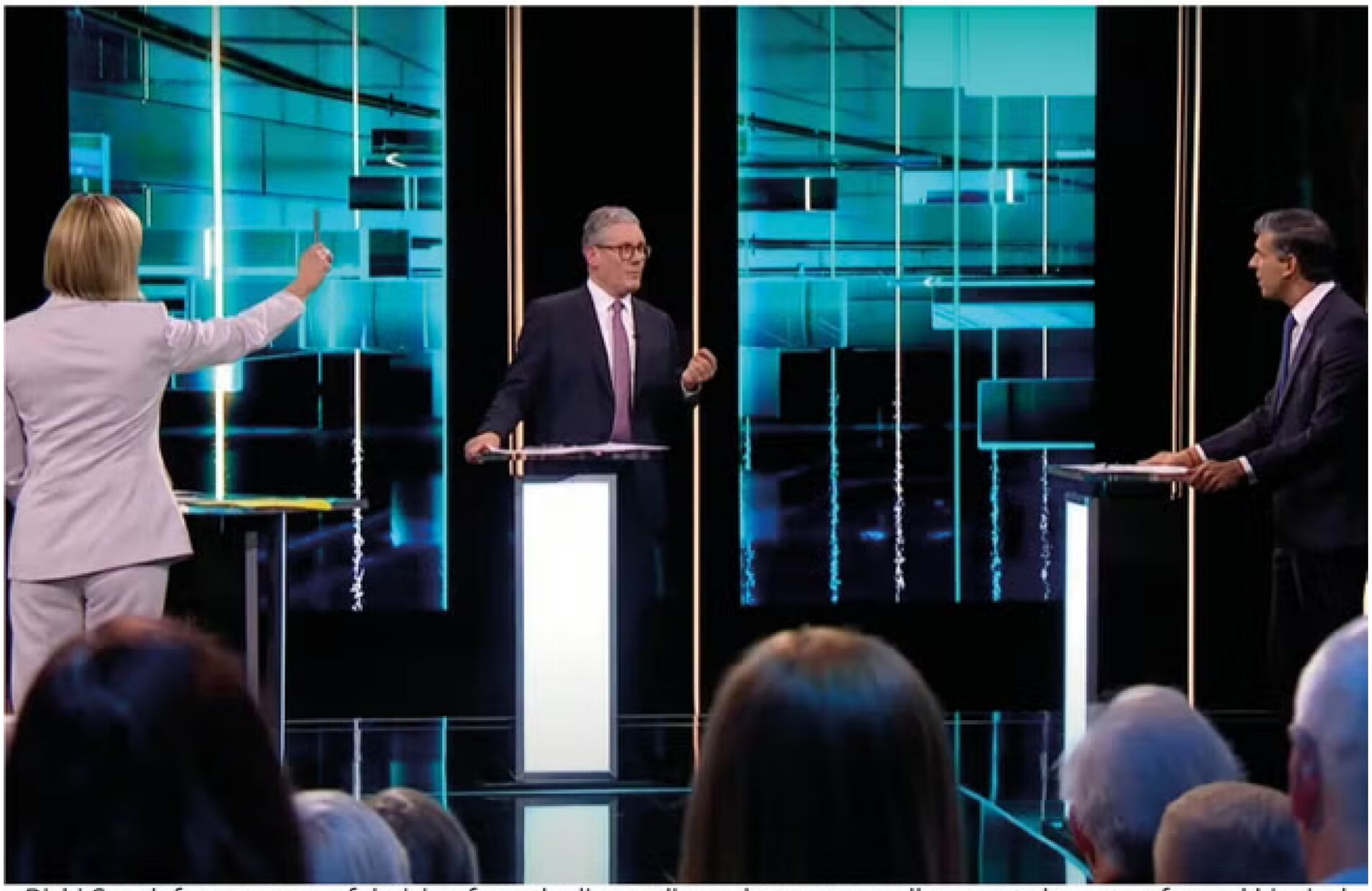
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Nigel Farage vows to replace Tories as pollster says his Reform UK could win up to four seats



Rishi Sunak faces groans of derision from the live audience but a snap poll suggests he outperformed his rival

ELECTION COUNTDOWN

Sunak and Starmer clash over tax plans in tetchy first debate

PM narrowly wins ill-tempered ITV match-up as leaders exchange barbs over £2,000 tax claim and plans for 'teenage Dad's Army' with exasperated host forced to shout: 'Gentlemen, please!'

DAVID MADDOX
POLITICAL EDITOR

Rishi Sunak and Sir Keir Starmer slugged it out in a tetchy first leaders' election debate, with snap pollsters giving a narrow edge to the prime minister. Although he was mocked by a studio audience concerned about the state of the NHS, schools, and the cost of living, Mr Sunak appeared to land more verbal blows on the Labour leader, including on Sir Keir's tax plans. As the debate went on, ITV's Julie Etchingham struggled at times to keep it civil and had to issue a half-time warning to the two men to stop interrupting one another, telling them: "We will lower our voices."

Editorials

A lurch right will only add to the Tories' poll woes

Rishi Sunak went into the first televised head-to-head debate with Sir Keir Starmer knowing that he needed a game-changer to alter the course of an election campaign that appeared to be going from bad to worse for the Conservatives.

The prime minister will have been relieved that he could finally present voters with "the choice" between him and Sir Keir; the whole point of calling a July election was to force people who have written off the Tories to at least look more closely at the only possible alternative. But ominously for Mr Sunak, the build-up to the ITV debate was dominated by Nigel Farage's dramatic arrival in the campaign as the new leader of Reform UK and the party's candidate in Clacton, where he launched his campaign and outlined his aim to enact a reverse takeover of the Conservative Party after the drubbing he expects it to suffer.

For Mr Sunak, there is now no escaping Mr Farage, who was the ghost at the TV debate feast. With the latest opinion polls suggesting a catastrophe for the Tories, Mr Sunak might be tempted to lurch further to the right in a desperate attempt to woo voters attracted by a Farage-led Reform party.

The prime minister should acknowledge that playing to the Tory base on issues such as pensioners' tax allowances, mandatory national service for 18-year-olds, scrapping "Mickey Mouse" degrees, and sensitive areas such as trans rights, have all failed to move the dial. The measures look more like an attempt to limit the scale of his party's defeat on 4 July, and to prevent Labour from winning a majority that would virtually guarantee two five-year terms, than a strategy for winning.

The Tories have predictably played the immigration card, promising an annual cap on the number of work and family visas in an effort to reduce net migration every year. But they declined to set a number, and said they would ask the independent Migration Advisory Committee to recommend one.

In different times, the Tories' pledge on immigration might have been a vote winner, but the public have heard it all before – in fact, from the same party at every election since 2010, when David Cameron promised to reduce net migration to the "tens of thousands". Instead, it rose to a record 764,000 in 2022, and

still stood at 685,000 last year, after easy election pledges collided with the more important realities of helping the economy by providing skilled workers, staffing vital public services, and the UK performing its duty to people from Ukraine, Afghanistan and Hong Kong.

As with tax, where Jeremy Hunt's two cuts in national insurance have brought no electoral reward, voters are not inclined to believe a party that has repeatedly broken its promises. Mr Sunak might be a relatively fresh face, and a welcome one after the disastrous premierships of Boris Johnson and Liz Truss, but the public are in no mood to give him the benefit of the doubt. On immigration, no one can blame them.

The danger now is that, under pressure from panicky Conservative candidates, Mr Sunak panders to the hard right – for example, by threatening to leave the European Convention on Human Rights, or proposing a referendum on pulling out of the convention on the grounds that it has stood in the way of the government's unworkable scheme to send migrants to Rwanda. Several cabinet ministers rightly have grave doubts about such a move, but Mr Sunak might try to bounce them in the hope that they will be reluctant to rock the boat during the election.

Such a rightward turn would be a mistake; apart from tarnishing the UK's reputation abroad, it would further alienate the under-50s, to whom the Tories must surely at some point make a pitch, and voters in the "blue wall" in the south of England. It would be a terrible legacy for Mr Sunak to leave, overshadowing his welcome achievements in rebuilding bridges with the EU and resolving the tricky problem of the Northern Ireland protocol.

Both main parties should remember that elections are won or lost in the centre ground. Sir Keir has dragged his party there after its left turn under Jeremy Corbyn, but he should not, as he woos 2019 Tory supporters, be tempted to follow the Tories down a hardline route on migration that might hamper economic growth. Mr Sunak should lay out a plan for the next five years that amounts to more than a hastily cobbled-together list of dividing lines with Labour.

Both leaders should remember that "national service", in its wider sense, is what all politicians should be in business for – putting "country before party", as Sir Keir promises. For the sake of the country, the centre must hold.

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Sunak claims narrow win in tetchy first leaders' debate



Keir Starmer and Rishi Sunak came out of their first contest fairly evenly matched (ITV)

DAVID MADDOX
POLITICAL EDITOR

Rishi Sunak and Sir Keir Starmer slugged it out in a tetchy first leader's debate of the general election, with snap pollsters giving a narrow edge to the embattled prime minister. While Mr Sunak appeared to land more verbal blows on the Labour leader, he was also mocked more by an audience concerned about the state of the NHS, schools, and the cost of living.

In a shouty confrontation, ITV's Julie Etchingham struggled at times to keep the debate civil, and had to issue a half-time

warning to the two men to stop interrupting one another. In the second half of the debate, during a particularly loud exchange, she said: “Please, gentlemen, we will lower our voices.”

With Labour leading in the polls by more than 20 points, and the Tories – according to some predictions – facing the prospect of winning fewer than 100 seats, Mr Sunak was under huge pressure to score a significant victory. And while the YouGov instant reaction poll gave him a narrow win of 51 per cent to 49 per cent, the closeness of the survey underscored a contest in which it was difficult to see a clear winner.

But the prime minister will be pleased that his two attack lines appeared to gain traction. Damagingly, it took Sir Keir 26 minutes to deny Mr Sunak’s repeated claim that he would raise taxes by more than £2,000 for each household. He eventually retorted that the figure had come from the Tories “taking a made-up Labour policy to Treasury officials for them to cost”.



Starmer struggled to deny the claim that he would raise taxes by more than £2,000 per household (Getty)

Mr Sunak also wanted to underscore his claim that Labour has no plan, saying that this election is “about the future and not the past” while insisting he has a plan himself. He repeatedly demanded to be told what Sir Keir would do about a number of issues, including doctors’ strikes and illegal immigration, and was met with criticism of his own record from Sir Keir.

But the Labour leader appeared to show more empathy with the audience, starting with a question about the cost of living from a woman who described bulk cooking at weekends to save money on energy bills. Sir Keir appeared to deploy tactics used in 2010 by Nick Clegg, of addressing audience members by name and looking straight into the camera.

As the debate wore on, Sir Keir began to dismiss Mr Sunak's attacks as "childish" and "garbage" while remarking that the prime minister was becoming increasingly "desperate". As the two locked horns on tax, Sir Keir said Mr Sunak had raised tax 25 times, saying: "He is the British expert on tax rises. They are at the highest level for 70 years." But Mr Sunak hit back, saying the election was "about the future" and insisting that he would keep cutting taxes while Labour would raise them.

However, the worst moment came when Sir Keir mocked Mr Sunak over waiting lists being longer than when he had promised to bring them down. Mr Sunak insisted that they were coming down, saying that they were "lower than they had been", which prompted laughter from the audience.



Sunak was mocked more than once by the audience (Getty)

Asked how long it would take to fix the "broken" health service, the prime minister pointed to the damage done by the Covid-19 pandemic, acknowledging that it would take time to recover, and adding: "But we are now making progress: waiting lists are coming down."

There was laughter when the Labour leader countered: “They were 7.2 million, they’re now 7.5 million. He says they are coming down, and this is the guy who says he’s good at maths.” Mr Sunak then blamed industrial action, eliciting groans from the audience watching the debate. “It’s somebody else’s fault,” Sir Keir said.

While earlier in the day Nigel Farage had mocked the two men for being the same, differences emerged during the course of the debate. Both men were asked directly whether they would use private healthcare if a family member was on a long waiting list for NHS care, and both gave clear answers. Mr Sunak said he would, while Sir Keir said he would not.

The Labour leader added: “I don’t use private health. I use the NHS. That’s where my wife works, in one of the big hospitals; as I said, it runs through my DNA.”

Crucially, Mr Sunak attacked Sir Keir over plans to pay for 6,500 extra teachers by ending the charitable status of independent schools and adding 20 per cent VAT to their fees. But Ms Etchingham also exposed the similarity of their positions when she pointed out that both had promised not to raise income tax, VAT or national insurance.



The debate was screened on ITV yesterday evening (PA)

Mr Sunak did not resile from his allegation that the country would be unsafe with Labour in charge, pointing to Angela

Rayner's past support for scrapping the Trident nuclear deterrent.

Responding to a question on security, Sir Keir pointed to his experience as director of public prosecutions as evidence that he could be trusted to keep Britain safe. But he also sought to draw a contrast between himself and Mr Sunak, saying the prime minister had made millions of pounds "betting against the UK during the financial crisis".

Mr Sunak responded that he would "rather have my job than work for Abu Qatada", referring to Sir Keir's work as a human rights lawyer when he represented the controversial preacher in his fight against deportation.

The Labour leader also doubled down on his claim that national service for school leavers was "Dad's Army for teenagers". The prime minister sought to defend his policy, saying it would be "transformational for young people in our country, giving them the skills and opportunity they need to succeed in life". But again his response drew laughter from the studio audience.

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Starmer will happily take this near-draw as a victory



The Labour leader got off to a slow start while Sunak displayed none of his usual tetchiness (PA)

JOHN RENTOUL
CHIEF POLITICAL COMMENTATOR

Keir Starmer knew that all he had to do was to get through the debate without making a horrible mistake. No wonder he was nervous, unsure whether to address the audience, his opponent, or presenter Julie Etchingham.

He had a good start, sounding more sympathetic to Paula from Huddersfield, who has to cook in batches to save electricity – although it took him some time to get round to "my dad was a toolmaker; my mother was a nurse; our phone was cut off".

Sunak knew that he had to disrupt his opponent and unsettle people about the prospect of a Labour government. He seemed relaxed but combative, interrupting Starmer repeatedly and demanding to know why he wanted to make life more difficult for people by putting up their taxes.

The Labour leader was slow, again, to respond, eventually calling the figure of £2,000 in extra taxes that the prime minister used "garbage". It was, he pointed out, arrived at by feeding assumptions into the Treasury – assumptions that included Tory policies by mistake.

Sunak scored the first win of the debate on the unexpected subject of NHS strikes, drawing applause from the studio audience, saying the junior doctors want "a 35 per cent pay rise and I don't want to raise your taxes to pay for that".

Starmer looked genuinely frustrated when Sunak challenged him on how he would resolve the dispute, and was reduced to a sulky "when I can get a word in edgeways", which he repeated later. But the prime minister had made his point – that Starmer's airy promise to "get people in a room together" was a bit rubbish.

After that, though, Starmer turned the tide, mentioning Liz Truss as often as he could and having the better applause lines. He was clapped for saying that VAT on school fees was "a tough choice, I do understand that". He was clapped for promising to "end non-dom status completely" – even though, as Sunak pointed out, the Conservative government has already done it – and to make "oil and gas companies pay their fair share". And he was clapped for promising to "smash the gangs" to stop the boats.

Sunak, on the other hand, attracted mocking laughter when Starmer challenged him on his claim that NHS waiting lists were "coming down". Starmer pointed out that they had gone up

since Sunak had promised to get them down; Sunak countered: “They are coming down from when they were higher.”

He was also laughed at when he tried to defend national service as an “opportunity” for young people. But he did win the last round of applause for a line that the Tories have used before and that I thought was too defensive: “If you think Labour are going to win, start saving.”

By then, Starmer had got over his early nerves and appeared to realise that he was playing politics on easy mode. He kept pointing out that the Tories had been in power for 14 years, and that Sunak didn’t seem keen to defend the record. Sunak kept saying that the election was about the future.

Sunak finally had a strong message for his closing statement: “In uncertain times we simply cannot afford an uncertain prime minister. If you don’t know what you’re going to get from Labour don’t vote for it.” But before he got to it, he had to pause to take a sideswipe at the ghost at the feast: Nigel Farage. The election was a choice between him and Starmer as prime minister, said Sunak: “A vote for anyone else makes it more likely that it will be him.”

The debate confirmed that Sunak was quicker and sharper, and that Labour’s policies are only barely battle-ready. But it also confirmed that Sunak has been fighting a hopeless battle from the start, and that the words “Liz Truss” are enough to bring most political arguments to an end.

YouGov’s snap poll showed nearly a dead heat, with 51 per cent saying Sunak “won”, and 49 per cent Starmer.

That was all that Starmer needed to do to clear the most important of the foreseeable hurdles in this election campaign. It was striking that his irritability was more in evidence than Sunak’s past tetchiness, which had been suppressed completely.

We had better get used to Starmer’s weary and humourless dismissiveness, because we will see a lot more of it when he becomes prime minister.

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Yappy terrier Sunak goes straight for Starmer's shin



A fired-up PM meant Julie Etchingham had her work cut out chairing the debate last night (Getty)

JOE MURPHY

"Gentlemen, please!" begged Julie Etchingham like an exasperated school ma'am at a rowdy PTA quiz night. "We will *lower* our voices."

Unexpectedly, the disrupter in the room, who kept talking over both his opponent and the chair was the usually well-mannered

prime minister, proving that nobody tears up the Queensberry rules quicker than a posh boy with his back to the wall.

Edifying it was not. But the first leader's debate of the 2024 election was undeniably livelier than the dreary arguments between Boris Johnson and Jeremy Corbyn in 2019.

It started with all the worn-out clichés of the genre: drumming war music; two suited gladiators in front of moving screens that gave a queasy seasick feeling; a spotlight on super-calm Ms Etchingham, quite the ice queen.

After the 30-second opening speeches – nothing new in either of them – it went over to the first questioner. Paula from Huddersfield spoke movingly of her struggle to make ends meet. "All I do is work to live," she said. "My savings are gone and I genuinely worry about the future."

Uncomfortable territory for the mega wealthy Sunak, the hedge funder who married a billionaire's daughter. Except that Sunak appeared to barely register what Paula had said, telling her his plan was working and adding, with tin-eared oafishness: "I know you are only just starting to feel the benefits of that."

Feeling the benefits? Did he not listen to a word she said? Events soon confirmed that the PM was in a telling, not listening, mood.

Starmer was empathetic, telling Paula he was "sorry" for her difficulties. Paula looked appreciative.

Then it all went a bit like Friday night in 'Spoons. "Why do you want to put up people's taxes?" demanded Sunak of his rival. Starmer pointed out that Sunak had raised taxes including NI multiple times.

Sunak deployed a dodgy spin attack about alleged unfunded Labour promises. "You want to put everyone's taxes up by £2,000." It was a line he kept repeating all evening – and it took Starmer until the 50th minute (presumably after a half-time pep talk) to denounce it forcefully as "garbage".

Janice, a cancer survivor in a wheelchair, told of her worry about the NHS being "broken", prompting both candidates to play Top

Trumps with family members who worked in the NHS.

Starmer bailed Sunak for promising lower waiting lists and allowing them to rise. Sunak claimed they were down “from when they were higher”, to which Starmer mocked: “This guy’s supposed to be good at maths.”

Sunak claimed he would have done better but for the striking doctors, which earned an audience groan and some laughter. “Ahhh,” said Starmer, “It’s always someone else’s fault.”

Harry and Deborah, both teachers, wanted to know about education plans.

“You heard him, Keir Starmer is going to raise taxes,” yelped Sunak, sticking to his only plan regardless of the question. “Desperate,” muttered Starmer.

Starmer looked hesitant at times but delivered some solid low blows of his own. While he was “foiling terrorist plots” as chief prosecutor, he taunted, Sunak had been “making money betting against the country during the financial crisis”.

The audience actually laughed when Sunak tried to explain his “*Dad’s Army*” plan for national service. “The army don’t like it,” pointed out Starmer truthfully. Sunak retorted: “All you can do is sneer.”

But Sunak was not trying to please the studio audience. His target was the tabloid leader writers and the Tory candidates who were on the verge of giving up on him.

Did the PM eat both fingers of his Twix bar before last night’s debate? Did he raid his mum’s pharmacy shelves of Pro Plus? Either way he stopped, briefly, being the doomed underdog and became a scrappy Yorkshire terrier sinking his teeth into the postman’s trouser legs.

Will it change anything? Probably not.

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News/ Exclusive

Sunak was offered a deal to stop Farage but rejected it



Rishi Sunak was dissuaded from going ahead with the deal by his key advisers (AFP/Getty)

DAVID MADDOX

Rishi Sunak could have avoided the expected election catastrophe facing him and the Conservative Party if he had agreed to make a deal with Nigel Farage.

The Independent has learnt that Tory Brexiteer MP Andrea Jenkyns and former Leave.EU communications director Andy Wigmore attempted to broker a deal between the Tories and

Reform. Sources have suggested that Mr Sunak "was interested" but dissuaded from going ahead by his key advisers.

Around six weeks before the prime minister made his rain-sodden announcement of a snap election on the steps of Downing Street, he is understood to have met with Ms Jenkyns who presented him with a plan to save the Tories.

While Ms Jenkyns did not wish to comment on that story, she has in the past publicly called for the party to get Mr Farage involved, bring back Boris Johnson, bring in right-wingers through a major reshuffle, and have some more "red meat" right-wing policies. One, to be put at the heart of the next election manifesto, was understood to have been either leaving the European Convention of Human Rights (ECHR) or seeking to reform it.

Around the same time, Mr Wigmore had a meeting with one of the prime minister's key lieutenants, Craig Williams, the MP for Montgomeryshire and parliamentary private secretary to the prime minister. *The Independent* has been led to understand that both meetings were "extremely positive", particularly on the ECHR.

Mr Williams is said to have been willing to push the idea and Mr Sunak was interested enough to meet with Ms Jenkyns. It is understood that when the meeting between Mr Sunak and Ms Jenkyns finished, they hugged and the prime minister promised to consider what she had said.



Cheers! Nigel Farage at his birthday party with Aaron Banks, finger-flipping ex-minister Andrea Jenkyns... and who is that in the background? (Andrea Jenkyns/Twitter)

Around the same time, private meetings were being held with Mr Farage and Richard Tice, who was then Reform UK leader. Someone with knowledge of the talks said: "There was a deal to be done but Sunak was overruled or dissuaded by his advisers." Reflecting on Mr Farage's announcement that he will run in Clacton, the source said: "All of this was unnecessary. It could have been stopped".

Chief of staff Liam Booth-Smith and political secretary James Forsyth are seen as the two main culprits in persuading Mr Sunak not to entertain the idea. But others, including chief whip Simon Hart and chair Richard Holden, were also said to be opposed to the proposal.

Speaking to *The Independent* in Clacton after his launch, Mr Farage, who has accused the Tories of "lying" over immigration and other policies, insisted that there was never a deal he would have accepted.

Instead, he has set his heart on the destruction and replacement of the Conservative Party, adding: "I am not interested in Tory MPs. I am interested in the British people." However, there is speculation that the meetings were too late and that the plan for an early election was already "unstoppable".

MPs had been told to give their campaign rather than parliamentary emails for 10,000 leaflets being promised at the time of the meetings. They arrived the day after the election was called.

It had been hoped that by calling a snap election, it would be impossible for Mr Farage to stand. When he announced he would only campaign, the plan seemed to have worked. That was until Monday this week when Mr Farage fully entered the fray with the polls already suggesting Labour is on course for a massive election victory.

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Farage launches ‘revolution’ from end of Clacton pier

Reform UK leader soaked in milkshake but unstirred



Hundreds turned out as Nigel Farage began his campaign in Clacton in Essex yesterday (PA)

DAVID MADDOX

Nigel Farage launched his eighth bid to become an MP yesterday, promising a “revolution” that will shake up British politics and laughing off an incident in which an unimpressed voter threw a banana milkshake over him.

The Reform UK leader launched his campaign in front of cheering crowds on Clacton pier in Essex, a day after he announced his return to frontline politics. The event – which was open to members of the public, who attended in their hundreds crowding into the street, lining footbridges and slopes around the launch – contrasted hugely with the stage-managed events of Rishi Sunak and Sir Keir Starmer.

But a young woman throwing what appeared to be a banana milkshake in his face after he completed his media round revealed that not everyone in the Essex seaside town welcomed him and illustrated the dangers of being so exposed. There was also a small protest at the back of the crowd as he delivered his speech with demonstrators holding a sign saying he was not welcome.

Before the milkshake attack, a buoyant Mr Farage had been riding on the crest of a wave of adulation from a town which was once held by Ukip MP Daniel Carswell and voted 73 per cent for Brexit in 2016.

Speaking to journalists in the Moon and Starfish Wetherspoons pub, he made it clear that Clacton was the first step in a plan to replace the Conservative Party. He said: “It’s over, it’s done, let’s all grow up, there is no election, Labour are going to win. The positive thing that I’m trying to do is to provide a voice of opposition to a Labour government.



Farage has a milkshake thrown at him by a woman (Getty)

“We need a proper voice, an opposition voice that represents the silent majority, for common sense. It’s still there in the country and I’m absolutely convinced the current Conservative Party who spent four years fighting among themselves, rather than getting on and running the country, in opposition – imagine their recriminations in opposition.”

Asked about his aims for the next five years, he likened the situation to Canada in 1993 when the Canadian Conservative Party, in power at the time, called an election and only won two seats. They eventually were replaced by the then-resurgent party.

Mr Farage told reporters: “My aim is for the centre right of British politics to realign and it can’t do that under the current Conservative mask, there needs to be a change. If there was a model I was looking for, then maybe it may sound ambitious, it will be Canada back 30 years ago.”

Asked if he meant a new party he agreed: “That’s right.” But added: “What I do know is without a strong Reform, without millions of votes, without some seats in parliament, it won’t happen.”

Mr Farage was accompanied by Richard Tice, who was party leader until Monday and is running in Boston and Skegness. Mr Tice told *The Independent*: “People are going to be surprised. We are going to overturn some huge majorities of 20,000 and more.”



Farage surrounded by crowds in Clacton (PA)

Farage praised his predecessor, despite ditching one of his policies on migration live on air this morning when pressed on asking overseas territories to take asylum seekers for money. He said: “Richard has done a very good job. He has kept the show on the road. The policies are mostly there but there will be tweaks, a Farage twist if you like.”

The Reform leader insisted that he expects his party to field the 630 candidates in England, Wales and Scotland previously promised and said there would be no deals with any Tory MPs. Asked if he expected any more Tory MPs to follow Lee Anderson and defect to his party, he said: “I am not very interested in Tory MPs. They had their chance and failed. I am more interested in the British people.”

Mr Farage also spoke of the areas of poverty in Clacton, noting that it is a “town at the end of the railway line that has been forgotten and marginalised”. He said: “I cannot promise miracles but I will try to make a difference to people living here.” While he said he will be watching the leaders debate between Sir Kier and Mr Sunak tonight he said he wished he could be taking part himself. He dismissed the two main party leaders as “Lib Dems saying the same thing”.

Mr Farage also accused the Tories of lying about Brexit and immigration, noting that they had promised to bring net migration down in the last four manifestos but failed every time. He said he did not believe Mr Sunak’s pledge to set a visa cap on new legal migrants and described this election as “the immigration election”, insisting that he would make that his top issue.

Asked about Tory voters being scared of voting for Reform because of letting Labour in he retorted: “When they will realise it is over? The Tories have lost already, they will find it much easier to vote Reform.”

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News/ Exclusive

YouGov: Reform UK could win as many as four seats

Party is now a threat in several constituencies, says pollster



Nigel Farage launches his general election campaign in Clacton, Essex, yesterday (PA)

ALICJA HAGOPIAN
DATA CORRESPONDENT, POLITICS

Nigel Farage's decision to stand as MP and take over as party leader could change Reform UK's chances of winning seats in the general election, says polling firm YouGov.

Reform was on course to come out of the election empty-handed, according to forecasts on Monday. But the data's release came hours before *The Independent* broke the news that Nigel Farage had decided to stand as the party's candidate in Clacton, Essex. According to YouGov's director of political analytics, Patrick English, the announcement "significantly increases the odds" that Reform could win at least one seat – and even up to four.

He told *The Independent*: "I do think that Farage intervening significantly increases the odds of Reform UK winning one, perhaps even two seats in Westminster. You might even put an upper band of four on that, depending on what exactly happens between now and 4 July."

He added: "Certainly, it will improve Reform's prospects. It will give them a highly competent, highly experienced strong messenger in Nigel Farage to go out, not just in Clacton, but around the rest of the country, to try and deliver that Reform UK message."

Before Mr Farage's announcement, YouGov predicted that no seat would be won by Reform, despite 300 candidates throwing their hat in the ring. Any Reform win is still far from certain. The seats to watch are those where Reform is fielding its heavy hitters, according to Mr English.

He said: "[For Reform successes], we're looking at Clacton. We're looking at Ashfield, because Lee Anderson is standing there trying to defend his seat as a defector. We're looking at Boston and Skegness where Richard Tice is standing." YouGov's polling analysis on Monday suggested that Reform has a margin of 15 points or more to close in its top constituencies, even in Ashfield, where former Tory Mr Anderson hopes to retain the seat.

In Clacton, Reform was 22 points behind the Conservatives, but this gap is expected to close considerably with Mr Farage replacing Tony Mack as the candidate. Clacton is the only seat ever won by Ukip, Mr Farage's former party, when it was

retained in 2015 by Tory defector Douglas Carswell. In 2019, it was gained for the Conservatives by former actor Giles Watling.

In addition, Mr English suggests keeping an eye on seats in South Yorkshire, where Reform might find success among previous Ukip and Brexit voters. “We’re also looking up toward Barnsley and Doncaster,” said Mr English. “There are a couple of seats there where the Brexit Party did very well in 2019, but I think Reform UK could potentially be very strong there as well.”

He added: “It’s important to maintain the distinction between Ukip and Reform. One thing that’s very prominent is, of course, Nigel Farage is no longer talking about Brexit, and that was Ukip’s sole purpose. The switch has now gone to focusing on immigration and British cultural values. It is a different party, but a lot of its supporters and all of its base will be very similar.”

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Election news in brief



Ex-Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn has written in defence of Diane Abbott in The Independent (PA)

Corbyn: Treatment of Abbott was disgraceful

Former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn has accused Labour of trying to silence Diane Abbott and hanging her “out to dry” as Britain’s first Black female MP faced horrific racist abuse. Mr Corbyn said the treatment of the veteran politician, who has been at the centre of a storm over whether she would be allowed to stand for the party, had been an “utter disgrace”. Ms Abbott was confirmed as a Labour candidate yesterday.

Writing in this paper, Mr Corbyn said: “The way that Diane Abbott has been treated is an utter disgrace – and I am disgusted by the blatant double-standards, hypocrisy and contempt for local democracy, in plain sight for all to see. Take a look at her social media and you will see the horrific levels of racist abuse she is forced to endure – and she has been hung out to dry.”

He added: “Make no mistake about the party’s intentions over the past few months: to try and silence a female Black voice who has the courage to stand up for a better world. It is thanks to the power of solidarity that, this time, they have failed”. Last Friday Sir Keir Starmer said the veteran MP was “free” to stand for the party after days of an extraordinary back-and-forth about whether she would be blocked.

Ex-Tory minister says ‘wages stagnated for 15 years’

A former Tory minister voiced concern over his own party’s economic record and said it has presided over a decade-and-a-half of wage stagnation. Matt Warman, the Skegness and Boston MP, and former deputy chair of the One Nation group of Tory MPs, said at an event in February there were now two “catch-up generations”.

“One is, and I’m not that far away from this myself, one is people who came of age in the wake of a financial crash. And they are people where essentially wages stagnated for 15 years. And there are good reasons why things couldn’t have been done particularly differently or better. But it’s a hard political argument.”

Mr Warman, who will be contesting his seat against Reform chairman Richard Tice, made the comments at Kings College London in an event hosted by think tank UK in a Changing Europe in February. He was responding to a question from Professor Anand Menon, who asked if Mr Warman was concerned that the government had failed to deal with the issues of Covid catch-up for children’s education.

ITN warn over fake news on election day

Broadcasters will not be able to warn viewers about election day deepfakes and misinformation, said the CEO of ITN. Rachel Corp, whose company produces *5 News*, *ITV News* and *Channel 4 News*, warned that "we're going to be flooded" with AI-created propaganda and said ITN has been raising these issues with the government for "over a year".

Speaking at a media conference in London, she said: "We have seen deepfakes of some of our presenters, which when you're [a company] based on authority of trust and impartiality, that does pose a threat." Ms Corp added: "One of the particular concerns around the election for us we did raise was come polling day, as you all know, broadcasters have to stop doing the TV news when the polls open, and all we can do is leaders voting and Labradors outside polling stations, we can't take it on. So if something emerges of Rishi Sunak high-fiving Vladimir Putin and it's spreading then we can't counter that… in the normal way on our bulletins, so there is a danger there." *PA*

Main parties not being straight on cuts, says IFS

Labour and the Tories are "avoiding the reality" that their economic plans will mean they will have to enact "sharp" spending cuts after the general election, a leading economic think tank has warned. In analysis published yesterday, the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) said neither of the main parties appeared "serious about the underlying principle of getting debt falling".

Both main parties are committed to meeting the fiscal rule of getting debt on a downward path between 2028-29 and 2029-30. However, the IFS forecasts say that the future chancellor will be "fortunate" to meet this aim. The think tank criticised the current fiscal rules which are "arbitrary and gameable" and that it was a "poor guide to the health of the public finances".

Isabel Stockton, senior research economist at IFS, described the fiscal rule as having "an unfortunate combination of

characteristics". She added: "It is eminently gameable - and has already been gamed almost to irrelevance by the current government; it is the loosest debt rule we have had in the past 30 years; and yet it is currently so constraining that it will either be breached, or will result in policies in practice quite different to those currently being peddled.

Blocked Labour candidate accuses party of 'hierarchy of racism'

Faiza Shaheen has dramatically quit the Labour Party and accused it of a "hierarchy of racism" after being blocked from running. She had been due to contest the Chingford and Woodford Green seat held by Sir Iain Duncan Smith. But she was told last Wednesday that the party was suspending her after she liked social media posts that criticised Israel and its actions in Gaza. Ms Shaheen resigned after the decision to block her became official yesterday, when Labour's National Executive Committee declined to nominate her. The move clears the path for her potentially to stand against Labour as an independent. She said: "Since the Conservatives won power in 2010, I have used all the tools available to me – from my research to my activism – to fight them on public spending cuts, inequality and divisive narratives. That is why to leave the Labour Party now, on the cusp of finally seeing the Tories out of government and a time when I should be celebrating, is crushing." Last Thursday, Labour selected Shama Tatler, a member of the Jewish Labour Movement, as its candidate for the Chingford and Woodford Green seat.



Labour should feel shame at how they treated hero Diane

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Urban progressive? No, I'm more an apolitical centrist

A leading pollster has identified six categories of UK voter, writes **Joe Middleton.** Which one describes you the closest?



The National Centre for Social Research used data from the British Social Attitudes survey (PA)

There will be six different types of voter at the forthcoming general election, according to new analysis by a leading pollster.

The National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) has identified six distinct categories of UK voter, based on responses to 12 questions put to the public. The groups have shared

characteristics, such as gender or social class, and align on key political issues such as the economy or immigration.

The underlying data is taken from the British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey, the latest iteration of which will be released in full next week.

Professor Sir John Curtice, senior research fellow at NatCen and professor of politics at Strathclyde University, said: “Much of the commentary on the election focuses on questions of performance. But elections are also influenced by voters’ values and their perceptions of politics and politicians.

“The electorate is not just divided between ‘left’ and ‘right’, but also between ‘liberals’ and ‘authoritarians’, while many people sit in the middle and are not especially interested in politics. This poses particular challenges for the two main parties, who will have to reach out to voters well beyond their own ‘comfort zones’ to succeed.”

Which type of voter are you?

Middle Britons

Middle Britons make up the largest group of voters, comprising more than a quarter of the electorate (26 per cent). They are mostly in the middle ground across political issues and are closest to a “typical” voter, with no clear political affiliation. They are hard for politicians to win over, and not that likely to vote.

Well-Off Traditionalists

Highly politically engaged and likely to vote, many Well-Off Traditionalists live in the rural South East. This group holds socially conservative views that often align with Conservative policies. They make up 12 per cent of the electorate.

Apolitical Centrists

The least politically engaged group is generally on the right on economic issues but more centrist on social issues. The Apolitical Centrists are relatively young and on low incomes.



If ‘Apolitical Centrists’ vote, they are likely to support one of the two main parties (PA)

Many in this group will likely not vote, but those that do will probably choose either Conservative or Labour. They comprise 17 per cent of the electorate.

Left-Behind Patriots

This group mostly voted for Brexit and would consider themselves patriotic. They are opposed to economic inequality, but are conservative in their social outlook. The Left-Behind Patriots have no strong allegiance to any party, but are more likely than others to support Reform UK. They make up 15 per cent of the electorate.

Urban Progressives

Typically university-educated professionals, Urban Progressives lean strongly to the left on economic issues and in a liberal direction on social ones. This group is likely to support Labour or the Greens, and its members, who account for 16 per cent of the electorate, are highly likely to vote.

Soft-Left Liberals

This group is university-educated, politically engaged, and liberal on social issues, but more centrist on the economy. Soft-Left Liberals are likely to vote Labour, Green, or Lib Dem. They make up 14 per cent of the electorate.

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Has Farage turned this into the ‘immigration election’?



The Reform leader’s ability to grab media attention will help propel the issue up the agenda (Getty)

ANDREW GRICE

Nigel Farage has called for an “immigration election” after becoming leader of Reform UK and deciding to stand as the party’s candidate in Clacton. The former Ukip and Brexit Party leader proposed that net migration, which stood at 685,000 last year, be reduced to zero. He said Reform would “freeze non-essential migration” to “reverse long-standing wage depression

and save Britain's public services from the burden of unlimited demand".

His unexpected intervention in the election will put the Conservatives' record on immigration under the spotlight, and could make it harder for them to put Labour under pressure on the issue.

Will immigration now dominate the campaign?

Farage's prominent role, and his ability to grab media attention, will probably propel the issue higher up the agenda. Some Labour figures fear, as Peter (now Lord) Mandelson put it, that Farage could "skew the debate" towards his agenda and "syphon off some of the oxygen" from Labour's campaign. But the issue is likely to be less salient than it was in 2019, when Boris Johnson pledged to "take back control" of Britain's borders after Brexit.

The Tories sense a Labour weakness, but their ability to capitalise on it has been harmed by a dramatic rise in net migration, which they have promised to cut at every election since 2010 but which rose to a record 764,000 in 2022. Then there is Rishi Sunak's failure to meet his overambitious pledge last year to "stop the boats". Opinion polls suggest that Labour is more trusted on the issue than the Tories.

Immigration is a priority for those who voted Tory in 2019, but among the wider electorate it is well behind the cost of living and the NHS, so there is a limit to how much time the two main parties will devote to it. Farage will enjoy a high profile, but is unlikely to get the "immigration election" he wants.

What are the Tories proposing?

Sunak has tried to outflank Labour by promising to introduce an annual cap on the number of work and family visas issued by the UK each year. The cap would be lowered in every year of the next five-year parliament if the Tories retain power.

Ministers declined to announce a precise number of visas. That would be recommended by the independent Migration Advisory Committee, which would consider both the costs and benefits of

migration. The committee has previously said it has no view on the appropriate level of net migration, which it considers "a matter for government".

The policy stops short of the call from Robert Jenrick, the former immigration minister, for net migration to be capped at 100,000.

What is Labour saying?

Keir Starmer called the Tory plan "a cap without a cap". He reiterated Labour's goal to bring down net migration, but refused to commit to a figure or guarantee that it would fall every year. The Labour leader told *The Sun on Sunday*: "Read my lips – I will bring immigration down."



Keir Starmer's approach to immigration has been criticised by left-wingers as well as some employers and unions (PA)

A Labour government would ban companies that are breaching employment laws from hiring workers from overseas, and order businesses applying for foreign worker visas to train Britons to do the jobs. But Starmer's approach has been criticised by left-wingers and by some employers and trade unions.

What will happen to net migration after the election?

No matter which party is in power, it should fall, as one-off factors such as accepting people from Ukraine and Hong Kong subside and the government's restrictions on dependents' visas for students and careworkers take effect. By next year, some

experts think it could drop to around 350,000, closer to the long-term average of 250,000 over the last 25 years.

What's the latest on the Rwanda scheme?

Some ministers had privately hoped that the first flight deporting migrants to Rwanda might finally take off shortly before the 4 July election, giving Sunak a much-needed boost. But government lawyers have now told the High Court that the earliest they could start is 24 July. Labour has pledged to scrap the programme.

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Hospitals hit by cyberattack



Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust is one of two trusts affected by the incident (PA)

REBECCA THOMAS
AMY-CLARE MARTIN
KATE DEVLIN

Two London hospital trusts have been forced to cancel all non-emergency operations and blood tests following a "major" cyberattack. Pathology systems at King's College Hospital NHS Foundation Trust and Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust, as well as GP services across south London, have been hit by a ransomware attack, according to emails seen by *The Independent*.

Synnovis, the company that supplies blood tests, swabs, bowel tests and other services for hospitals serving NHS patients across six London boroughs, warned the two NHS trusts on Monday that it had been hit by a major malware attack, the consequences of which have affected tens of thousands of patients, according to sources close to the hospitals.

The supplier covers Guy's Hospital, which runs the Evelina London Children's Hospital, as well as Harefield Hospital, King's College Hospital, Princess Royal University Hospital, Royal Brompton Hospital and St Thomas' Hospital. In a second email yesterday, seen by *The Independent*, it confirmed it had been hit by a ransomware attack.

GPs have been told to cancel all non-emergency pathology appointments, while hospital staff have been told to request emergency blood samples only from patients who require transfusions. The National Cyber Security Centre is now involved, while NHS England has declared a level three incident – the second-highest alert level.

In a message to staff on Monday, Guy's and St Thomas' said: "Synnovis, the pathology provider for both King's and Guy's and St Thomas', informed us of a major incident with ICT systems." A senior NHS source told *The Independent* that transplants have been affected as patients' blood tests cannot be cross-checked, and that healthcare leaders in London have been warned that the incident could take "weeks or months" to resolve.

In a separate message, Synnovis said there would be delays for patients receiving results, and GPs have been asked to cancel all non-urgent blood test appointments. "Given the nature and magnitude of this attack, this is an evolving situation," it said. The emails say it is unclear how long the issue will last.

In the second email, Synnovis told staff: "This is a harsh reminder that this sort of attack can happen to anyone at any time and that, dispiritingly, the individuals behind it have no scruples about who their actions affect. This incident is being reported to law enforcement and the Information

Commissioner, and we are working with the National Cyber Security Centre and the Cyber Operations team."

The National Cyber Security Centre and the National Crime Agency have been contacted for comment.

A government spokesperson said: "The Department of Health and Social Care, NHS England and the National Cyber Security Centre are working together to investigate a cyber incident affecting a number of NHS organisations in southeast London. Patient safety is our priority and support is being offered to the impacted organisations."

A spokesperson for NHS England's London region said: "On Monday 3 June, Synnovis, a provider of lab services, was the victim of a ransomware cyberattack. This is having a significant impact on the delivery of services at Guy's and St Thomas', King's College Hospital NHS Foundation Trust, and primary care services in southeast London, and we apologise for the inconvenience this is causing to patients and their families. We are working urgently to fully understand the impact of the incident with the support of the government's National Cyber Security Centre and our Cyber Operations team."

The spokesperson said that emergency care continues to be available, so patients should access services in the normal way.

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News

Three abandoned infants found to have same parents



Baby Roman (left) and Baby Harry are the sister and brother of Baby Elsa, who was found in a park in East Ham in January (Metropolitan Police)

CALLUM PARKE
ALEX ROSS

Three newborn babies found dumped in parks in east London over the past seven years share the same parents, it has been revealed – as the Metropolitan Police continue the search for those who abandoned the infants.

DNA tests presented at a hearing at East London Family Court proved that a baby girl found by a dog walker in Newham earlier this year is the sister of two other babies, a boy and a girl, found in similar circumstances in 2017 and 2019.

The baby, named Elsa by hospital staff, was less than an hour old when she was found in a shopping bag in sub-zero temperatures on 18 January. Her brother, who was named Harry, was found abandoned in a park in Plaistow in 2017, and her sister, called Roman, was discovered in a park in Newham in 2019.

At the family court hearing this month, Judge Carol Atkinson said the story was of "great public interest" as she amended restrictions to allow reporting of the relationship between the children.

The Met Police have not yet been able to identify the parents, despite several public appeals over the children, who have all survived: the eldest two have been adopted, while Elsa is still in foster care. Judge Atkinson said she hoped that identifying the children's relationship could help the Met in its investigation to find the biological parents.

Elsa was found wrapped in a towel in a reusable shopping bag by a dog walker at the junction of Greenway and High Street South in East Ham. At the time, police said the baby, who when discovered was so cold that it took doctors three hours to record her temperature, was likely to have been born following a concealed pregnancy.

Roman was also discovered in freezing temperatures, in a park area close to Roman Road and Saxon Road in East Ham, on 30 January 2019 at 10.15pm. She was wrapped in a white towel and placed in a shopping bag next to a bench in a children's play area. Like Elsa, she was also found by a dog walker. Rima Zvaliauskas told the BBC she had been "shocked and distressed" to make the find.

Harry was found wrapped in a white blanket in a park area off Balaam Street in Plaistow on 17 September 2017 at 8.20am. At the point of each discovery, the Met Police ran appeals asking

for information on the parents of the babies, and appealing for people seen in the areas to come forward.



Ch Supt Simon Crick led the appeal after the discovery of Baby Elsa (PA)

Speaking after Elsa was found, Chief Superintendent Simon Crick said: “We are extremely concerned for [the mother’s] welfare as she would have been through a traumatic ordeal and will be in need of immediate medical attention following the birth.

“Trained medics and specialist officers are ready to support her and we urge her to get in touch by phone or walk into the nearest hospital or police station. If you are the baby’s mother, please know that your daughter is well. No matter what your circumstances, please do seek help.”

In her ruling to lift reporting restrictions on Monday, Judge Atkinson said: “The abandonment of a baby in this country is a very, very unusual event and there are years where there are no children abandoned, and because of that, it is the story of the abandoning of a child that is of public interest.”

She continued: “It is for the same reason, in our current society, of enormous interest and importance that people know that there are a mother and father out there who felt the need to relinquish their children in this way, three times, and that is of considerable interest, it seems to me. If I restrict these rights and the reporting of that story, I think that does impact on

public consciousness of these sorts of matters. It restricts the openness of justice."

The ruling follows efforts to increase transparency in the family court system. While journalists can usually attend family court proceedings, reporting restrictions limit what can be published, to protect the anonymity of those involved. Following an application made, Judge Atkinson varied the transparency order in Elsa's case to allow reporting of the fact that she has two siblings as well as other details. Only certain other details of the three children, who are Black, can be reported.

Harry and Roman – who now have different names – have since been adopted. But barrister Kate Claxton, representing Newham London Borough Council, previously told the court that the ongoing investigation means that Elsa's birth cannot be registered, meaning no final decision regarding her care can be made. A further hearing in her case is expected to be held at a later date.

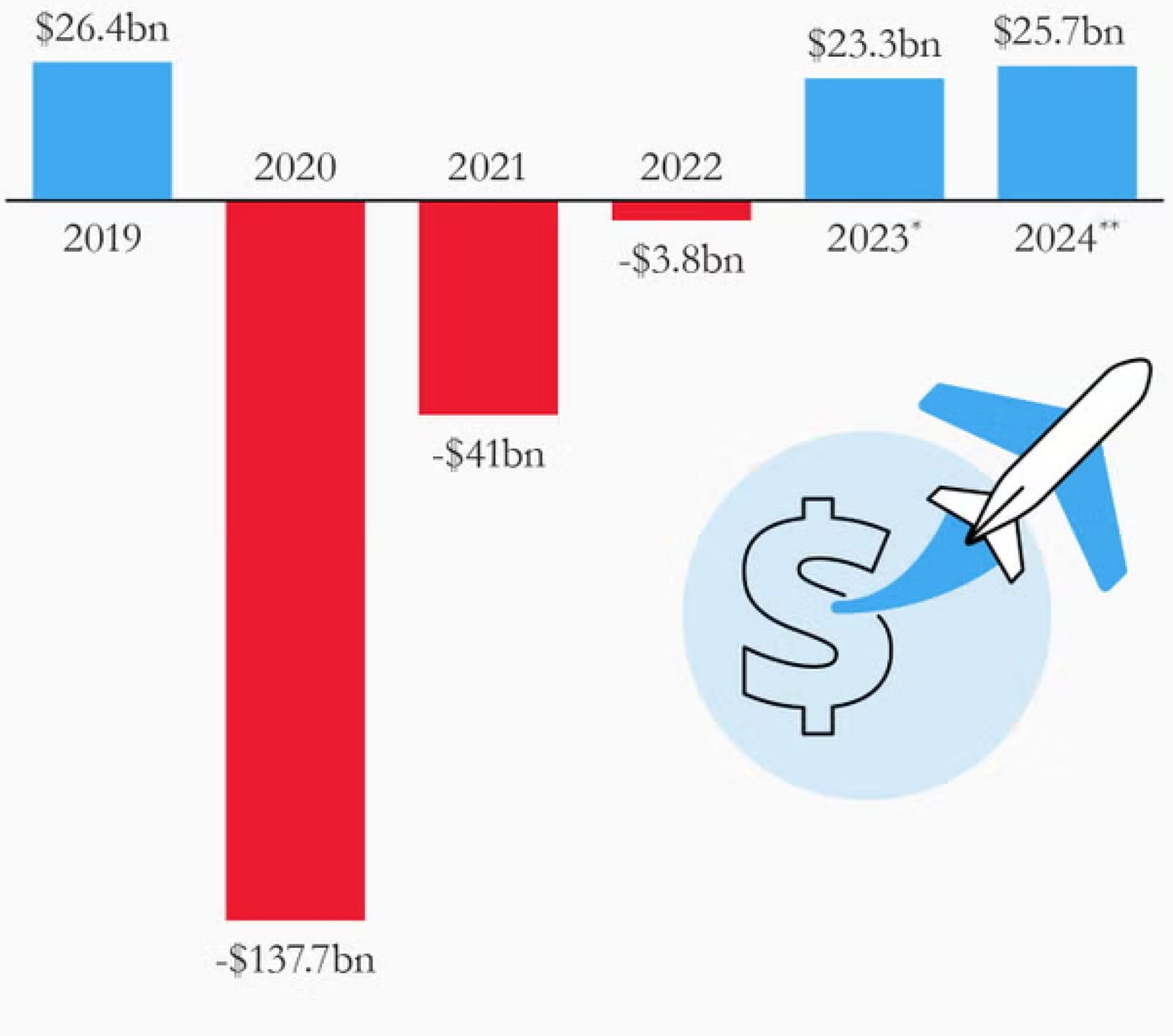
Detective Sergeant Laurence Dight, from the Met Police, told the court on Monday that the police investigation into the identity of the parents remained ongoing. Anyone with information regarding the parents' identities is asked to contact the force using the reference CAD 6876/18 Jan.

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By Numbers Blue skies ahead

Profit and loss of the world's commercial airlines, 2019 to 2024



* Preliminary estimate ** Forecast

Source: International Air Transport Association

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INDEPENDENT statista

Pictures of the Day



Green party

The faces of All India Trinamool Congress supporters are smeared with green colour as they celebrate the election results in Kolkata. *AP*



Hell on earth

A panoramic view of the Svartsengi area near Grindavik, Iceland, with active craters and lava flows in the foreground. *AP*



Chute on sight

Humanitarian aid is dropped on Khan Yunis by the Royal Jordanian Air Force, in the southern Gaza Strip. *AFP/Getty*



Lost in France

US soldiers attend a wreath-laying ceremony at the 1st Infantry Division Monument, as part of ceremonies marking the 80th anniversary of D-Day, near Omaha Beach, Normandy. *AP*



Dousing the flames

A firefighting plane disperses fire retardant on a wildfire in Puertollano, near Tarifa, southern Spain. *Reuters*

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Home news in brief



Tennyson has almost recovered after his ordeal running though central London in April (MoD)

Army horses that bolted prepare for Trooping the Colour

Military horses seen galloping through central London earlier this year will take part in Trooping the Colour after making a recovery, the army has said. Two of the horses bolted after being spooked by rubble being dropped through a plastic tunnel while on an exercise in Belgravia on 24 April.

The Life Guards soldiers and five military working horses that were injured in the incident “are continuing to make remarkable

progress in their recovery", the Household Cavalry Mounted Regiment said. The two most seriously injured horses, Quaker and Vida (the white horse), are continuing their recuperation in the countryside.

Three of the horses that were injured – Trojan, Tennyson, and Vanquish – are back on duty and "against all expectations, are looking likely to take part in the King's birthday parade on June 15", the regiment said. The celebration, held on Horse Guards Parade in Whitehall, will be attended by the King now that he has returned to public-facing duties.

Mr Fib and Little Miss Surprise join Mr Men series

Mr Fib and *Little Miss Surprise* are the latest characters to join the Mr Men and Little Miss children's book series. The two new stories will be published on 12 September, more than 50 years after *Mr Tickle*, the first Mr Men book, was released in 1971. The series was conceived by cartoonist and illustrator Roger Hargreaves, who died in 1988, and has been continued by his son Adam, who has added new characters to the collection.

Adam Hargreaves said: "It's always fun creating new characters to add to the series, although I've got a way to go to catch up with my dad. A *Mr Fib* has been rattling around in my imagination for a long while, and *Little Miss Surprise*, of course, popped into my head right out of the blue!" The collection already includes classic characters such as *Little Miss Sunshine*, *Mr Bump* and *Mr Lazy*, and more recent additions such as *Mr Rude*.

Asian hornets survived last winter

Asian hornets could be here to stay in the UK after DNA testing confirmed they survived winter. The species, which has the scientific name *Vespa velutina*, dismembers and eats bees and poses a threat to local pollinators and ecosystems. The hornets are thriving in France and there have been increasing reports in recent years of sightings in southern England.

Earlier this month the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs said there was no solid evidence that the hornets had stayed here over winter. But testing by the government-backed National Bee Unit has shown that three queen hornets caught at Four Oaks, East Sussex, are the offspring of a nest destroyed in nearby Rye in November 2023, suggesting that the species is breeding in the UK.

Asian hornets are believed to have been imported in a consignment of pottery from China and later spread to several regions in France. In 2016, the Asian hornet was discovered in the UK for the first time, in Tetbury, Gloucestershire.

Statue of late comedian toppled by taxi collision

A statue of the late comedian Victoria Wood, which was erected in her hometown after her death, has fallen over after a taxi crashed into it. The two-metre-high sculpture was ripped off its base by the collision in Bury, Greater Manchester, shortly after 10pm on Monday. Greater Manchester Police said the driver of the vehicle was taken to hospital with injuries that were not believed to be serious or life-changing. No arrests were made.

The bronze statue had taken pride of place opposite Bury Library, from which Wood used to steal books because she was too chronically shy to ask a librarian how to join. It was unveiled in May 2019 in tribute to the much-loved comedian, who died in April 2016 from cancer at the age of 62.

New date set for Rwanda flights if Tories win election

The earliest date Rwanda deportation flights could take off has been pushed back to late July, new court documents show. Rishi Sunak's government had originally promised that flights taking migrants to Rwanda would start in the last week of June, but this was delayed due to the calling of the general election for 4 July.

Government lawyers have told the High Court that the earliest date on which flights could start is 24 July. The new date was

revealed in a court order issued as part of the charity Asylum Aid's legal challenge against the government's Rwanda policy.

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World

Modi secures historic third term but loses his majority

India's PM must rely on BJP allies to form an administration



Narendra Modi greets the crowd at a campaign roadshow in the northern city of Varanasi (Getty)

MAROOSHA MUZAFFAR

Narendra Modi has won a historic third consecutive term as India's prime minister – but his victory was overshadowed by

the failure of his Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to win an expected outright majority, and a surprisingly strong performance by the largely discounted opposition.

"*Abhki baar 400 paar*" – "This time, beyond 400 [seats]" – was the rallying cry during his campaign, articulating the party's aim of dominating the 543-seat Lok Sabha, the lower house of parliament.

It was an ambitious target but not an unreasonable one, after the BJP won two successive landslide victories in the 2014 and 2019 elections; in the latter, the BJP won 303 seats in its own right, contributing to a ruling National Democratic Alliance (NDA) tally of more than 350 – nearly a two-thirds majority.

Almost all exit polls suggested the BJP was close to achieving its aim. But in the event, Mr Modi's party fell woefully short and will now be forced to rely on coalition partners to form a government. It could have major implications for how the world's most populous country is run over the next five years.

With most constituencies counted, the ruling NDA had 295 seats and the opposition INDIA bloc's tally stood at 230, a massive improvement from its showing in 2019. The NDA will still form the government, having crossed the majority threshold of 272 seats, and Mr Modi will stay on as prime minister. But political analysts said it was a "moral defeat" for the BJP and might just spell an end to the "politics of hate" that have defined Mr Modi's decade in power.

"This was no ordinary election," renowned left-wing political and social activist Harsh Mander told *The Independent*. "All Modi was offering was a project of hate. At a time when there is a jobs crisis, unprecedented inequalities, and severe climate challenges, a BJP landslide win would have meant that India slipped into very dark times."

He said there was "a sense of relief" that the BJP had not won a clear majority. "A coalition government is better, as the BJP will have to rely on coalition partners to formulate any policy. There will be discussion, debate, and no one-man government." Mr Mander credited the opposition for putting up a spirited fight

despite many challenges. “There was huge money-power. There was the use of all the state institutions against them.”

In advance of the election, federal agencies under Mr Modi’s government raided and jailed leading opposition politicians such as Arvind Kejriwal, chief minister of Delhi and leader of the Aam Aadmi Party, and froze bank accounts held by the main opposition Congress party. At the same time, the BJP was revealed to have been the biggest beneficiary of a system of secret political donations, called Electoral Bonds, that was recently declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court.

If not for the crackdown, Mr Mander argued, the INDIA bloc might have performed even better.

As results trickled in yesterday, it became clear that the BJP faced setbacks in several states, notably India’s largest, Uttar Pradesh, where the INDIA bloc, led by Akhilesh Yadav’s Samajwadi Party, was ahead in 43 of the 80 seats. In West Bengal, an eastern state where the BJP had campaigned aggressively, the Trinamool Congress was ahead in 32 of the 42 seats.

In Maharashtra, the opposition was on course to secure 30 seats, while the BJP and its allies lagged with 17. More remarkably, the BJP was trailing in at least 30 per cent of the seats it won in 2019, and some of its most prominent faces were staring at defeat.



BJP supporters dance at the party’s offices in New Delhi after hearing of a candidate’s victory yesterday (AP)

Smriti Irani, the minister for women and child development, lost to Kishori Lal of Congress in Amethi, a prestige constituency she was vying to retain after wresting it from Rahul Gandhi, the face of the opposition, in 2019. Prajwal Revanna, a lawmaker from BJP ally Janata Dal Secular who was arrested last week on sexual abuse charges, lost in the southern state of Karnataka.

Several factors contributed to the BJP's struggles in these states and constituencies, Arati Jerath, a political analyst, told *The Independent*. "There was a lot of attrition as far as the BJP was concerned, when you look at the ground reports," she said. "They suggested that the BJP was not going to do well."

And, unlike in previous elections, there was no singular national issue this time round. Key issues varied by state, reflecting caste dynamics, lack of enthusiasm among BJP and RSS workers, and concerns about unemployment.

"Honestly, what I am seeing in this entire election is unlike 2014 and 2019. There is no national vote," she said. "It's very much like what happened in 2004, which the BJP lost. The outcome was an aggregate of state elections. That is, I think, what we are seeing today. There was public anger, which exploded against the BJP."

Supriya Shrinate of the Congress party told NDTV that the opposition's performance in Uttar Pradesh, the heartland state that has been the bedrock of the BJP's Hindu nationalist politics, was "a moral loss" for the ruling party.

Ms Jerath agreed. "If the BJP failed to secure a clear majority when the entire election campaign was centred around Modi, that is a clear moral defeat for the BJP."

Manisha Priyam, a political observer, told *The Independent* that the result showed that "state-level interests and federal interests are very important and integral to the idea of India".

Political scientist Gilles Verniers told *Al Jazeera* that the BJP "went from using Modi as the main argument to using him as the sole argument. And that backfired." "This is a setback," Mr Verniers argued, referring to the BJP. "The options now are to

be more conciliatory and share power, or to double down on authoritarianism, which is the path they have taken over the past few years."

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India's election leaves Modi with a diminished mandate



Analysts' predictions of a landslide victory for Narendra Modi failed to materialise (AFP/Getty)

ALISHA RAHAMAN SARKAR

Narendra Modi's apparent failure to win an outright majority in India's general election will spark conflict within his party and limit his mandate to carry out sweeping reforms in a historic third consecutive term.

Modi is still set to return as prime minister, but will need the support of coalition members in his National Democratic

Alliance (NDA) bloc to do so, a stunning development that defies most analysts' expectations and every exit poll released after voting closed in the general election on Saturday.

As of yesterday evening, Modi's BJP [Bharatiya Janata Party] was leading in 245 seats, well short of the 272 needed for a majority. His NDA coalition as a whole was ahead in 295 constituencies, while the opposition INDIA alliance was leading in a remarkable 232 seats. Some exit polls had predicted that INDIA would win as few as 120.

Modi boasted on the campaign trail that his NDA would win a third landslide and as many as 400 seats in the 543-seat lower house of parliament. His opponents and critics feared what would happen if he were given such a mandate, including the prospect that he could change India's secular constitution and declare it a Hindu country. Modi denied having any plans to do so, but opposition leader Rahul Gandhi declared yesterday evening that voters had "fought to save the Indian constitution".

Whether or not such a change was truly on the cards, Modi had promised that some major reforms would come in his first 100 days after winning the election. "My plan for the first 100 days after the result is ready, and I won't waste a single day," the prime minister repeatedly said during election rallies and scripted TV interviews.

Some of the BJP's most eye-catching plans included a uniform civil code, essentially forcing the country's many communities to bring their customs closer in line with the Hindu majority, and a national register of citizens, which critics said could see many Indian Muslims without proper documentation branded illegal immigrants.

Another campaign pledge was to regularise Indian elections so that federal and state votes all take place at the same time every five years. It was widely thought that this policy would benefit only the BJP, as it would capitalise on Modi's supposedly iron-clad personal approval figures.



A supporter of the Indian National Congress party waves the national flag as others watch election results (AFP/Getty)

Such sweeping changes will now almost certainly be challenged by Modi's alliance partners, said Sayantan Ghosh, columnist and professor at St Xavier's College in Kolkata. "The Modi government will have to backtrack on its ideology," he explained. "Modi is for the first time under pressure. It will be the most compromised NDA government ever formed. Modi and home minister Amit Shah will have to take the responsibility, because they have been at the top and there are resentments within the party."

If, as expected, the BJP doesn't win a majority on its own, it will be "heavily dependent on the goodwill of its allies, which makes them critical players who we can expect will extract their pound of flesh, both in terms of policymaking as well as government formation", said Milan Vaishnav, director of the south Asia programme at think tank the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. "This would be truly uncharted territory, both for Indians as well as for the prime minister," he told reporters.

Opposition leaders are attributing Modi's election underperfomance to his failure to address the country's growing economic inequality, with unemployment steadily rising even as billionaires and major businesses thrive. Since rising to national prominence with his home state's "Gujarat model" of

economics, until now Modi's pro-market stance has been seen as a major selling point.

Reuters reported that two government officials had said Modi was planning to introduce a raft of business-friendly measures, including pushing through regulations that would make it easier for large companies to hire and fire workers. Those same markets responded very negatively to yesterday's results, with the Sensex and Nifty indices dropping some 8 per cent before recovering slightly.

Dr Chietigj Bajpaee, senior research fellow for the south Asia programme at Chatham House, said the election result "may restrain some of the BJP's more controversial identity-driven politics, but it will also make it more difficult to make progress on some of the more politically sensitive reforms, for instance labour reforms and land acquisition. This explains the fall in India's stock market as the results are being announced."

Though no one is currently in a position to challenge Modi's authority within the BJP, yesterday's results are a huge dent in his aura of invincibility, and will embolden factions within the Hindu nationalist movement that believe he has taken too much power into his own hands.

One senior member of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the militaristic ideological parent of the BJP, said its leaders were considering ways they could "pull up" or reprimand Modi for the result. They suggested the RSS could seek to hold an internal election, which, though not directly affecting Modi's position as BJP leader, could see the RSS move away from him in the direction of a preferred successor.

While these results might seem like bad news for the BJP, ultimately Modi has won the election with a campaign that started out talking about economic growth and ended in shrill dog-whistle references to Muslims taking wealth from Hindus. Modi began his election campaign by inaugurating a temple to the Hindu god-king Ram that was built on the site of an illegally demolished 16th-century mosque, and the courts are currently

hearing cases against two more mosques in the BJP-run state of Uttar Pradesh.

But if one event yesterday suggested that Modi's tactics for appealing to his right-wing Hindu base were faltering, it was the result from Ayodhya. The very seat where Modi inaugurated the Ram Temple was actually won by a candidate standing for the INDIA alliance.

"One important thing the elections have shown is that India's democracy remains more robust than is often perceived," Bajpaee notes. "Despite its imperfections, a degree of checks and balances persist in India's democracy, with the institutions still stronger than the individual. In a country of India's size and diversity, with longstanding traditions of dialogue and disagreement, democracy cannot be easily overturned."

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Hunter Biden's drug habits under spotlight in gun trial



Joe Biden's son Hunter arrives at court in Wilmington, Delaware, yesterday with his wife Melissa (Reuters)

STAFF REPORTER

Federal prosecutors yesterday painted Joe Biden's son Hunter as a man whose dark habits ensnared loved ones and who knew

what he was doing when he lied on federal forms to purchase a gun in 2018.

Jurors also got their first look at the document at the centre of the case, and Hunter Biden's attorney argued that his client did not believe he was in the throes of addiction when he stated in the paperwork that he did not have a drug problem. In the short time that he had the gun, he did nothing with it, and weapon was never even loaded, attorney Abbe Lowell said in opening statements. "You will see that he is not guilty," Mr Lowell said.

Hunter Biden has been charged with three felonies stemming from the purchase of the Colt revolver when he was, according to his memoir, addicted to crack. He has been accused of lying to a federally licensed gun dealer, making a false claim on the application by saying he was not a drug user and illegally having the gun for 11 days.

The case is dredging up painful memories for the president and his family, and revealing new and highly personal details about some of their struggles with addiction as the 2024 election looms, all while the first lady watched from the front row of the courtroom.

Jurors will hear testimony from the president's brother James Biden, who is close with Hunter and helped his nephew through rehab stints in the past. They will also hear how Hallie Biden, the widow of the president's late son, also became addicted to crack during a brief relationship with Hunter. Hallie took the gun from Hunter and tossed it into the garbage at a nearby market, afraid of what he might do with it. The gun was later found by someone collecting cans and eventually turned over to police.



Jill Biden at court in Wilmington, Delaware, yesterday (Getty)

The president was in Washington yesterday, announcing an immigration order and hosting a picnic for congressional leaders before he departed for France later in the day. He will be gone the rest of the week. Jill Biden planned to meet him in Europe.

The president's allies are worried about the toll the trial may take on the elder Biden, who has long been protective and deeply concerned about his only living son and his sobriety and who must now watch as those past mistakes are publicly scrutinised.

Prosecutors yesterday spent hours on Hunter Biden's drug problem, using his own words and missives to show the depth of the addiction. They showed jurors his old laptop computer, the same one he left at a Delaware repair shop and never retrieved. In 2020, the contents made their way to Republicans and were publicly leaked, revealing highly personal messages about his work and his life. He has since sued over the data breach.

An FBI agent read aloud messages from the laptop's data to the jury that chronicled a desperate effort to buy drugs, email receipts for a detox facility he attended before relapsing and large sums of cash he withdrew.

In one exchange with Hallie, she wrote: "I called you 500 times in past 24 hours." Hunter replied less than a minute later, informing her that he was "sleeping on a car smoking crack on

4th street and Rodney." He added in a follow-up text: "There's my truth."

And the jury heard lengthy audio excerpts of his memoir, Beautiful Things, in which he narrates his return to Delaware around the time of the gun purchase and his descent into drugs following the death of his brother, Beau, in 2015 from cancer. The written excerpts were displayed on a screen as the audio was played.

His sister Ashley Biden, watching from the courtroom, dabbed at her eyes with a tissue and eventually left. Jill Biden, too, was absent after lunch. She was expected in Washington with her husband.

Prosecutor Derek Hines told the jury Hunter was trying to score drugs just days after he lied on the form, which was later shown to jurors.

"No one is allowed to lie on a federal form like that, even Hunter Biden," Mr Hines said. "He crossed the line when he chose to buy a gun and lied about a federal background check ... the defendant's choice to buy a gun is why we are here."

"When the defendant filled out that form, he knew he was a drug addict," and prosecutors don't have to prove he was using the day he purchased the firearm, Mr Hines said.

The proceedings come after the collapse of a deal with prosecutors that would have avoided the spectacle of a trial so close to the 2024 election. Hunter Biden pleaded not guilty and has argued he is being unfairly targeted by the Justice Department after Republicans decried the now-defunct plea deal as special treatment for the Democratic president's son.

Me Lowell said the form asks whether you "are" a drug user. "It does not say 'have you ever been,'" and he suggested the president's son did not think of himself as someone with a drug problem when he purchased the gun. His state of mind should be considered at the time of the purchase, not "what he wrote in a book in 2021".

Mr Lowell also blamed Hunter's problems with the firearm on Hallie's disposal of it. "After he bought the gun, Hunter did nothing with it," Lowell said. The gun became a problem only because of what Hallie Biden did.

If convicted, Hunter Biden could face up to 25 years in prison, though first-time offenders do not get anywhere near the maximum, and it's unclear whether the judge would give him time behind bars.

The trial is unfolding just days after Donald Trump, the presumptive Republican presidential nominee, was convicted of 34 felonies in New York City. The two criminal cases are unrelated, but their proximity underscores how the courts have taken centre stage during the 2024 campaign.

Yesterday, a former Trump aide and vocal Biden critic, Garrett Ziegler, attended court, prompting Hunter Biden's wife, Melissa, to approach him and say "You have no right to be here" and yelling an expletive. Ziegler has been sued by Hunter Biden, who claimed he violated computer privacy laws by accessing and then manipulating the laptop data.

Hunter Biden also faces a trial in California in September on charges of failing to pay $1.4m in taxes. Both cases were to have been resolved through the deal with prosecutors last July, the culmination of a year-long investigation into his business dealings.

But Judge Maryellen Noreika, who was nominated to the bench by Mr Trump, questioned some unusual aspects of the deal. The lawyers could not come to a resolution on her questions, and the deal fell apart. Attorney general Merrick Garland then appointed a former US attorney for Delaware, David Weiss, as a special counsel in August, and a month later Hunter Biden was indicted.

Mr Garland yesterday faced members of the Republican-led House judiciary committee in Washington, which has been investigating the president and his family and whose chair has been at the forefront of a stalled impeachment inquiry stemming from Hunter Biden's business dealings.

AP

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World news in brief



Rescuers search homes in Passau, Bavaria, yesterday after the Danube and the Inn flooded (AFP)

At least five people dead after flooding in Germany

A woman's body was recovered yesterday from a car that sank into floodwater in Bavaria, bringing the confirmed death toll in flooding across Germany to five. Persistent heavy rain led to widespread flooding over the weekend. While the situation has now eased in southwestern Germany, water levels remained high in parts of Bavaria as of yesterday, particularly on the Danube and in the Rosenheim area in the southeast. Some major railway lines, including several leading to Munich, were still blocked or disrupted.

The bodies of four people who died in the floods were found on Sunday and Monday, three of them in basements. Police reported the discovery of a fifth victim yesterday in the small town of Markt Rettenbach. They said a driver who had apparently ignored barriers blocking a flooded road on Monday slipped off the road into a field and called emergency services to alert them that her car was filling with water. Rescuers found the nearly submerged vehicle and recovered the woman's body. *AP*

Heavy security on anniversary of Tiananmen crackdown

Checkpoints and rows of police vehicles lined a major road leading to Beijing's Tiananmen Square yesterday as China heightened security on the 35th anniversary of a bloody crackdown on pro-democracy protests. China has long sought to quash any memory of the events, when the Chinese government ordered in the army to end the months-long protests and uphold communist rule. An estimated 180,000 troops and armed police rolled in with tanks and armoured vehicles, and fired into crowds as they pushed towards Tiananmen Square.

The death toll remains unknown to this day. Hundreds, if not thousands, are believed to have been killed in an operation that started on the night of 3 June and lasted until the following morning. Hundreds of tourists lined the streets leading to the gates to enter Tiananmen Square and the Forbidden City.

Asked by a foreign journalist for comment on the 35th anniversary during a daily foreign ministry briefing, spokesperson Mao Ning shrugged off the event. "The Chinese government has long since come to a clear conclusion on the political disturbance that took place in the late 1980s," Mr Mao said.

Knox returns to Italian court on slander charge

Amanda Knox is set to defend herself in an Italian court today against a slander conviction. A court ruled that Italy had violated her human rights during a long night of questioning after the

murder of her British roommate Meredith Kercher in November 2007. The slander conviction for accusing a Congolese bar owner of the murder is the only charge against Knox to have withstood five court rulings that ultimately cleared her of the murder of Kercher, who was 21, in the apartment they shared in Perugia.

The slander charge was largely based on two statements typed by police that Knox signed during the early hours of 6 November 2007 under extended questioning in Italian from police without a lawyer or a competent translator. The European Court of Human Rights ruled that the conditions violated her human rights.

After Kercher's murder, suspicion fell on Knox, then 20, and her Italian boyfriend, Raffaele Sollecito, with whom she had been involved for around a week. Knox and Mr Sollecito were convicted in their first trial, but after a series of flip-flop verdicts, they were ultimately exonerated by Italy's highest court in 2015. Rudy Hermann Guede, a man from Ivory Coast whose DNA was found at the crime scene, was convicted of the murder. Guede served 13 years of a 16-year prison sentence.

Louisiana approves surgical castration for sex offenders

Some sex offenders in Louisiana could soon be ordered to undergo surgical castration if convicted of sex crimes, as part of an expansion of a bill proposed earlier this year. Louisiana lawmakers have given final approval to a bill that could force those convicted of sex crimes – including rape, incest and molestation – against a child younger than 13 to undergo the process.

Several states, including Louisiana, can currently order these criminals to receive chemical castration, which uses medications that block testosterone production in order to decrease sex drive. However, surgical castration is a more invasive procedure. In April, Glenn Sullivan Sr, 54, of Springfield, Louisiana, was ordered to be physically castrated after he was convicted of raping and impregnating a 14-year-old girl. He pleaded guilty to

four counts of second-degree rape and was sentenced to 50 years in prison.

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Voices

Labour should feel shame at how they treated hero Diane



Make no mistake about the party's intentions: to try and silence a female Black voice (Getty)

JEREMY CORBYN

I remember the day Diane Abbott was elected as the first Black female MP very well. It was a truly historic moment, a new chapter in British Black history, and a victory of hope and justice over division and fear. I remember, a few years before she even became an MP, the work Diane did in setting up Labour Party Black Sections, a group

that campaigned against racism and for the political representation of Black and Asian members in the party.

I remember her speech in the House of Commons during the 2008 Counter Terrorism Bill. In a fierce defence of civil liberties, Diane warned us that increased police powers would lead to arbitrary detention, miscarriages of justice and the disproportionate arrests of ethnic minority communities. “I do not believe that there is some trade-off between our liberties and the safety of the realm”, she said. “What makes us free is what makes us safe, and what makes us safe is what will make us free.”

I remember her speaking out against poor regulation of financial services, while serving on the Treasury select committee, around the time of the financial crash. I remember Diane risking her career – becoming embroiled in a bitter re-selection battle – because she had the courage to speak out against the Iraq war.

I remember appointing her to the shadow cabinet, during which time she demanded justice for the Windrush generation, exposing the reality of a hostile environment she had opposed her entire life. I remember 2 October 2019, when Diane became the first Black MP to represent their party at the dispatch box.

The way that Diane Abbott has been treated is an utter disgrace – and I am disgusted by the blatant double standards, hypocrisy and contempt for local democracy, in plain sight for all to see. Take a look at her social media and you will see the horrific levels of racist abuse she is forced to endure – and she has been hung out to dry. But what I find most frustrating is the way in which, for the duration of this shameful episode, Diane’s achievements have been ignored.

I have been proud to campaign alongside Diane for social justice and peace our entire careers. And as we say good riddance to 14 years of Tory rule, we need to be offering people hope for a better future

You know what? If parliament had listened to Diane Abbott, we wouldn't have invaded Iraq, Black Britons wouldn't have been deported in the Windrush scandal, and our country wouldn't have been decimated by austerity and privatisation.

Those in positions of power ignored Diane before. They are ignoring her again. On the news and on the radio, she has been routinely patronised by frontbenchers who are happy to call her a trailblazer but refuse to emulate the values she represents.

If the Labour leadership wanted to show Diane some respect, they would listen to the demands of her constituents. They would defend – not demonise – migrants and refugees. They would pledge to abolish the two-child benefits cap, lifting 250,000 people out of poverty overnight. And they would have the courage to make the case for an ethical foreign policy based on peace.

I have been proud to campaign alongside Diane for social justice and peace our entire careers. And as we say good riddance to 14 years of Tory rule, we need to be offering people hope for a better future. I am standing as an independent candidate in Islington North in order to ensure my constituents have an independent voice for equality, democracy and peace. It is disgraceful that local party members in my constituency have been denied the right to select their candidate, in a flagrant attack on our democracy, our community and the values we share.

We have to stand up and defend our rights – and we will run a positive campaign based on the values that have united our community for 40 years: rent controls, public ownership, a Green New Deal, and peace and human rights around the world. I know that's what Diane will fight for, too – and if the people of Islington North re-elect me as their MP, I'll be working alongside her in the next parliament.

Make no mistake about the party's intentions over the past few months: to try and silence a female Black voice who has the courage to stand up for a better world. It is thanks to the power of solidarity that, this time, they have failed. We must do everything we can to ensure they don't succeed in the future. That means shifting from a strategy that merely *defends* those under attack, toward ones that empowers them.

The Left is always looking for leaders. Look around you – and you will see leaders in the communities we are meant to represent. It was Black women in Hackney who founded Sistah Space, a community-based centre to support African and Caribbean women affected by domestic and sexual abuse. And it was Black women in Hackney – including those from Sistah Space itself – who organised the spontaneous protest outside Hackney Town Hall in support of Diane.

We are facing unprecedented crises. We will not solve these crises by defending the economic status quo. We will solve them by listening to people like Diane Abbott who are prepared to challenge it. As she said herself in 2008, during the counter terrorism debate, "If people from our different ethnic communities cannot come here and genuinely reflect their fears and concerns, what is parliament for?"

Jeremy Corbyn is a former leader of the Labour Party, and is running as an independent candidate in Islington North

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We must not fall for Farage's cheap stunts in this election



The only way is Essex: the new Reform UK leader presses the flesh in Clacton yesterday (PA Wire)

DAVID BLUNKETT

Almost a third of the way into the general election campaign and Nigel Farage does it again. Just as you thought voter fatigue might already be kicking in, the great self-publicist – indeed, the showman of modern British politics – pulls his rabbit out of the hat.

Last week, he was only interested in the US presidential election. This week he is the candidate for Clacton, the former seat of Douglas Carswell, the Tory MP who quit to join Ukip in 2014. Indeed, as he launched his campaign in front of a crowd of supporters, he promised to be a "bloody nuisance" – before having a milkshake thrown over him.

I have long been cautious of the chances of a landslide victory for Labour, but with Farage taking over the leadership of Reform UK (and all the coverage that this will give him) I now think that anti-Labour votes – which might have gone to the Conservatives – are much more likely to switch to Reform. Farage might take the seat, and Lee Anderson – who quit the Tories earlier this year – might just pull off a win in the Nottinghamshire seat of Ashfield.

The last two weeks have seen one or two eye-catching attempts to gain the attention of the electorate. The Conservatives floated the idea of national service, a policy clearly aimed at an older generation – conscription ended in 1960.

But there is, in fact, a very real challenge facing young people, which community service would help in part, to resolve. According to the Office for National Statistics, there are 900,000 16 to 24-year-olds who are not in education, employment or training, and just under two-thirds of those are not, for ill-health and other reasons, seeking work. The implications are profound with respect to the health and wellbeing, of their future – and their early connection with the world of work.

Then we have had another bone thrown to the same group of voters who are suspicious of the expanded opportunity for young people to take the university route. Namely, that some courses would be cut and apprenticeships offered instead. I am in favour of apprenticeships – they were commonplace in my city of Sheffield many years ago. A pity, therefore, that there has been an enormous drop in younger people taking this pathway over the last few years.

Another problem is that the sums don’t add up. University students take out loans, whereas apprenticeships are funded from the public purse, including the levy on larger businesses. Plus a whole variety of other half-promises, adding up to billions of unfunded commitments, with more on national insurance still to come!

But none of these ill-thought-through gimmicks will be able to match anything that Farage will come up with in the next four weeks. Not just significant for the Tory vote, but also for the direction of the Conservative Party after the election. We have already seen a role reversal of the two major parties and with the increased pressure now on Rishi Sunak, this trend can only accelerate.

I have been cautious of a landslide victory for Labour, but with Farage taking over Reform UK I now think that anti-Labour votes are much more likely to switch from Conservative to Reform

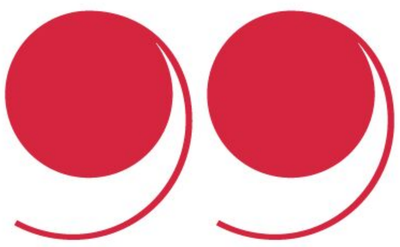
In 2019, Jeremy Corbyn and John McDonnell, his shadow chancellor, promised the earth as they racked up tens of billions of pounds in projected spending, which frightened the electorate to death. This time it is Labour playing the caution card, refusing to be egged into substantial spending pledges, while the Conservatives have reinvented the “magic money tree" that former prime minister Theresa May said didn’t exist.

This week we have already seen Keir Starmer putting his tanks on the Tory’s lawn with his promise to cut legal migration and upskill the UK workforce. However, at this stage, most people have had their attention, if at all, on what the election outcome will mean for them in terms of the health service, social care and education.

It will be interesting to see what the Reform Party has to say on these central issues. Before the end of this election campaign, I hope that there will be a great deal more from all politicians on the bread-and-butter issues on which fly-by-nights have nothing to say.

In the end – and this might seem incredibly downbeat for someone who has always liked the cut and thrust of political debate – this election might just be more about stability and a safe pair of hands than anything eye-catching or dramatic. Not, I fear, a message to get people enthused to cast their vote, but much more crucial to the future of our country than a boost to the ego of one individual.

David Blunkett is a former Labour home secretary and served as the MP for Sheffield Brightside and Hillsborough from 1987 to 2015



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Voices

Tory party's smear campaign on Starmer the DPP is OTT



Keir Starmer, the then director of public prosecutions, speaks during a press conference in 2009 (AFP/Getty)

DOMINIC GRIEVE

In a general election, it is right that the leadership qualities of prospective prime ministers are thoroughly examined and assessed. Voters deserve nothing less.

But as a former Conservative attorney general with ultimate responsibility for the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) from 2010 to 2014, I am astonished to see some of my former colleagues seeking to suggest that as director of public prosecutions (DPP), Keir Starmer was a “lefty lawyer” who failed in the role.

This flies in the face of the facts. As DPP, Starmer had to implement the savings that the Cameron government brought in because of the financial crisis. He succeeded in doing this by amalgamating offices and cutting nearly a quarter of the staff, all while maintaining an effective service. I also realised, as I visited offices affected by the changes, that he had led from the front and was held in high regard by staff from whom he was asking for challenging changes in working practices.

His success as a leader of this important government department was well known in Whitehall. When, after his departure, the CPS was to be made the subject of further budget cuts, I was able to get them halved because the Treasury acknowledged how well the CPS had performed and delivered previously.

He chose to leave the role in 2013, but I never heard any suggestion from anyone within government that he should not be reappointed had he wished to continue. As DPP, he attended the weekly meeting of permanent secretaries. Had any of them had concerns about his performance, I would have known about it.

At no stage did Starmer’s priorities as DPP suggest he was pursuing some “lefty lawyer” agenda. When he informed me about controversial individual decisions taken personally, I never had cause to disagree with his reasoning.

He prioritised the interests of the people he was there to serve ahead of the institution's image



The CPS, like any human service, is never going to be perfect and the DPP takes and is aware personally of only a tiny fraction of prosecutorial decisions. The suggestion that he had a personal role in not prosecuting Jimmy Savile was simply untrue. But when things did go wrong with the CPS, I found him wanting to take responsibility and find solutions for the future. He initiated reviews of CPS practices when problems were identified which led to lasting improvements in how the work was done.

I was particularly impressed by the manner in which he mobilised the CPS to work with the courts after the 2011 riots, sometimes through the night, to ensure that speedy justice was delivered on those who had committed offences. He correctly assessed that stopping criminality of this kind required clear evidence of rapid consequences for the perpetrators and the approach worked.

On policy matters, he was pragmatic in trying to focus on problems. In June 2013, he introduced the victims' right to review, allowing any victim of crime, including bereaved family members, to ask the CPS to look again at a case following a decision not to charge. He prioritised the interests of the people he was there to serve ahead of the institution's image.

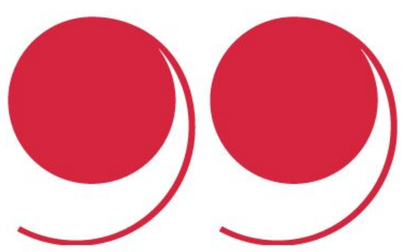
The reality is that Starmer worked hard as DPP to uphold the rule of law and make our country safer. He put special focus on improving conviction rates in cases of sexual assault and on smashing criminal gangs. The report on human trafficking published by the Home Office in late 2012 acknowledged the role of the CPS in this. I am not surprised to learn that Theresa May, the then home secretary, took him out for dinner to thank him for his services when he left. As a public servant, he had

served the government of the day with both dedication and professionalism.

Being DPP and becoming prime minister are, of course, not one and the same. This election should offer an opportunity for detailed debate about the many challenges our country faces, and which party might be best placed to tackle them. But we do our democracy no favours by slinging mud at our opponents, whoever they are.

For Conservatives to try to attack Starmer's record as DPP is ridiculous, and reflects badly on those who do it.

Dominic Grieve is a former Conservative attorney general



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Voices

Meloni reclaimed the B-word – and I'm all in favour of it



Italy's PM Giorgia Meloni received wild applause when she introduced herself as 'that bitch' (AP)

FLIC EVERETT

About 10 years ago, I went on a weird press trip to Slovakia with a bunch of random European journalists. One was a highly camp German blogger, whose favourite greeting to me and my fellow women was: "Hey, what's up, bitch?"

Maybe he also identified as a bitch and imagined he was girlishly connecting with us, but I found it both irritating and demeaning. “Bitch” has long been considered an insult to women, and it’s not a word for men, camp or otherwise, to deploy. For women, however, it’s come to indicate a certain take-no-prisoners attitude.

From Britney’s “It’s Britney, bitch” intro to “Gimme More”, her comeback after the wilderness years, followed by “Bitch I’m Madonna” by, er, Madonna, to Kate Moss’s scathing dismissal of a disgruntled female pilot as a “basic bitch”, the word has an undeniable power – although all of these, along with the infamous line from Shirley Conran’s *Lace* (“Which one of you bitches is my mother?”), are examples of women addressing other women with the unsayable word – which isn’t necessarily much better than if it were coming from a man.

This week, however, the Italian prime minister, Giorgia Meloni, reclaimed the insult from her detractors after the male, left-wing governor of Campania was recorded referring to her in private as “a bitch”. She greeted him with: “President de Luca? That bitch Meloni – how are you?” The video of the encounter was played at a rally in Rome last week, to wild applause.

When used by women about themselves, rather than as a demeaning slur, clearly the B-word can be a statement of intent – one that says “Don’t mess with me.” “Bitch” is not a lighthearted greeting, but when it is used well, it has come to mean a woman who takes no nonsense, values herself, and is prepared to be considered “difficult” to get what she wants.

The word was originally associated with Diana, the Roman goddess of the hunt, who was often portrayed with dogs, and as a result, it came to suggest a feral, sexual quality

Men have always proudly owned that kind of self-description, with “power player” being just one admiring phrase within Wall Street jargon that translates as “unrepentant sociopath”. The male B-word equivalent, “bastard”, is almost a term of endearment for certain successful men – a question such as “How’s the French chateau, you rich bastard?” would never be interpreted as offensive.

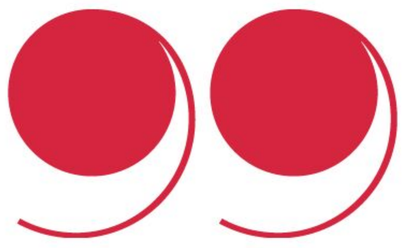
For women, though, “bitch” has long been considered a vicious insult – and it’s been around since the 1400s. According to researchers at James Madison University in Virginia, “A woman being called a bitch was being accused of being worse than a prostitute, because at least a prostitute stood to gain financially from her sexual favours.” It was also originally associated with Diana, the Roman goddess of the hunt, who was often portrayed with dogs, and as a result, it came to suggest a feral, sexual quality. Maybe it’s no wonder that Madonna’s happy to reclaim it.

“Bitch” is an unrepentantly challenging word that’s still often used to crush and debase women who aren’t playing by the accepted social rules. “Being a little bitch”, “bitchy” and even the self-named “stitch ’n’ bitch” groups of chatty crafters all suggest a gossipy spitefulness, in an insult that is only ever levelled at women and gay men.

Of course, gossip and secrecy have for millennia been a simple solution to a lack of social power – what other way did women have of protecting ourselves? A bitch may not be nice, but she often suffers less as a result.

Yet despite the ongoing reclamation of “bitch”, it will never, as far as I can see, be acceptable to use it about other women. It’s fine for supermodel Emily Ratajkowski, when speaking about Hollywood’s fetishisation of female pain, to declare that she was entering her “bitch era”. But it’s only ever valid to say it about ourselves, when “I’m a bitch” can mean: “I won’t be ripped off, I won’t be patronised, I won’t be demeaned and insulted by men.”

And on that basis, I’m all in.



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Vilification of young British Muslims cannot be tolerated

As a young Muslim living in Britain, I was deeply disturbed and saddened by Nigel Farage's comments about Muslim youth in the UK. Hearing such inflammatory and dangerously divisive remarks from a public figure is deeply hurtful.

Although Farage claimed he was referring to a minority of Muslim youth, his use of misleading statistics to vilify even a small segment of our community is not just irresponsible – it is a betrayal of the very values of fairness and respect that Britain stands for. Any attempt to equivocate these actions of a minority with the teachings of Islam or the wider Muslim community is wholly inaccurate.

Extremism in all its ugly forms, in any community, should be condemned. But such reckless and divisive rhetoric must not be tolerated. It merely sows discord and division, and risks tearing apart the fabric of our society, turning people against one another based on fear and prejudice.

The Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, of which I am part, has consistently championed the principles of loyalty, peace, and integration, embodied by our motto: "Love for All, Hatred for None".

Islam's teachings emphasise the importance of contributing positively to society and upholding the law of the land. My own family sought asylum in the UK, seeking its safety and freedoms, and we have always endeavoured to give back to this country that welcomed us with open arms.

Thus, I implore public figures to hold themselves to a higher standard of discourse, one that promotes understanding rather than hatred, as it is only through mutual respect for people of diverse backgrounds and faiths that can we create a stronger, more inclusive Britain.

Malik Fraz Ahmad *Durham*

Answer the question

Many reporters ought to be congratulated on their patient attempts to garner answers when grilling politicians during this election campaign. Many politicians are trying hard to play the game and a perfect example is James Cleverly.

For the second time in a week, the home secretary responded to almost all the questions put to him by immediately and blatantly ignoring requests to explain Tory policy, instead attempting weak attacks on Labour. I can see that he doesn't have much to

work with, given the appalling 14-year record the Tories have, but this approach simply exposes the weakness of their position.

It also undermines any attempt to promote positive politics and minimise the damaging, irresponsible, deliberate divisions that have undermined public confidence since the EU referendum. Cleverly is insulting our intelligence if he thinks we do not notice his feeble efforts to avoid the question.

He, his colleagues and whoever is advising them need to show more respect to the electorate and get to the point. The country is sick of pathetic, deliberately constructed culture wars. That strategy won't even work for Mr Farage – not this time.

David Lowndes *Southampton*

A modern solution for the modern MP

If I were prime minister, I would make it a requirement that all MPs must have their main residence in the constituency they are representing. In my opinion, from their moment of nomination, and throughout their tenure, MPs should have to primarily live in the area that they stand for, and not simply bounce between safe seats just to keep their careers afloat.

Furthermore, I'd take away any expense option for "constituency residences" or "second homes". Instead, I would provide specific residences a short hop from parliament for all MPs to stay in when they're in London.

If they want an office and staff, they can use their own constituency office for that. A simple, modern (and austere) solution for the modern MP and I commend it to the House.

Paul Finch *Highbridge*

History could repeat itself

I take Graham Powell's point (Letters, yesterday) that the priority at the election is to oust the Tories. But if Labour achieves an overall majority, there will be no incentive for the party to change the system. They've had opportunities to do that during the last hundred years, but first-past-the-post has suited them, as it has the Tories, because it enables a party with a minority of electors' votes to obtain a majority of parliamentary seats.

The Tories have been able to degrade our country because there was no real opposition to them – mere words are not a constraint, it's parliamentary votes that matter.

I have no objection to Labour being the largest party, and it's very likely that this will be the case. But unless smaller parties also have some influence, the system will not change and there's a danger that the disaster of the last 14 years could be repeated at some time in the future.

Susan Alexander *South Gloucestershire*

Vote tactically

I see clear evidence of matters significantly affecting women's equality, including the cost and insufficiency of childcare, a massive backlog in rape cases awaiting trial so increasing the trauma of victims, and a failure to police restraining orders on abusers.

And yet, what is the focus of our useless (and hopefully outgoing) equalities minister, one Kemi Badenoch? None of the above issues, but, instead, trans issues, of course – culture war clickbait for the more right-wing members of our society.

And how exactly does she expect to exclude trans people with gender recognition certificates from single-sex spaces such as toilets and changing rooms? Despite some misconceptions, many such trans people are not obvious among us and all have birth certificates that look like any other person's, so what's her plan?

It is setting a disgusting precedent that isn't a surprise from this candidate of whatever is left of the Conservative Party. My message to people is, wherever you are, vote tactically to get the Tories out of our lives for as long as possible.

Sarah Wood *Scotland*

Democracy in action

I fully agree with Amanda Baker (Letters, yesterday). My mother always emphasised the importance of voting when she raised my sister and me, reminding us that women died so we could have the right to do so.

I quote this to anyone who tells me that they will not be voting.

For those of us who often feel that our votes don't count, the answer would be to bring in proportional representation. In such a case, I would go even further and make voting compulsory and move the voting day to the weekend. It could take place over both Saturday and Sunday to respect people's different sensibilities. But it would be a better approach to put our democracy into action.

Viv Pert *London*

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I'm not 'chuffed' to hear these words show my age

A whole raft of 'slang' words have been declared obsolete, according to new research, but **Sam Leith** says don't worry... it's only a matter of time before they come back into fashion



'Me? Out of fashion? I don't believe it!': Richard Wilson as Victor Meldrew in 'One Foot in the Grave' (David Crump/ANL/Shutterstock)

You know that feeling you get when you read an obituary in the paper of a public figure and it comes as a horrible shock? A shock not because you were surprised by their going, but because you would have sworn blind they had died a decade

previously. Who knew him out of *'Allo 'Allo!* was still with us, you marvel. Except – oh. There's probably a German word for this sort of double-take. And it applies, as a sort of special sub-category, to the reaction of anyone north of 40 years old to the recent report on "out-of-date" slang.

Researchers from WordTips (me neither) surveyed 310 different obsolete slang terms as defined in the crowdsourced slang resource UrbanDictionary and counted the numbers of "upvotes" and "downvotes" that each term had accrued from the site's users.

Among the antiquated expressions that users of the site professed apparent nostalgia for were such epithets as "bugger all", "sod off", "pear-shaped", "chuffed" and "innit".

The most fondly remembered of all obsolete slang terms was, apparently, that all-purpose not-quite-the-f-word intensifier "bloody".

All these epithets are staples of my day-to-day vocabulary; and at 50, I'm not exactly of the generation that learned to swear from Biggles and Algy. As a professed "old fart", I was, you could say, not chuffed – that someone seems to think these much-loved and used words are obsolete. I never got the bloody memo.



The chicken connoisseur: Elijah Quashie, the YouTuber behind 'The Pengest Munch' (TheCNSR/YouTube)

But I will not be the only one. This report will leave even some Gen-Zs feeling like dinosaurs. While phrases such as "curtain

twitcher", "chockablock" and "Bob's your uncle" are included, also in the list of supposedly out-of-date slang terms were "peng", "dench" (no, not the actor), "bruv" and "ledge" (no, not the window appendage – do try to keep up).

The first of these – meaning, roughly, jolly good – was popularised by a fried chicken critic in the excellent YouTube show *The Pengest Munch* which only started less than a decade ago. I've heard my 10-year-old say "bruv" to someone other than his brother.

As the WordTips folk point out, too, it's pretty hard to draw firm conclusions on attitudes to slang from upvotes and downvotes: "Whether Boomers are upvoting these slang terms in a cringe effort to relive their glory days or Zoomers are embracing the cool jive of yesteryear for vintage street cred is for you to decide."

We can conclude, from this, I think, that user polls on UrbanDictionary may not yet be at the cutting edge of academic sociolinguistics, but it does tell us something. It tells us that the study of slang itself is getting trickier, and that usages that used to shift in decades or generations now shift in months, weeks, nanoseconds, zeptoseconds.

Language evolves. Since the advent of the internet, it has evolved even faster. It goes, now, in fruit-fly generations. Slang, in particular, has always been used to bind social tribes; when it spills out of the in-group (when your mum stops thinking that LOL means "lots of love", or lifestyle magazines start putting "cheugy" in headlines) the in-group adopts a new slang.

I’ve been wearing Doc Martens continuously for 35 years, and I used to be in fashion once a decade. Nowadays it’s once a year

The vectors for its transmission used to be spoken language, its petri dishes the workplace or the school playground. David Mitchell’s novel of 1980s childhood, *Black Swan Green*, could conjure a decade and a generation with the narrator’s use of “ace” as a term of approval.

The Mitchells of the future won’t be able to do the same for the 2020s or even 2024. Social media’s virality means a slang term can be halfway to “over” by the time its coiner presses send. But that also means they can come back in fashion as quickly as they lose their edge. Ace is now used as it ever was, and the Nineties classic “extra” is apparently the word du jour.

That’s dizzying. But it’s also, in some sense, reassuring. Just as the fierce tribal and generational divides that used to apply to music have been erased by the streaming services – the singles charts are meaningless; everything is available all the time forever; your 14-year-old daughter loves early-Nineties indie bands – so too have those in the language.

So there’s no reason to worry. I’ve been wearing Doc Martens continuously for 35 years, and I used to be in fashion once a decade. Nowadays it’s once a year. Same with language. The intervals between a usage being cool, it being ironically cool, it being fully back in fashion, and it being a universal expression,

are all but imperceptible – and what's more, it's not always clear which of these states the word is in any way.

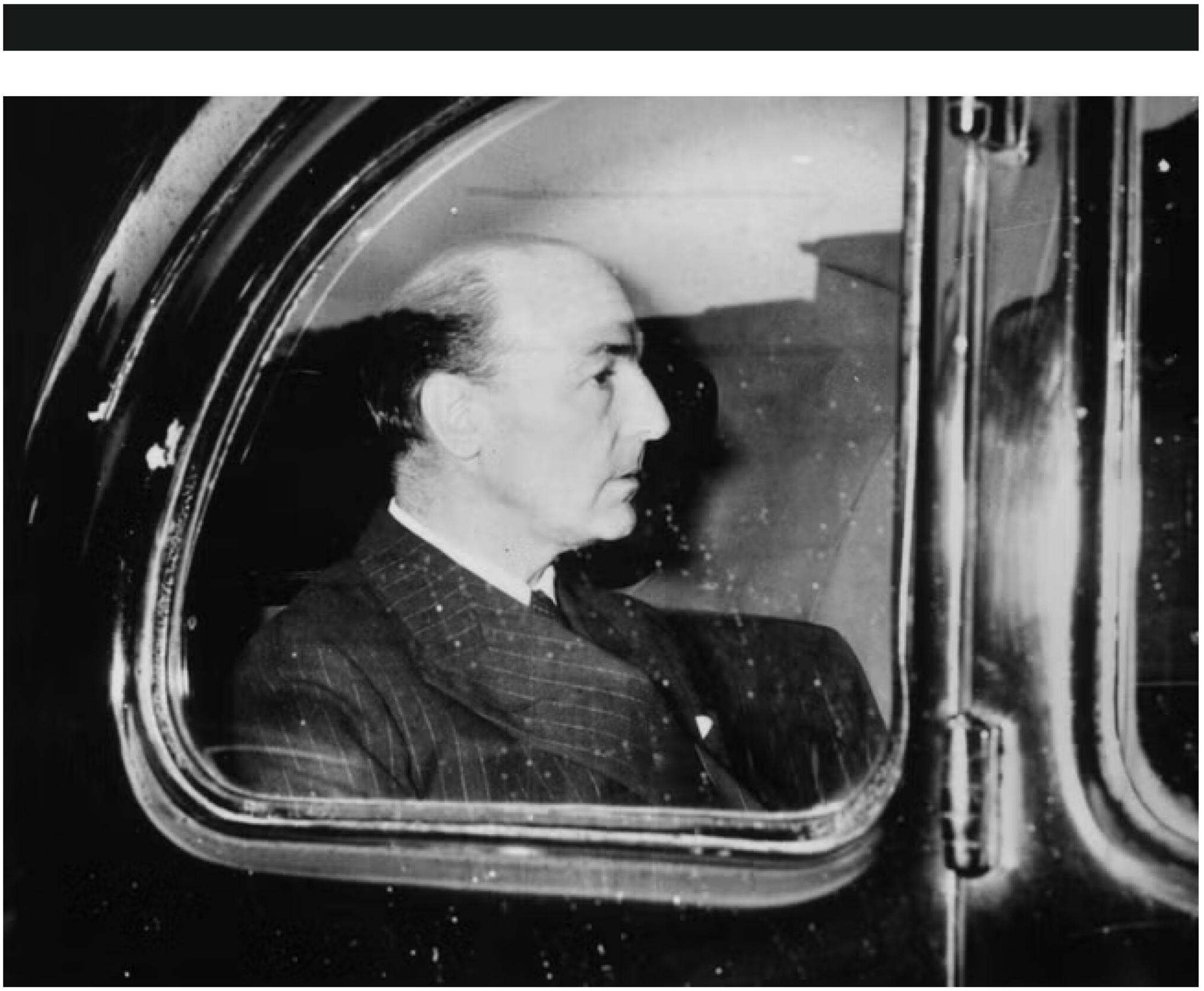
We're all obsolete – and we're all perfectly up to date. It's all peng, bruv.

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Section 2

ON THIS DAY



War minister John Profumo resigned over a sex scandal on this day in 1963 (Getty)

755: English missionary Boniface and 53 companions were murdered in Germany by unbelievers.

1916: Lord Herbert Kitchener, British general and conqueror of the Sudan, was lost at sea when his ship HMS *Hampshire* struck a mine off Orkney, en route to Russia. There were no survivors.

1944: The Cafe Gondree was the first place to be liberated from the Germans on the eve of the D-Day landings when paratroopers from the 6th Brigade dropped on the town of Benouville to seize the vital canal bridge.

1947: US secretary of state George Marshall announced the Marshall plan to help Europe recover from near-bankruptcy following the war.

1963: War minister John Profumo resigned, admitting he misled the House of Commons about his relationship with Christine Keeler.

1967: The six-day war between Israel and Egypt began.

1975: Egyptian president Anwar El-Sadat reopened the Suez Canal to all but Israeli shipping, after eight years of closure.

1975: In Britain's first referendum, a large majority voted to stay in the Common Market – more than 17 million voted Yes and almost 8.5 million voted No.

1989: In Poland, Solidarity defeated the Communists in the first free elections since the end of the Second World War.

On this day last year: A pill taken once a day could cut the risk of dying from lung cancer by half, "unprecedented" results from a decade-long global study revealed.

Birthdays

Margaret Drabble, author, 85; **Nigel Rees**, broadcaster/writer, 80; **Laurie Anderson**, musician, 77; **Sir David Hare**, playwright, 77; **Ken Follett**, writer, 75; **Kenny G**, saxophonist, 68; **Ron Livingston**, actor, 57; **Mark Wahlberg**, actor, 53; **David Weir**, Paralympic athlete, 45.

PA

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STICKY SITUATION

The male contraceptive gel shows promise in lowering sperm counts. But **Helen Coffey** still can't envisage a future where we hand over reproductive responsibility to the opposite sex



Bitter pill: birth control usually feels like a woman's responsibility (Getty)

The man approaches nervously. Asks her name. She nods with a smile, and he takes the seat opposite. It's one of those first dates that just clicks: conversation flows, beats between topics act as

punctuation rather than awkward silences. Drinks turns into dinner turns into cocktails turns into a taxi back to her place, where things continue to flow – this time physically. She reaches for a condom, but he touches her lightly on the wrist.

“Don’t worry, I’m on the gel.”

This could legitimately be a snapshot of the future after a new form of male contraceptive has shown considerable promise in early trials.

Containing the hormones nestorone and testosterone, the revolutionary gel has been found to lower sperm counts to contraceptive-level effectiveness within around eight weeks – a shorter timeframe than similar male contraceptives also in development, some of which can take up to four months to make the grade.

The trial first launched in 2018 and has been monitoring sperm counts in more than 200 males in the US. For more than half of men, the gel was effective within two months, rising to more than three-quarters in three months.

“More than 80 per cent of participants using this novel male hormonal contraceptive gel formulation containing Nestorone 8mg [milligrams] and Testosterone 74mg showed suppressed sperm output within 12 weeks, a rate that appears to be faster than prior studies with other hormonal regimens,” say scientists from the National Institutes of Health in Maryland, who authored the study. “A more rapid time to suppression may increase the attractiveness and acceptability to potential users.”

The product, designed to be rubbed into the shoulder blades daily, had already been in development for a decade by the time testing launched. Dr Diana Blithe, the project lead, declared the team was “hopeful” that it would “demonstrate effectiveness of a male method for use by couples”.



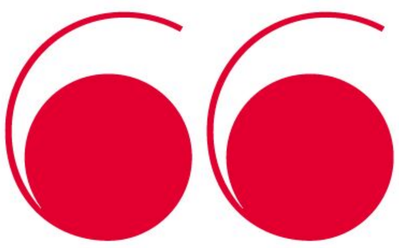
‘Abortion is healthcare’: reproductive rights have been reversed in some US states (AP)

“A successful result may lead to additional scientific discovery around contraceptive products for men,” she added.

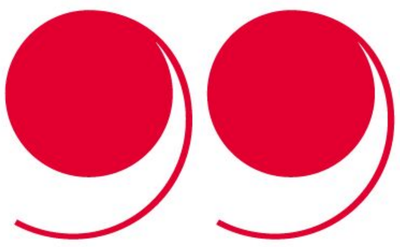
While it’s all very admirable and an important scientific breakthrough, the main stumbling block that stood out to me had nothing to do with timings, effectiveness or, in fact, the gel at all. The main stumbling block is the idea that women could ever really feel safe entrusting the opposite sex with the fundamentals of birth control.

Ever since the invention of contraception – and before the concept even existed – women have always known it’s up to us to take care of the distinctly unsexy “not falling pregnant” part of sex. We had to be the ones counting the days of our cycles to lower the likelihood of conceiving a child before condoms came onto the scene; we had to be the ones to insist that a man use one once they did. While the development of other methods like the combined pill, implant and coil liberated us further, it also kept the responsibility firmly in our hands. Don’t want a baby? Pump your body full of hormones that make you feel unhinged and have a higher blood clot risk than the Covid-19 vaccines, or get a device inserted that may cause longer, heavier periods and debilitating cramps. Don’t fancy any of that? Insist on rubbers (and enjoy frequent moping about how “it just doesn’t feel the same”) or put a huge amount of trust in the person you’re sleeping with to exercise enough control to “pull out” at the correct time.

And, unless you *have* gone down the route of putting something into your body, whether it be physical, chemical or both, you remain profoundly vulnerable, taking it on faith that a man will be true to his word. Case in point: the rise in stealthing, the practice of not wearing or secretly removing a condom when having sex with someone without their consent. It's defined as rape in English and Welsh law, but that hasn't stopped it from happening to a staggering number of women. While it's difficult to get data because the practice is so rarely reported, according to one study on more than 1,100 patients at a sexual health clinic in Melbourne, Australia, 32 per cent of women had been victims of stealthing at one time or another.



In a world where women could be imprisoned for having an abortion, the idea of entrusting contraception to men feels even more laughable



Women who had experienced stealthing tended to play it down – they were three times less likely to consider it to be sexual assault than participants who had not experienced it. But, according to the charity Rape Crisis England & Wales, "Rape is never, ever OK – no matter what 'kind' of rape it is. At Rape Crisis England & Wales, we prefer to use the word 'rape' when talking about stealthing. That's because we think it's important to be very clear about what stealthing really is."

Of course, as always, this comes with a huge #NotAllMen caveat. We *know* that the vast majority of guys aren't out there tricking sexual partners in the most despicable ways. But the

very fact this crime exists – and is prevalent enough to have developed its own moniker – is enough reason to keep women convinced that birth control remains solely our domain.

Then there's the issue of reproductive rights in general, which have been terrifyingly walked back in certain US states to the point where *The Handmaid's Tale* is starting to look like non-fiction. In a world where women could be imprisoned for having an abortion, the idea of entrusting contraception to men feels even more laughable.

After all, biologically, it's we who are stuck with the ramifications if an accident does happen; *our* bodies that have to change in order to grow a human; *our* lives that will be irrevocably altered should we decide to bring another human into this world. Without those consequences, will men ever take the issue of contraception as seriously as women are forced to? They may take a financial hit, but they're still free to disappear into the ether, forever maintaining a footloose-and-fancy-free lifestyle should they wish – an option rarely afforded to women.

So yes, while "don't worry, I'm on the gel" *could* legitimately be a snapshot of the future, we all know she *would* worry – and for good reason. Contraceptive gels – and male contraceptives in general – are all well and good, but until men are forced to take real responsibility for children in the same way that women are, I fear birth control will forever remain our responsibility too.

Rape Crisis offers support for those affected by rape and sexual abuse. You can call them on 0808 802 9999 in England and Wales, 0808 801 0302 in Scotland, and 0800 0246 991 in Northern Ireland, or visit their website at rapecrisis.org.uk

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Across France for £1.35 per day: the deal of the summer

If you're 27 or under (and can jump through a few hoops), PassRail is a cross-Channel bargain, writes **Simon Calder**



Going places: Gare du Nord in Paris, the busiest railway station in France (Simon Calder)

Young rail passengers will be able to roam wherever they wish on the French rail network during July and August for a flat rate of just £1.35 per day. President Macron announced the plan for a one-month unlimited PassRail in September 2023. Initially it

seemed to be an all-ages project intended to emulate the €49 Deutschlandticket – which opened up travel around Germany after the Covid pandemic.

After months of negotiations between central government, the regions and SNCF (French Railways), it is now clear that the scheme is open only for passengers under 27. There are also many restrictions on the trains that can be taken: high-speed TGV expresses are excluded, but so too are suburban services in the Paris region, Ile de France.

Crucially, it appears the PassRail will be available only to people with an address in France.

What's the big idea?

Young people will be able to travel the length and breadth of mainland France in July and/or August for a flat fare of €49 (£42), which works out at £1.35 per day. They will need an address in France to buy a ticket, either through SNCF Connect – the main vendor – or Trainline, the private company.

Former transport minister Clement Beaune, who was involved in setting up the scheme, called it "a tremendous step forward, of which I am very proud, for young people, ecology and mobility". But it comes with strings attached. The German scheme enabled travellers simply to buy a pass that was valid on local and regional transport everywhere in the country without further formality. In contrast, French passengers must "buy" a ticket – at zero cost – to make each journey.

This is analogous to the pan-European Interrail pass; it allows the partner organisations involved to understand who has travelled where so that cash can be allocated and data compiled for future planning.

Which trains are allowed?

The main services are TER (Transport Express Regional) trains, which comprise the main regional and local services across France. Examples include:

- Calais to Amiens

- La Rochelle to Bordeaux
- Port Bou (Spanish station on the French border) via Perpignan to Avignon
- Marseille to Nice
- Lyon via Dijon to Paris (the slow and pretty way)

In addition, the PassRail is available on Intercités trains. These are “classic” trains running on the conventional network rather than high-speed lines. In particular, they connect Paris with cities in south-central France off the high-speed network, such as Clermont-Ferrand, Vichy and Limoges. There are also regional links, including Nantes-Lyon and Bordeaux-Marseille.

Carriages with seats on night trains will also be available with the pass, though passengers will need to pay extra for a berth.

Which trains are definitely not allowed?

Pretty much everything else. All TGV high-speed trains – whether Inoui (the main brand) or low-cost Ouigo – are off limits. So too are high-speed trains run by foreign rail operators from Germany, Italy and Spain within France. The same applies to the Ouigo Classique network, running conventional trains between Paris and Le Mans, Nantes and Lyon.

Crucially, the entire RER (suburban express) network around Paris is excluded, as is the Metro system. Passengers who arrive from Orleans at Paris Austerlitz who wish to continue from Gare du Nord to Compiegne will need to pay extra for a ticket across the capital.

During the Paris Olympics in July and August, fares will increase to €4 for the Metro and €6 for the RER. Some stations serving only the TGV network, including at Paris CDG and Lyon airports, will be inaccessible with the PassRail.

Anything else?

Yes. Intercites trains, and some TERs in regions such as Normandy, will require reservations as well as tickets to control the numbers on trains during the busy summer months.

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Where is the scenic cycling in Portugal and France?



The quiet streets of the French island of Ile de Re are perfect for biking (Alamy)

Q We like cycling while on holiday but don't like hills. Can you recommend somewhere around the coast of either Portugal or France which is fairly flat?

Elizabeth W

A Portugal is a good choice between October and April, when the better weather makes cycling more of a pleasure. But the coastline is hilly for a large part of its considerable length. For unchallenging gradients, I recommend going east from Faro

airport along the Algarve shore. If you take your own bikes, you can even enjoy a beachside adventure within 10 minutes cycle of the airport: Faro's beach is a lovely strand of sand just to the west. For the main part of an Algarve adventure on two wheels, aim along and among the sands and lagoons towards the Spanish border. In particular, I suggest a base in the lovely old town of Tavira – just inland from the Atlantic.

Between May and September, though, I recommend you concentrate on France. For a multi-day trip I suggest two swathes of shoreline. The first is the Baie de Seine, the arc of coast between Cherbourg and Le Havre. The area is very high profile this week because it is the site of the D-Day landings, so you can find plenty of 20th-century history along the way. With the exception of the challenging bridge over the mouth of the Seine to and from Le Havre, most of it is reasonably flat.

The second option: from Bordeaux out to Arcachon, location of some massive sand dunes, and the start of a long and mainly flat ride south to Biarritz – where the terrain becomes decidedly three-dimensional.

Finally, if you prefer a quiet backwater where you can potter around by bike, look no further than the Ile de Re off the coast at La Rochelle (and connected by an impressive bridge). Bikes are easily available, there are plenty of quiet paths and lanes, and it is the ideal way to explore. Just try to avoid July and August, when first one-half of the population of Paris, and then the other half, seem to descend en masse.

Email your question to s@hols.tv or tweet @SimonCalder

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BRING ME SUNSHINE

Emily Goddard tries out the top vitamin D supplements



Exercise and eating a healthy balanced diet are essential to helping your body get all the nutrients it needs to stay well. But there's one vitamin that's often in short supply in autumn and winter: vitamin D. You can blame it on the weather.

Dr Sam Oliver, a reader in sport and exercise science at Bangor University, says: "From October through to March due to insufficient sunlight, a low-dose daily oral vitamin D3 supplement might be needed to maintain vitamin D sufficiency."

The sunshine vitamin, so-called because we get most of it from the sun's rays, is essential to the health of our bones, teeth and muscles. Research also suggests it can boost the immune system, and Dr Oliver and his colleagues made another significant discovery last year.

"More recently, a greater understanding of vitamin D's role within the immune system means that maintaining vitamin D sufficiency may also be important to prevent and cope with respiratory infections," he says. "For example, our recent research indicates winter vitamin D supplementation reduces the duration and severity of the common cold."

How we tested

Now you know the need for vitamin D, let us try to help you demystify the vast number of options out there, so you can decide which is best for you and your health.

We've scoured the market and selected the supplements we'd be happy to take ourselves, after listening to the expert's advice. We've included a range of products with several methods of consumption, noting how easy they were to take, and a number of different strengths. Please note that doses of more than 1,000IU are rarely needed unless you have a condition or lifestyle that requires higher potency vitamin D (please speak to your clinician before starting a high-potency supplement).



Nutrition Geeks vitamin D3 1,000IU: £6.99, Amazon

They say good things come in small packages, and this supplement proves that. Inside this compact, letterbox-friendly foil bag – which uses less plastic than conventional pill bottles – are 180 tiny tablets measuring 6mm, each delivering a high-quality 1,000IU vitamin D hit. They are incredibly easy to swallow and leave no aftertaste, so they are perfect for anyone who struggles to take pills without gagging. Perhaps best of all, though, is the price: this bag for less than £4 is equivalent to a six-month supply of vitamin D and will easily get you through autumn and winter.

Buy now



Myvitamins vitamin D3 softgels, 1,000IU: £1.87, Myvitamins

Gel capsule supplements tend to be among the easiest to swallow but they often contain gelatine, meaning they are not suitable for vegans. But not these Myvitamins vitamin D3 softgels. Each capsule of this high-strength supplement is easy to swallow and made using lichen algae, helping you to get your daily vitamin D while on a plant-based diet.

The one-a-day dosage means a 180-capsule bottle provides almost six months' worth of vitamin D and the pocket-friendly

price means that they're excellent value for money. We also like that the pot is made from recycled materials and is fully recyclable again when it's empty.

Buy now



Nature's Own vegan D3 2,500IU: £10.24, Amazon

Many supplements contain milk, come in gelatine capsules or have been tested on animals, so we wanted to include something that is suitable for vegans. The Nature's Own vitamin D3 is cruelty-free and takes the nutrient from lichen extract. Our tester found the one-a-day tablets easy to swallow and liked that they are free from GMO, gluten and yeast. There are 60 pills in each bottle, giving you a two-month supply.

Buy now

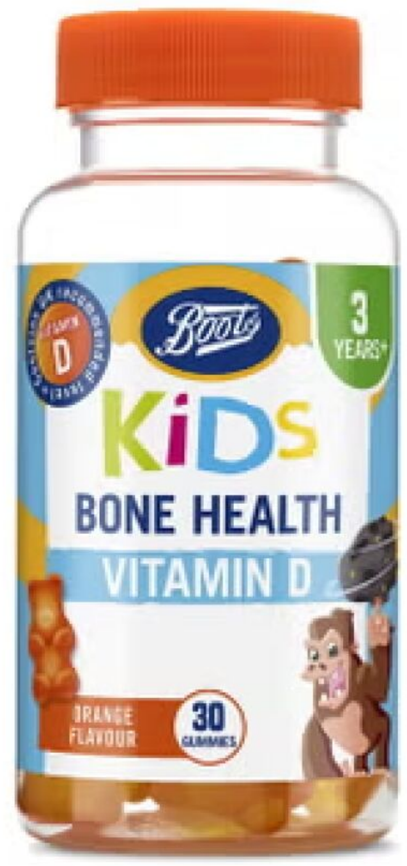


Myvitamins vitamin D gummies, 1,000IU: £5.28, Myprotein

This vitamin D supplement being bright orange is highly appropriate because each one-a-day gummy delivers 500 per cent of your recommended daily dose of the sunshine vitamin whatever the weather. Gummies are a delicious way to take supplements, and it could help make the habit of taking them regularly easier to form because you're likely to look forward to their yummy taste – just like our tester did.

The Myvitamins vitamin D gummies are also suitable for vegetarians and the packaging is recyclable. However, like many gummy supplements, they do contain sugar, which is something to be aware of if you're keeping an eye on your intake.

Buy now



Boots vitamin D, 30 gummies: £5.10, Boots

The NHS recommends that all children under five years of age take a daily vitamin D supplement throughout the year. But getting your child to take capsules is another matter entirely. That is unless you can give it to them in sweet form – these gummies will undoubtedly do the trick. One of these chewy orange-flavoured bears each day provides little ones with the recommended 10 micrograms of vitamin D, plus they'll look forward to taking them – our young tester tells us that they are yummy.

Buy now



Dr Vegan vitamin D3 2,500IU, 30 capsules: £8.09, Amazon

Taking a daily supplement can generate a lot of plastic waste over the years, but Dr Vegan has a solution to help limit your impact on the planet. These plant-based vitamins come in plastic-free, compostable packaging and can be stored in your special refillable Dr Vegan pill tin to keep them fresh. The daily supplement itself is vegan, easy to swallow, halal, and gluten, dairy and lactose-free, making them suitable for pretty much everyone.

This is a high-dose vitamin D, with 2,500IU per pill, so please do check with your clinician that it is suitable for you. It is already a reasonable option, but there is an offer that means you can buy three packets and only pay for two, while a subscription service saves you 15 per cent.

Buy now



The Nue Co vitamin D: £14.25, Naturisimo

People with certain conditions, multiple sclerosis, for example, may need to take significantly higher than usual doses of vitamin D all year round. This supplement is ideal for those people. It contains 3,000IU of vitamin D3 that is delivered daily with three sprays under the tongue at any time of day – a bottle contains 35 servings. Our tester found it easy to use and store, and liked that a subscription service is available, so you never run out and save £3 each month. We would recommend speaking with your GP before starting this supplement though, because of its high potency.

Buy now

The verdict

Convenience, quality and value for money make the Nutrition Geeks vitamin D3 1,000IU our best buy. They are extremely easy to take, generate less plastic waste than conventional pill bottles and carry a price tag that is accessible for most people.

We'd also recommend Aguulp for immunity if you're looking to combine multiple vitamins and minerals in one easy-to-take supplement, and the Dr Vegan vitamin D3 for its eco-friendly credentials.

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Madeley's new novel is his most Partridge moment yet

After Richard Madeley's dramatic radio recap of his novel's first chapter – a mix of bizarre twists and mundane details – went viral, **Katie Rosseinsky** delves into his literary works



Dark revenge thriller 'Father's Day' is sprinkled with Partridgeisms (Getty)

The sun is rising above a Roman amphitheatre just outside Cirencester, where two police officers have been called to the scene. Lurking inside this historic ruin is a truly grisly surprise: a man has been suspended from a sideways wooden cross. This is not, as you'd be forgiven for assuming, the introduction to a

particularly disturbing episode of a *Midsomer Murders* spin-off, or some middle England reboot of *The Wicker Man*. Welcome, instead, to the opening chapter of Richard Madeley's new novel, *Father's Day*.

It's a scene that the veteran broadcaster retold with his imitable panache during a recent appearance on BBC Radio 2. "There's a man who has been crucified," he told host Michael Ball. "He's very dead." Madeley's synopsis, with all its unusual over-enunciations and meandering non-sequiturs about Roman history (did we really need to know the amphitheatre's seating capacity in the first century AD?), was an inevitable hit on Twitter/X. "I was listening to this yesterday and nearly crashed the car," one social media user wrote in response.

The 68-year-old, who became a household name while presenting ITV's *This Morning* in the late Eighties up until the early Noughties alongside wife Judy Finnigan, but now flies solo as a host on *Good Morning Britain*, has acquired a reputation as a real-life Alan Partridge. He certainly shares a penchant for odd asides and unwieldy anecdotes, as well as an offbeat interview style, with Steve Coogan's comedy character (Madeley, for his part, says he "couldn't care less" about the comparisons, because "taking yourself seriously is daft").

Just this week, he could be seen on *GMB* inspecting Kerry Katona's new nose job at uncomfortably close range. Other greatest hits include the time he pondered whether we should "pity" Prince Andrew, his bizarre interrogation of the RMT's general secretary Mick Lynch ("Are you or are you not a Marxist?") or the unforgettable moment when a bright orange Madeley turned up for filming after over-zealously applying his daughter's fake tan as a moisturiser. But could the presenter's new book be his most accidental Partridge venture yet?



Shelf life: Madeley and his wife Judy Finnigan have hosted their book club since the Noughties (Getty)

Father's Day is not Madeley's first literary effort. He has been writing novels for just over a decade (before that, he released the autobiographical *Fathers & Sons*, which looked back at his fraught relationship with his dad) and he and Finnigan have headed up the Richard and Judy Book Club for even longer than that, lending their seal of approval to crowd-pleasing commercial fiction. His back catalogue is filled with mysteries and murders set against the backdrop of picturesque locations, often in the sort of places where a TV presenter might have a second home (think the south of France, the Lake District or, as in the case of his latest work, the Cotswolds).

After that dramatic opening chapter, things take an even darker turn. The (very) dead man, we learn, was a twisted catfish who skulked around in internet chat rooms, pretending to be a troubled teen named Rosie (he was in fact a fortysomething loner and recreational cat killer named Arthur, who lived in his parents' box room). He drew young girls into his confidence, then encouraged them to start harming themselves or even consider suicide. Did Arthur's killer know about his awful proclivities? Were they motivated by revenge?

It's pretty grim stuff – or at least it would be, were it not constantly lightened up by Madeley's wonderful Partridgeisms. Celebrity novelists are often accused of simply hiring a ghostwriter then slapping their name on the front of their book

and taking all the glory. You can tell Madeley didn't do this, because the narrator's voice is, well, so very *him*. Sometimes the writing is so blunt as to become almost poetic. "The man looked like the twat he was," goes one evocative description of a TV historian roped in to provide insight on the Roman-style crucifixion.

Cars are always respectfully referred to by their full brand names and Coldplay's 'Viva la Vida' gets a surprising amount of airtime

Elsewhere, the narrative is heavy with references to what you can only imagine are some of the author's favourite preoccupations. There are extended sequences devoted to a protagonist's house hunt: "Three bedrooms. Orchard garden. Views of the village across a wooded valley. Freehold." Tick, tick, tick. Later, we learn that, pre-crucifixion, the novel's killer was scrupulous about the structural integrity of the wooden cross, as "the experience of working with the architect on his kitchen refit had brought home the importance of properly designing a structure and making sure he had the right tools and materials at the ready". Kevin McCloud would either be proud or mildly disturbed.

Cars are always respectfully referred to by their full brand names and Coldplay's "Viva la Vida" gets a surprising amount of airtime. "It always sends a tingle down my spine," says Nick, the aforementioned house hunter, who happens to be a successful novelist who writes books – "all *Sunday Times* bestsellers" –

about the Roman empire. He's also very, very keen for Aidan Turner to star in the next TV adaptation. Nick embarks on this career, we learn, after one university tutor kindly takes him aside and tells him: "We believe you should write novels, and perhaps plays or screenplays, based on your wonderful, instinctive grasp of what it was to be Roman." If only all universities offered such ego-boosting careers advice, rather than looking at your arts degree and asking if you've ever considered applying for the civil service fast stream.

Nick's line of work explains the near-constant bombardment of tangential details about the Romans. The man is the perfect advert for the widespread pop culture theory (propagated on that most reliable of sources, TikTok) that men think about the Roman empire at least once a day. Even when he's trying to enjoy a date with a beautiful pathologist named Sally, he can't resist from sprinkling a few Roman facts into their conversation. Like every good female love interest, Sally is blessed with "what would have been described in an earlier era as film star looks". Those film star looks, we learn, are very specific. "Indeed she was often mistaken for the British actress Felicity Jones," Madeley writes, a resemblance "which had led to a tabloid newspaper story claiming that the star had moved to the Cotswolds".

In fairness to Madeley, his book isn't all strange asides and Felicity Jones doppelgangers. Beyond this, he's pretty adept at weaving together different narratives and time frames, and the underlying story asks interesting questions about retribution, justice and who gets to dish this out. With a grisly murder plot and a picturesque location, you have to wonder whether he, like Nick, has been writing with one eye on a TV deal. It certainly has the makings of a slightly unhinged ITV three-parter. I wonder if Aidan Turner's got a gap in his schedule.

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Still covering all the bases

Ever the curmudgeon of popular music, Van Morrison is back with his 45th album and a characteristically mercurial night of covers at the Royal Albert Hall, writes **Louis Chilton**



The singer appears to have abandoned his brief stint as an anti-lockdown campaigner (Getty)

★★★★☆

There's a quiet irony to Van Morrison's entrance at the Royal Albert Hall, as the band play him on for a prosaic cover of "You Are My Sunshine". Face obscured behind dark sunglasses and a brimmed hat, mouth fixed into a near-unwavering scowl, he looks allergic to the very idea of sunshine.

But such is the mercurial appeal of Morrison, perhaps the greatest and most confounding curmudgeon in the history of popular music. After briefly rebranding as an anti-lockdown campaigner during the height of Covid, the 78-year-old is back touring his latest album, *Accentuate the Positive*, a record comprising covers of classic country and rock'n'roll songs.

After "Sunshine", he throws himself into a cover of the Everly brothers' "When Will I Be Loved" with considerably more gusto, which gamely compensates for a rather plodding arrangement – albeit with a couple of guitar licks that fleetingly evoke Linda Ronstadt's peerless 1974 version. The band (seven men, and two women backing singers) are uniformly excellent, and come alive on the more up-tempo numbers, such as the jaunty "I Wish I Was an Apple on a Tree".



Van Morrison performs on stage at The O2 Arena in March 2020 (Getty)

In his pomp, Morrison was able to grab a cover by the neck and really make it his own – think back to the mid-Seventies when, newly divorced, he slowed Sam Cooke's ineffable love song "Bring it On Home To Me" to a bitter, snarling croon. Tonight, though, many of the covers plucked from *Accentuate the Positive* are little more than drab re-imaginings of overly familiar oldies. Hank Williams's "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry" is completely butchered, the original's off-kilter melancholy substituted for a too-quick, pendulous bounce.

And yet, on an utterly unpredictable song-by-song basis, Morrison shows he can still turn it on when he wants. A rich and purposeful restyling of the trad folk song “Green Rocky Road” is bolstered by Morrison on guitar. (Throughout the evening, he also supplements his still-solid vocals with some functional noodling on the saxophone and harmonica.) A barnstorming guest appearance from Chris Farlowe on “Take Your Hand Out of My Pocket” sees Morrison crack a rare grin.

As you might expect from a Van Morrison gig at the Royal Albert Hall, the crowd skews older. There are a few overheard grumblings about the lack of originals – big hitters such as “Brown Eyed Girl” or “Moondance” do not feature – but the reception overall is enthusiastic and gently awed. (Anyone expecting Morrison to wheel out a set full of crowd-pleasers in the year 2024 is, frankly, living in some kind of fantasy world.)

As is now customary at Morrison gigs, the man himself shuffles off mid-song, leaving his band to wrap things up with a succession of virtuosic solos while he presumably hightails it into a taxi

For those close enough to the stage to catch it, there’s good fun to be had in watching Morrison gesticulate demandingly at his band – particularly the drummer, for whom the singer’s antic gestures start to look less like showmanship and more like a public disciplining.

When, maybe two-thirds of the way into the set, Morrison begins threading in his original material, there’s a palpable

change in energy. “Crazy Jane on God”, a somewhat deep cut from Morrison’s back catalogue, may be the standout number of the night – grand and purposeful. The uncharacteristically sanguine “Days Like This” is followed by the punchy “Wild Night”, performed here with a section of freeform vocal warbling that goes on a few dozen bars too long.

The encoreless set concludes with a final, elongated rendition of “Gloria” – arguably one of Morrison’s best-known songs, first recorded by his early band Them when he was still a teenager. As is now customary at Morrison gigs, the man himself shuffles off mid-song, leaving his band to wrap things up with a succession of virtuosic solos while he presumably hightails it into a taxi. “I want to shout it ev’ry night/ I want to shout it ev’ry day,” Morrison sings. The words don’t seem true at this point – but after six decades of G-L-O-R-I-A, who could blame him?

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Bitingly funny adaptation is the match of beloved book

Hailed as a Black British answer to ‘Bridget Jones’ Diary’ on its release, hit novel ‘Queenie’ jumps to the small screen with all of its comedic charm intact, writes **Katie Rosseinsky**



Bugged bunny: Dionne Brown portrays the titular character in the Channel 4 series (Channel 4)

★★★★☆

When Candice Carty-Williams’ debut novel *Queenie* was released back in 2019, it felt like a real publishing phenomenon. You’d spot its colourful covers – readers could choose from a

spectrum of rainbow hues – in the hands of bleary-eyed commuters; that summer, it was about as ubiquitous as Zara's notorious white spotted maxi dress. It was hailed as the Black British answer to *Bridget Jones's Diary*. Five years later, heroine Queenie Jenkins has, like Bridget, been brought to life on screen, in a Channel 4 adaptation that's bitingly funny and sharply observed

We first meet Queenie, a 25-year-old British-Jamaican journalist played by Dionne Brown, during an early morning gynaecologist appointment. Undergoing a transvaginal ultrasound is, for most women at least, never the ideal way to kick off your working day, but her doctor's bracing manner (briskly quizzing her on her sexual history before calling over her colleagues to survey Queenie's scan) doesn't exactly alleviate the awkwardness. The whole experience is made even more disconcerting – at least for the viewer – by the fact that said doctor is played by former presenter Laura Whitmore.

It's a scene that immediately sets the tone for the series, with Queenie's internal monologue providing a witty running commentary on what's unfolding on screen. "Are there loads of guys just hanging round in my uterus?" she ponders as Whitmore's character asks about her past partners. When the doctor brushes off her yelps of pain – "I'm sure you're fine, strong girl like you!" – it's the first of many microaggressions directed at our protagonist. Queenie's scan results prompt her to reconsider her relationship with boyfriend Tom (*Big Boys'* Jon Pointing), as does a painful dinner with his family, an event that culminates in his grandmother "doing a racial e-fit" of the couple's hypothetical grandchildren.



Candice Carty-Williams' story follows Queenie through microaggressions and angst (Channel 4)

Post-breakup, Queenie turns to dating apps for a series of short-term encounters and situationships that soon turn toxic; she's relentlessly fetishised by her white partners. Working as a social media assistant at a newspaper, she flounders as she deals with an icy boss played by *Bridget Jones* star Sally Phillips (one of a handful of nods to that film) and an overly friendly male colleague whose nice guy persona turns out to be a façade. And then there's her fraught relationship with her mother Sylvie, rooted in a childhood abandonment that forced Queenie to grow up too fast.

Half a decade has elapsed since the book's publication, meaning that Queenie and her mid-twenties pals have now been rewritten as members of Gen Z. There are nods to the 2020s setting: her young cousin Diana performs TikTok dances, and voice notes replace texts. But the main scaffolding of the story is the same: if anything, dating app culture has arguably worsened since the book was written; gentrification has only sped up and London rents are even higher.

Showrunner Carty-Williams and her fellow screenwriters deftly balance these more serious storylines with lighter, comic moments, and Brown (who's had smaller roles in shows like Apple TV's *Criminal Record* and ITV's *The Walk-In*) is a deeply empathetic screen presence: she brings pathos to Queenie's mental health struggles without smoothing over her spiky sense

of humour and her many foibles. She's backed up by a winning ensemble cast: from newcomer Bellah as Queenie's best pal Kyazike to Samuel Adewunmi as her low-key, slow-burn love interest Frank. And keen-eyed viewers will spot Carty-Williams in a brief cameo role too.

The half-hour episodes mean that some plot strands don't get quite as much attention as they deserve, and as the series goes on, there's a slight sense that we're hurtling towards a conveniently happy ending. Pacing quibbles aside, though, *Queenie* is that rare thing: an adaptation that's sure to be as beloved as the book that inspired it.

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Creaky dialogue stunts this ambitious Star War spin-off

In a fun twist, 'The Acolyte' introduces a martial arts element to the franchise – but, says **Ed Power**, the Force is too weak



Return of the Jedis: Amandla Stenberg plays Osha and her rogue twin Mae (Disney)

★★★☆☆

As the latest Star Wars spin-off, *The Acolyte,* arrives on Disney+, it's worth considering if we have all been too harsh towards the entertainment giant's stewardship of the franchise from a galaxy, far, far away. Yes, some of Disney's contributions to the saga

have been ricketier than the Millennium Falcon halfway through *The Empire Strikes Back*. But it wasn't as if Star Wars creator George Lucas was without blemish. He gave us psychopathic teddy bears the Ewoks, the apocalyptically irritating Jar Jar Binks and, in Natalie Portman and Hayden Christensen, the on-screen couple with the worst chemistry in cinema history. Star Wars had been misfiring on all cylinders long before the mouse house caught the saga in its tractor beam.

It should be acknowledged that, at its best, Disney Star Wars has been the equal of anything that went before. Rosario Dawson's *Ahsoka* and Ewan McGregor's *Obi-Wan Kenobi* might have been resounding damp squibs, but *The Mandalorian* years one and two were a lark. Prequel movie *Rogue One* is meanwhile generally agreed to be the third best Star Wars film after the original and *Empire*. And Tony Gilroy's *Andor* is one of the most outstanding TV shows of the past five years. It's easy to hate on the Magic Kingdom (it's also obviously great fun). Amid the schadenfreude, though, perhaps there is space to recognise the Disney Wars era hasn't been an unmitigated flop.

Refreshingly, *The Acolyte* attempts to remove itself from Disney discourse entirely, by rewinding to the glory days of the Old Republic and the pre-Darth Vader Jedi – aeons before the events chronicled in the hacky, hamfisted JJ Abrams/Rian Johnson sequel trilogy of Daisy Ridley, Adam Driver etc. It also tries to expand the Star Wars universe by introducing the new concept of "Force-Fu" – the use of the mystical Force as a martial art. Sadly – and despite the best intentions of all involved – it doesn't quite work. One issue is that it suffers from atrociously creaky dialogue ("We have unfinished business, attack me with all your strength"). Another is that the plot, while clearly fancying itself as deep and mysterious, falls into the now-familiar Star Wars pitfall of zipping exhaustingly from planet to planet, to the point where it all becomes a blur.

There are also moments of (presumably) unintentional hilarity. A ceremony involving a renegade coven that taps into the Force appears to have been intended as a comment on how feminine power is controlled by the patriarchy (the Jedi, male and female,

are horrified by the idea of these women using their Force as they see fit). But the depiction of the "witches" is far too hokey. It falls somewhere between a Bat for Lashes video, the Hellblade video games and a parody of Ari Aster's *Midsommar*.

Showrunner Leslye Headland has described 'The Acolyte' as a mix of 'Frozen' and 'Kill Bill' – a comparison that just about holds water

The martial arts element is introduced right at the top in a bracing scene, in which rogue Force user Mae (Amandla Stenberg) tangles with Jedi master Indara (Carrie-Anne Moss). Showrunner Leslye Headland has been upfront about Indara being a tribute to Trinity, Moss's high-kicking cyberpunk hero from *The Matrix*. *The Acolyte* isn't shy about the reference – a sequence in which Indara bends in slow motion to avoid a killing blow could have come straight from the Wachowski blockbuster.

Headland has also described *The Acolyte* as a mix of *Frozen* and *Kill Bill* – a comparison that just about holds water. As with *Frozen*, the series is, at its heart, about two sisters who don't get along. Stenberg plays both: the seemingly villainous Mae and her twin Osha, a former trainee Jedi who flunked out of Force school.

Mae and Osha haven't seen each other for more than a decade, after Mae committed a terrible act that changed her sister's life forever. Osha had assumed Mae was dead. But no, she's alive and now – as "an acolyte" with illicit Force training – is hunting

down Jedi Knights, starting with Indara (much as Uma Thurman's Bride took her revenge in *Kill Bill*).

You can see why the showrunner would cite *Frozen* and *Kill Bill*, each having a major cultural footprint. However, a more accurate comparison might be the Netflix animated binge-watch *Arcane*, in which two estranged sisters are on opposite sides of a conflict between good and evil.

Initially, the audience's sympathies are supposed to lie with Osha. She is introduced as a tomboy-ish grease monkey trying to put her Jedi past behind her while making a living repairing starships. Stenberg does well playing both characters – fleshing out Osha's trauma and Mae's justified (in her eyes) resentment against the Jedi. She is joined by a solid support cast. They include Lee Jung-jae as Osha's old Jedi mentor, Dafne Keen (Lyra in the BBC's *His Dark Materials*) as his sarcastic student, *The Good Place*'s Manny Jacinto as an idiot smuggler and Jodie Turner-Smith as a mystical figure from Mae and Osha's past.

Praise must also go to Headland – a co-creator of Netflix's quirky time-travel drama *Russian Doll* – for trying to do something different with Star Wars, with the concept of a community of female dissidents accessing a forbidden side of the Force. Yet despite a reported $25m per episode budget, the series suffers from the same flat, "cheap" look that was an issue with *Obi-Wan Kenobi*, while the pacy action scenes never compensate for the clunking dialogue. It's a spirited effort, but in the continuum of Disney's Star Wars hits and misses, *The Acolyte* lands bang in the middle.

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Business news in brief



Imperial College London is the world's second-highest-ranked university for 2025 (Getty)

Imperial leapfrogs Oxbridge duo in world university rankings

Imperial College London has been placed higher than the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge in global rankings. The Quacquarelli Symonds World University Rankings have seen Imperial rise from sixth to second place, ending years of Oxbridge dominance at the top of the international league table.

Cambridge fell from second to fifth place, while Oxford remains in third place in the global rankings for 2025. Only

Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the US – which secured the top spot in the rankings again – outperformed Imperial College London.

Airline boss describes Heathrow as 'just not good enough'

The boss of one of the world's largest airlines has launched a scathing attack on Heathrow airport. Sir Tim Clark, the head of Emirates, accused those in charge of Britain's busiest airport of prioritising shareholders and the payment of dividends over the state of the aviation hub. The UAE flag carrier is based out of Terminal 3.

"I was at Heathrow the other day, and walking out of our lounge, the ceiling height is awful," Sir Tim told *The Times*. "It looks like a utilitarian structure, post-Second World War. It is just not good enough. It's an old airport. You need to open up the whole terminal."

Supermarket motorists paying more to fill up at Asda

Asda has become Britain's most expensive supermarket fuel retailer, according to a new analysis. Rivals Tesco, Morrisons and Sainsbury's sold a litre of petrol for an average of 2.1p less than Asda at the end of May, the RAC said. The difference in average diesel prices was even steeper, at 2.5p per litre. The RAC said that for many years Asda "prided itself on selling the cheapest fuel", often being the first supermarket to cut pump prices; it was taken over by the billionaire Issa brothers and private equity firm TDR Capital in 2021.

The RAC analysis found that, across all UK forecourts, the average price of petrol fell by 2.4p per litre last month to 147.9, while diesel prices dipped by 4.5p per litre to 153.6p.

Mission Group mulls over higher takeover approach from rival

Digital marketing firm Mission Group has said it is considering a higher £32.3m takeover approach from rival Brave Bison, but

its initial view is that the proposal is still unlikely to get its backing. Brave Bison, which owns the Social Chain agency founded by *Dragons' Den* star Steven Bartlett, said it had put forward an increased possible bid worth around 35.1p per Mission share on 25 May after its first approach was rejected.

The new proposal suggests giving Mission shareholders about a 50 per cent holding in the newly formed company, and would offer a partial cash alternative of up to 50 per cent of the offer price. But Mission Group said: "The board's preliminary view is the revised possible offer does not reflect Mission's contribution to the proposed combined group."

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Middle England dilemma is a step into the unknown



Who'll partner Declan Rice in Euro 2024... (clockwise, from top left) Kobbie Mainoo, Adam Wharton, Conor Gallagher or Trent Alexander-Arnold? (Getty)

RICHARD JOLLY
SENIOR FOOTBALL CORRESPONDENT

There have been 77 England matches since Trent Alexander-Arnold debuted in 2018. If he had played in them all, he would be level on caps already with Terry Butcher, wedged between John Terry and Tom Finney. Instead, he has 24 international appearances to his name, the same as Bert Williams and Paul

Madeley. He has fewer caps in the Gareth Southgate era than Jesse Lingard, barely half as many as Kieran Trippier.

A player who has been labelled the best right-back in the world has sometimes only seemed Southgate's fourth choice. And yet, the England manager has long insisted he is an admirer of Alexander-Arnold's talent. An attempt to reinvent him as a midfielder – first criticised by Jurgen Klopp, then adopted – may have been a consequence of his preference for Kyle Walker and Trippier's defensive qualities but is a bid to unleash a creator.

It is, though, something of a voyage into uncharted territory for Southgate and Alexander-Arnold alike. The Merseysider missed the March friendlies against Brazil and Belgium with injury – Southgate's selectorial choices are not the only reason why he has so few caps – and when he scored against Bosnia and Herzegovina on Monday, it was with a volley that displayed his technical expertise. But only after beginning in midfield and later reverting to right-back.

Southgate savoured the goal while accepting that Alexander-Arnold has been underused. "Firstly, he is enjoying playing in an England shirt," he said. "He has had a difficult international career in that because of the strength in depth in the area. We haven't always been able to give him the amount of football that his talent deserves but we have always been trying to find a way to do that and I think he knows that and he appreciates that. So it is lovely to see him score, have that moment and play with that confidence for England."



Alexander-Arnold was on target in England’s win (PA)

Alexander-Arnold can play passes others cannot imagine, let alone execute. He can add a dimension. “We were very pleased, it is a role he is discovering and he is hungry to learn,” Southgate said. But he is learning on the job. Even the rookies Kobbie Mainoo and Adam Wharton have more positional experience; they are midfielders by trade. The relatively battle-hardened Conor Gallagher has come to seem the safe option. For Alexander-Arnold, the unproven element is whether he can operate as a midfielder in a defining tournament game, whether he has the positional acumen to shield the defence when out of possession. This, above all, was where Southgate trusted Kalvin Phillips and Jordan Henderson. Alexander-Arnold feels the wild card in that respect.

“That is the unknown. Obviously, with Gallagher, with Mainoo, even with Wharton you know exactly what they can and what they can’t do,” said Southgate. “None of these players can do everything so you are trying to work out what is the right balance. Obviously, Declan [Rice] is going to be in there so what is the balance with him? That could be different for different games.”

It could be Jude Bellingham, but Southgate counselled against expecting to see Real Madrid’s 23-goal finisher too deep. “Jude’s obviously playing the season very high up the pitch for Madrid,” he said. “Defensively, [it was] a bit of a mix. He’s defended as a 10 or as a left-winger at times. That’s depended on the rotations

in their team. What he hasn't done is played as a 6. Or as a lower 8. It's a while since he's done that and we've got to bear that in mind."



Gallagher gets stuck in against Bosnia (The FA/Getty)

It is partly a question of chemistry. "All the bits have to fit together," said Southgate. And traditionally, England have lacked the player who knits a team together; if Alexander-Arnold can supply the magic ball, the youngsters Mainoo and Wharton are the natural passers; always available, always looking for the next ball. The Crystal Palace player's England debut was auspicious. "He is just pretty unflappable," said Southgate. "That ability to receive and see a picture early isn't something you should underestimate."

Unprompted, he started mentioning two of the modern-day greats, six-time Champions League winners. "You immediately start to think of [Toni] Kroos and [Luka] Modric and those types," he said. "They've had a decade or more of how to control the rhythm of a game. That's a step beyond where we're at with Wharton and Mainoo. They're really tender in their development. They're doing really well and we're excited about working with them but we've got to be realistic about what that's going to look like in terms of controlling the tempo at the highest possible level, which is also a step that none of them have seen yet."

For Wharton, Mainoo and Alexander-Arnold, in different ways and at different stages of their career, Euro 2024 will be a step into the unknown. They are England's three new midfielders: two youngsters and a recycled, rebranded right-back.

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Russo makes the difference in crucial win over France

France Diani (72 pen)	1
England Stanway (21), Russo (34)	2



Alessia Russo scored the goal that boosted the Lionesses' Euro qualification chances (Reuters)

ADAM MILLINGTON
AT THE STADE GEOFFROY-GUICHARD

England have had their fair share of wake-up calls as of late and they haven't always heeded them. This time, though, they finally did what was required.

The Lionesses found their rhythm against France in Saint-Etienne and ironed out the issues which blighted them in Friday's defeat in Newcastle. In doing so they handed a significant boost to their Euro 2025 qualification hopes.

They are joint-second in Group A3, trailing leaders France by two points with two fixtures remaining. The top two teams in the group automatically progress to next year's tournament in Switzerland, the others have to endure play-off rounds.

It didn't need a complete overhaul, rather some fine-tuning. That Sarina Wiegman opted to make no changes other than replacing the injured Mary Earps with Hannah Hampton turned some heads, but that soon faded out of the conversation.

Georgia Stanway delivered the first blow. Then Alessia Russo got in on the act. By half-time England were in the unexpected circumstance of leading 2-0 and it was definitely deserved.

France battled in the second half to try and rescue a result as England became a tad sloppier. All they managed was a consolation goal from the penalty spot after Leah Williamson clumsily fouled Grace Geyoro and Kadidiatou Diani converted, but they couldn't dent England's lead further. Hampton had to make a stunning save to deny Marie-Antoinette Katoto in the 89th minute, but Wiegman's side clung on to a valuable victory.



Wiegman said victory in France was a boost to England's qualification hopes (Reuters)

For the most part, they didn't play into France's hands when out of possession, instead they sat back and waited to take their turn. The hosts tried to draw them out of position in the hope of opening gaps they could exploit like they did on Friday, but England learned their lesson.

Their organisational skills often stifled France and also fuelled the hosts' frustration and that gave England exactly what they needed. Herve Renard's side left pockets of space, Beth Mead and Lauren Hemp were ready and waiting to dance through them.

Getting into better areas is just one part of the equation, making the most of them matters too. Perhaps it was the enormity of the situation – a chance to get three crucial points in Group A3 – or maybe it was the desire for revenge. Whatever it was, it was necessary.

The reluctance to try things was gone, Stanway made that clear enough when she opened the scoring. Hemp pulled the ball back to the edge of the area, Stanway found herself in space. She could have carried on a passing move but instead she opted to go it alone. Without any hesitation she struck with her laces, sending a rocket past Pauline Peyraud-Magnin.



Stanway opened the scoring with a stunning strike (The FA via Getty Images)



Russo then doubled England's lead from Hemp's cross (The FA via Getty Images)

From that moment on, it was clear that England were in for a good night. They'd had the better of the chances leading up to that point – Ella Toone should really have scored when she instead scuffed into Peyraud-Magnin's hands from close range when one-on-one – and France just looked uneasy.

Russo was there to provide the second on a night where she excelled. She was in the right place at the right time to meet a looping Hemp delivery with a deft header to get the goal her efforts deserved, but her impact went further than scoring.

The Arsenal striker's tendency to drop deep can sometimes be infuriating, but, if everything else aligns, it instead becomes an important asset.

Here's how the routine goes: she moves to collect a pass, turning with it as she takes her first touch and begins a crucial period of hold-up play. After that, Mead or Hemp race down the wings. Then she has the liberty of releasing the ball to wherever is best and creating a chance, usually creating a chance for herself. She appears to do all this without a moment's thought.

What she lacks in Ellen White's presence in the box she makes up for with the rest of her abilities. It is only when the performance in other areas of the pitch becomes laboured that her efforts don't quite pay off.

Thankfully, things were better in nearly every area even if they weren't quite perfect. Having Alex Greenwood in the back line would have been a definite improvement, especially when the defence tired late in the game. There were also still a handful of wayward passes from Lucy Bronze and others in the midfield. Despite their shortcomings, things were much improved.



Russo impressed with her display leading the line (The FA via Getty Images)

It became nervy as France threw everything forward to try and snatch a draw and England grew increasingly haphazard, but they were able to hold out. That is all that will matter.

Handing starts to the likes of Aggie Beever-Jones, Jess Park and Grace Clinton who seem consigned to the bench despite stellar club seasons could help breathe new life into this England side. It might, perhaps, have led to more openings and more goals against France. Yet for all the annoyance Wiegman's lack of rotation brings, her decision isn't without merit.

England don't have "easy" friendlies anymore. Attempting to bed players in and risking new talent on pivotal nights could very well backfire; this time sticking to her squad feels a shrewd decision from a master tactician.

Qualification is far from done, but at least it is now a realistic possibility rather than a slim prospect. They are level on points with third-placed Sweden, trail France by just two and have games against Sweden and the Republic of Ireland left to play.

The race to get the top two spots in the group is a three-horse one and if England can replicate displays like this then they will be in a good place. Should they allow themselves to revert to recent form, slipping in standards after seemingly improving, then it would be disappointing.

July's fixtures will set the tone for the year that follows. Automatic progression will avail them of the burden of a convoluted play-off system. They must now harness the form that drove them to a first away win against France in 51 years into next month's camp.

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Knee injury forces Djokovic to pull out of French Open



Novak Djokovic complained about the condition of the court during Monday's five-set win over Francisco Cerundolo and an MRI scan confirmed a torn medial meniscus in his right knee (AP)

JAMIE BRAIDWOOD

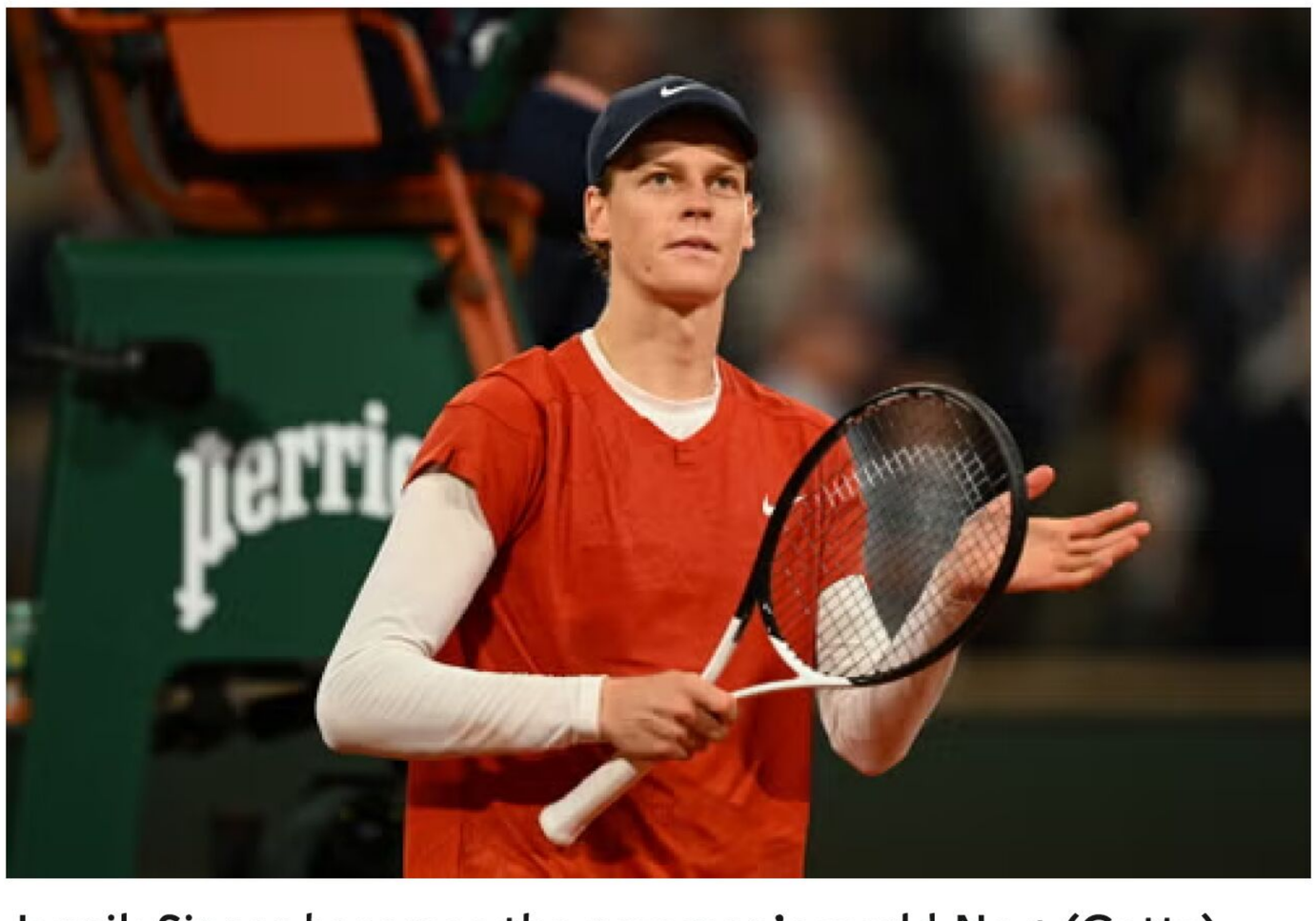
Novak Djokovic has pulled out of the French Open due to a knee injury sustained during his fourth-round win over Francisco Cerundolo on Monday.

The 37-year-old underwent an MRI scan in Paris yesterday afternoon and has been forced to withdraw from today's quarter-

final against Casper Ruud. Djokovic's scan revealed a "torn medial meniscus in his right knee", which makes the 24-time grand slam champion a serious doubt for Wimbledon. The Championships begin on 1 July.

As a result of Djokovic's withdrawal, there will be a new French Open men's champion this week, while Italian Jannik Sinner will become world No 1 for the first time on Monday. Djokovic slipped on court at the start of the second set against Cerundolo, taking a medical timeout as he grimaced in pain. The Serbian played on after taking the maximum dose of painkillers available to him, battling from behind to win in five sets in four hours and 39 minutes.

Djokovic blamed the condition of the court for his injury, insisting the clay was too slippery and should have been swept during the sets by the ground staff. The defending champion took to court barely a day and a half after finishing his third-round match against Lorenzo Musetti, which also went to five sets, at 3am on Sunday.



Jannik Sinner becomes the new men's world No 1 (Getty)

Djokovic said after his win over Cerundolo that he had been battling the injury for a couple of weeks but that it had flared up after slipping on Court Philippe-Chatrier.

Djokovic was attempting to win the French Open for a fourth time to extend his grand slam record to 25 singles titles. He defeated the Norwegian Ruud in last year's final but now there

will be no last-eight rematch. His shock exit from the tournament means Djokovic has still not won a title in 2024. The extent of his injury, which was confirmed in a statement released by the French Open, could have significant implications for the rest of his season.

Djokovic was looking to win his eighth Wimbledon title next month, while the Championships are followed by the Olympic Games in Paris. The Olympic title is the only major honour he has not won in the sport and the most successful men's player in history will be 41 by the time of the next Games in Los Angeles.

Djokovic had to defend his French Open title to keep the world No 1 ranking, which now falls to Sinner. The 22-year-old defeated Djokovic on his way to winning his first grand slam title at the Australian Open in January, and he becomes the first world No 1 from Italy in the history of the rankings.



Iga Swiatek cruised past Marketa Vondrousova (AP)

Djokovic's withdrawal means two-time French Open runner-up Ruud will progress to the semi-finals, where he will face either Alexander Zverev or Alex de Minaur on Friday. On the other side of the draw, Sinner will face Carlos Alcaraz or Stefanos Tsitsipas for a place in Sunday's final.

The news of Djokovic's withdrawal broke during Sinner's 6-2, 6-4, 7-6 (3) win over Grigor Dimitrov and he was told he was becoming the new world No 1 during his on-court interview: "It's a special moment for me," he said. "First of all it's

everyone's dream to be number one in the world, but seeing Novak retiring, it's disappointing. I wish him a speedy recovery."

Iga Swiatek will meet Coco Gauff tomorrow for a place in the final of the French Open in the 12th installment of what has, so far, been a one-sided rivalry. World No 1 Swiatek has won 10 of their 11 meetings, the most recent coming in Rome last month and the most important being the Roland Garros final in 2022. The 23-year-old Pole is in ominous form as she hunts a third straight title and a fourth in five years.

Since saving a match point against Naomi Osaka in the second round, Swiatek has dropped only eight games and won 20 on the spin in dispatching Marie Bouzkova (6-4, 6-2), Anastasia Potapova (6-0, 6-0) and Marketa Vondrousova (6-0, 6-2).



Coco Gauff came from behind to beat Ons Jabeur (EPA)

"I feel like you just go crazy every point," was Wimbledon champion Vondrousova's honest assessment of yesterday's quarter-final. But Gauff, now 20 and the reigning US Open champion, showed her mettle as she came from a set down to beat Ons Jabeur 4-6, 6-2, 6-3. "Potapova isn't me. I'm not Vondrousova," she said. "It doesn't mean anything. Maybe I could lose with the same score, maybe not, but I'm going to go in and just try to win. I have nothing to lose, all the pressure is on her."

Jabeur was unhappy about her early start against Gauff on a sparsely populated Court Philippe Chatrier. "I have a lot to say

on that topic," said the Tunisian eighth seed. "I don't expect any women to play in the evening but frankly, playing a quarter-final at 11am is really such a chore. We deserve to be here. Playing in the afternoon is better. There is going to be more people watching us and the stadiums are crowded. The VIP [area] is, well, you know, as usual.

"Playing that late for men after midnight is not a good thing. We saw yesterday how Novak was suffering with his knee – because he couldn't really recover well. I think for all players, men, women, we deserve better than that. We deserve better scheduling."

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Sport

Sports news in brief



Manchester City vice-captain Kevin De Bruyne says he will consider ‘offers’ from Saudi Arabia (Getty)

‘You have to be open to everything’, says De Bruyne

Kevin De Bruyne has said he is open to playing in Saudi Arabia should there be an offer that pays him a life-changing salary. The Manchester City vice-captain has one year left on his contract and has discussed a move abroad with his family, with his wife Michelle willing to consider it, and his oldest child asking how long he has left at the Etihad Stadium.

De Bruyne, who turns 33 this summer, has made 382 appearances in nine years at City, winning six Premier League

titles and one Champions League. But the Belgian has become more injury-prone and missed five months of the current campaign after undergoing hamstring surgery. He is now wondering what his next move will be and is expected to be a target for the Saudi Pro League, either now or in 2025. De Bruyne told *Het Laatste Nieuws*: “Saudi? At my age you have to be open to everything. If I play there for two years, I will be able to earn an incredible amount of money. Before that I had to play football for 15 years. I may not even reach that amount yet.”

Scotland demolish Israel to remain unbeaten

Martha Thomas scored four goals as Scotland defeated Israel 5-0 in Budapest to remain unbeaten atop Women’s Euro 2025 qualifying Group B2. It was the second time in quick succession the two sides had faced each other after Pedro Martinez Losa’s side won 4-1 at Hampden on Friday night. And yesterday’s rematch on neutral territory in Hungary proved similarly comfortable for the Scots, who have now taken 10 points from a possible 12 in their quest to qualify for the finals in Switzerland next year.

Meanwhile, substitute Troy Parrott strengthened John O’Shea’s claims on the vacant manager’s job as he fired the Republic of Ireland to friendly victory over Euro 2024-bound Hungary. The 22-year-old Tottenham striker, who spent last season on loan at Dutch club Excelsior, struck in stoppage-time to seal a smash-and-grab 2-1 victory over Marco Rossi’s men which ended their 14-game unbeaten run. For Ireland, whose only wins since March last year had come against European minnows Gibraltar, there was a measure of relief after a turbulent period in their recent history, with Stephen Kenny’s successor still to be appointed almost seven months after his departure.

In the other qualifier, Nicole Kozlova’s last-gasp equaliser denied Wales three points in their Women’s Euro 2025 qualifier against Ukraine in Poland. Kozlova struck seven minutes into stoppage-time to earn her side a 2-2 draw that cost Wales top spot in Group B4 with two games left to play.

PSG reacted with ‘violence’, says Mbappe

Kylian Mbappe has accused Paris Saint-Germain of reacting “with violence” after he told the club of his desire to leave at the end of his contact. Mbappe signed a five-year deal with Real Madrid on Monday. He spent seven seasons at PSG, becoming the club’s record goalscorer and winning a host of domestic titles.

Mbappe entered the final year of his contract last summer, and claimed the club threatened to sit him on the bench for the season until coach Luis Enrique intervened. “They made me understand that I wouldn’t play for PSG... they spoke to me with violence,” Mbappe said at a press conference with the French national team ahead of the upcoming European championships. “Without Luis Enrique and Luis Campos I wouldn’t have set foot on the pitch. They saved me. That’s the truth. Just playing was a great source of pride. But it is certain that next year I will not settle for a year like this.”

Major league baseball player banned for life

Major League Baseball has banned San Diego Padres infielder Tucupita Marcano for betting on baseball and suspended four other players for one year after finding the players placed unrelated bets with a legal sportsbook.

Marcano appears to be the first active major leaguer banned under the sport’s gambling provision since New York Giants outfielder Jimmy O’Connell in 1924. Pete Rose, baseball’s active career hits leader, famously agreed to a lifetime ban in 1989 after an investigation concluded he bet on Cincinnati Reds games while managing the team.

One other big leaguer, Oakland Athletics pitcher Michael Kelly, was declared ineligible for one year yesterday for betting on baseball while he was in the minor leaguers. Additionally, minor leaguers Jay Groome of San Diego and José Rodríguez of

Philadelphia were banned for one year for betting on major league games. *AP*

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