JULY 2024 • £8.99

Prospect

ELECTION SPECIAL

OUR PUERILE POLITICS

Rafael Behr *on the election campaign we deserve—but won't get*

PLUS

Matthew d'Ancona
Tim Bale
Nadine Batchelor-Hunt
Philip Collins
Marie Le Conte
Zoë Grünewald
Peter Hitchens
Peter Kellner
Matthew Lesh
Moya Lothian-McLean
Frances Ryan

Sam Freedman & Tom Clark
LABOUR IN POWER

Universities are broken and broke
GLEN O'HARA

Students, Gaza and echoes of Vietnam
TARIQ ALI

Britain's fractured Jewish community
RACHEL SHABI

Imogen West-Knights Dominic Cummings, video superstar? / *Margaret Hodge* Goodbye to all that / *Malcolm Chalmers* Why we're not ready for Putin / The state of England: a books special

9 771359 502095 29

ESCAPE THE ECHO CHAMBER

PROSPECTMAGAZINE.CO.UK

abrdn

To be ahead in Asia, be on the ground.

abrdn Asian Investment Trusts

In Asia, life and business move fast. To invest here successfully, you need local knowledge.

abrdn has had investment teams in Asia for over 40 years. So we get to know markets, companies, trends and innovations first hand. And you get to select from investment trusts featuring the most compelling Asia opportunities we can find.

To harness the full potential of Asia, explore our Asian investment trusts on our website.

Please remember, the value of shares and the income from them can go down as well as up and you may get back less than the amount invested. Asian funds may invest in emerging markets which can carry more risk than developed markets.

Invest via most leading platforms.

Find out more at abrdn.com/asiatrusts

THE PROSPECT GRID

Our monthly cut-out-and-keep guide to who falls where on the taste hierarchy

UPMARKET

DOWNMARKET

DUD

BANGER

Coppola.
Megafloppolis

Michael Gove.
From Brexit to exit

Rishi Sunak.
Sinking in the rain

ICC.
Not just for corrupt African countries, it turns out

Alice Munro.
As good as it gets

Harriet Harman
bows out with grace

Jonathan Yeo's King Charles.
Nice face, shame about the sausage fingers

Diane Abbott.
Starmer's blind spot

Public inquiries
are costly and slow, but necessary

AI.
After the hype, the cold water. It isn't all it's cracked up to be

The Garrick hauls up the white flag. But will women side with Groucho?

Iain Dale.
Farewell (probably) to a great broadcaster

D:Ream
From New Labour anthem to Sunak trolling soundtrack

Nigel Farage
bottled it. Our gain, Donald's loss

Julian Assange.
Enough is enough

Scarlett Johansson.
Sam Altman won't do that again

Fawlty Towers.
Zombie culture is alive and well

Tyson Fury.
Good fighter, bad loser

Gina Rinehart
is no oil painting. And she's rich enough to ban one

Jürgen Klopp.
Tschüss to our favourite German

War on cyclists.
A change from the one on motorists. Equally specious

Rebus.
Hackneyed, yet hypnotic

RIP **Doge dog.**
Wow, much sad

Starmer says civil servants need a **duty of candour.**
You mean they didn't have one already?

IMAGES VIA SHUTTERSTOCK, WIKIPEDIA COMMONS & YOUTUBE

In this issue

FEATURES

10 **It's no joke**
These times demand a more serious election than the one we're getting
Rafael Behr

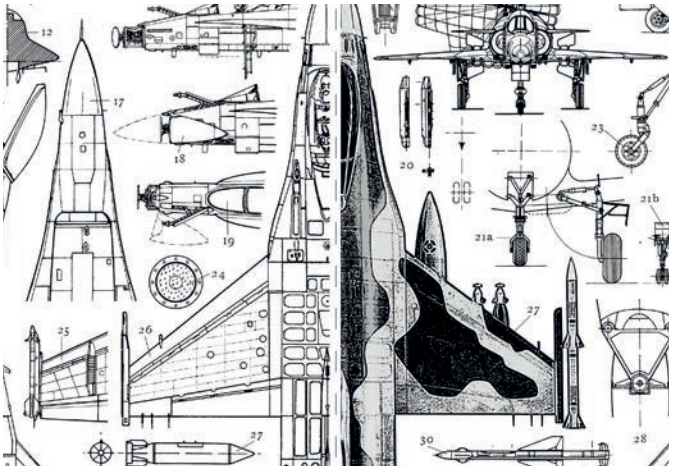
16 **Election panel**
Our gang of experts and analysts explain what political parties should be talking about

26 **Is Labour ready?**
The party is on course for power. But it still needs to figure out what it wants
Sam Freedman

plus
Starmer's trip hazards
Tom Clark

36 **Fractured minority**
The war in Gaza is reshaping Britain's Jewish community
Rachel Shabi

42 **A balance of fear**
The defence budget is set to rise. But to what end?
Malcolm Chalmers



50 **Crash course**
The UK's world-renowned universities are in deep trouble
Glen O'Hara

REGULARS & COLUMNS

01 **The grid**

05 **Contributors**

06 **People**

Susan Neiman, Alex Norris, Huda Ammori & Richard Barnard

20 **The perils of snap elections**
Phil Tinline

23 **Letters** *plus* **In fact**

35 **Diary**
Margaret Hodge

41 **Echoes of 1968**
Tariq Ali

48 **Why I'm suing Facebook**
Ethan Zuckerman

55 **Philosopher-at-large: Free speech isn't simple**
Sasha Mudd

56 **The joy of lex: Unclubbable**
Sarah Ogilvie
plus **Stephen Collins's cartoon**

57 **Can legal power save Gaza?**
Conor Gearty

80 **Lives**

86 **Crossword & Bobby Seagull's Brain Teaser**

88 **Brief encounter**
Kara Swisher

THE CULTURE

60 **England, our England**
A nation shrouded in myth
Peter Hoskin

64 **Northern renaissance**
Rebalancing the old divide
Stu Hennigan

66 **Camera man**
Sam Hanna's everyday England
Sukhdev Sandhu

68 **No country for young men**
England's mental landscape
Christiana Spens

70 **Building backwards**
The rise of suburban Tudor
David McAllister

72 **Art: Still life? Still going**
Francesca Peacock

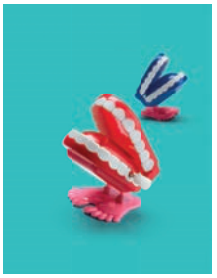
74 **TV: DomTube, reviewed**
Imogen West-Knights

75 **Film: Cantet's class act**
Sukhdev Sandhu

76 **Stage: When plays go global**
Kate Maltby

77 **Pop: Smalltown, bigtime boy**
Laura Barton

78 **Classical notes: Dial O for obsession**
Ian Bostridge



Cover photograph by Sara Morris

PODCASTS

→ **Peter Fabricius**
on South Africa's election

→ **Priyamvada Gopal**
on Gaza campus protests

→ **Ella Glover**
debunks the opioid "crisis"

→ At **prospectmagazine.co.uk** or wherever you get your podcasts

ONLINE

→ The *Prospect* website is updated daily with new analysis from our contributors. Visit **prospectmagazine.co.uk** for more, including:

→ **Alona Ferber**
Gaza hostage families are still living 7th October

→ **Emily Lawford**
The Revolutionary Communists plot a comeback

→ **Nick Davies**
Digs deeper into the phone-hacking scandal

FOLLOW PROSPECT

→ *X* @prospect_uk
Threads @prospect_magazine
Facebook prospectmagazineuk
Instagram @prospect_magazine
TikTok @prospectmagazine

The organisation design experts

We're more than just a consultancy firm. For over 15 years, our team of dedicated professionals have been committed to positively shaping the UK's organisational landscape.

We're trusted by industry leaders

JOHN LEWIS & PARTNERS

News Corp

Bauer Media Group

IKEA

sky

NHS

M&S

Want to learn more? Get in touch:

info@q5partners.com

www.q5partners.com

Prospect

2 Queen Anne's Gate,
London, SW1H 9AA
publishing@prospectmagazine.co.uk
editorial@prospectmagazine.co.uk
Website prospectmagazine.co.uk
Advertising 020 3372 2934
Editorial 020 7255 1344
Subscriptions 0330 333 0173

EDITORIAL
Editor Alan Rusbridger
Deputy editor Ellen Halliday
Managing editor Alex Dean
Creative director Mike Turner
Senior editor Alona Ferber
Books & culture editor Peter Hoskin
Head of digital audience Ben Clark
Production & associate editor David McAllister
Assistant editors Sarah Collins, Emily Lawford
Editorial fellow Imaan Irfan
Contributing editors Andrew Adonis, Matthew d'Ancona, Tom Clark, Philip Collins, Isabel Hilton
Production assistants Pippa Crawford, Faye Curran, Ruth Lucas

PUBLISHING
CEO Mark Beard
Head of client revenue Wendy Miller
Head of advertising sales Jonny Hart
Head of digital Chris Tilbury
Head of engagement Jo Murray
Head of customer revenue Tom Bath
Senior finance manager Adwoa Bannerman
Management accountant Anna Garnek

EDITORIAL BOARD
Wolfgang Blau, Clive Cowdery, Annette Dittert, Mary Fitzgerald, Karin von Hippel, Will Hutton, Razia Iqbal, Jane Shaw, Sonia Sodha, David Willetts

FOR SUBSCRIPTION INFORMATION
Prospect Subscriptions
Rockwood House, 9-17 Perrymount Road, Haywards Heath, RH16 3TW
Tel 0330 333 0173
Email customerhelp@subscription.prospectmagazine.co.uk

NEWSTRADE DISTRIBUTION
Seymour Distribution Ltd
2 East Poultry Avenue, London, EC1A 9PT
Tel 020 7429 4000

EDITORIAL CALENDAR

Aug/Sept:	10th July
October:	28th August
November:	25th September

The magazine is owned and supported by the Resolution Group, as part of its not-for-profit, public interest activities.

Resolution abc

Contributors

Features

Rafael Behr *is a political columnist for the Guardian and the author of "Politics: A Survivor's Guide" (Atlantic)*

Malcolm Chalmers *is deputy director-general of the Royal United Services Institute think tank*

Tom Clark *is a contributing editor at Prospect*

Sam Freedman *is a senior fellow at the Institute for Government and senior adviser to the Ark schools network*

Glen O'Hara *is professor of modern and contemporary history at Oxford Brookes University. He is the author of "The Politics of Water in Post-War Britain" (Palgrave Macmillan)*

Rachel Shabi *is a journalist and broadcaster. Her latest book, "Off-White: The Truth About Antisemitism" (Oneworld), is out in October*

Columns

Tariq Ali *is a writer and filmmaker*

Sarah Collins *is assistant editor at Prospect*

Alice Garnett *is a 24-year-old writer based in London*

Conor Gearty *is a professor of human rights law at the London School of Economics and an honorary KC. His new book, "Homeland Insecurity: The Rise and Rise of Global Anti-Terrorism Law", is published by Polity*

Alice Goodman *is a poet, librettist and Anglican priest in Cambridgeshire*

Sheila Hancock *is an actor and writer*

Margaret Hodge *has been MP for Barking since 1994. She is stepping down at this general election*

Emma John *is a sports journalist, podcast presenter and author*

Tilly Lawless *is a queer, Sydney-based full-service sex worker*

Tom Martin *has a mixed arable and sheep farm in East Anglia*

Sasha Mudd *is Prospect's philosopher-at-large. She is an assistant professor at the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, and visiting professor at the University of Southampton*

Sarah Ogilvie *is a linguist, lexicographer and computer scientist based at Oxford*

Phil Tinline *is the author of "The Death of Consensus: 100 Years of British Political Nightmares" (Hurst)*

Ethan Zuckerman *is founder of the Initiative for Digital Public Infrastructure at the University of Massachusetts Amherst*

The Culture

Laura Barton *is Prospect's pop critic and host of Radio 4's "Notes on Music", which is available on BBC Sounds*

Ian Bostridge *is Prospect's classical critic, a singer and historian. His book "Song and Self" (Faber) was published in 2023*

Stu Hennigan *is a writer, poet and musician from the north of England. His book "Ghost Signs" (Bluemoose) was shortlisted for two national literary prizes*

Peter Hoskin *is Prospect's books & culture editor. He is also the Daily Mail's games critic*

David McAllister *is production & associate editor at Prospect*

Kate Maltby *is Prospect's theatre critic and chair of the UK Critics' Circle, Drama Section*

Francesca Peacock *is an arts journalist. Her first book "Pure Wit: The Revolutionary Life of Margaret Cavendish" (Head of Zeus) was published last September*

Sukhdev Sandhu *is Prospect's film critic and runs the Colloquium for Unpopular Culture at New York University*

Christiana Spens *is an artist and writer. Her memoir "The Fear" (Repeater) was published last year*

Imogen West-Knights *is Prospect's TV critic. Her novel "Deep Down" (Fleet) was published last year*

impress publish with integrity regulated member

Regulated by IMPRESS: The Independent Monitor for the Press CIC
IMPRESS, 16-18 New Bridge Street, London, EC4V 6AG
Tel: 020 3325 4288 **Email:** complaints@impressorg.com **impressorg.com**

To make a complaint about material published by *Prospect*, follow the guidance at **prospectmagazine.co.uk/complaints**

PEOPLE »

Susan Neiman

Woke or broke

Before she first published her book *Left is Not Woke* in March last year, the philosopher Susan Neiman expected some backlash. The French publisher that had brought out two of her previous works—to great success, Neiman tells me over a video call from her office in Berlin—refused to publish this one. The fear was that her critique of tribalism on the left could inadvertently boost the right. As she writes in the second edition, which came out in May: "'The situation is serious,' I was told. 'Marine Le Pen could win our next election.'" Neiman went with a bigger publisher.

Given the attendant controversies of taking on "wokeism", the 69-year-old had sent the manuscript to friends. "Criticise as hard as you can," she recalls beseeching them. "I'm sure I'm gonna get it once the book comes out."

Most of us have to live with our errors, but Neiman was able to correct hers in this latest edition. What were the alleged gaffes? Among other things, critics said she was "shadow boxing", having insufficiently defined woke in her argument for a universalist left. In the book, she writes that the notoriously nebulous concept "begins with concern for marginalised persons, and ends by reducing each to the prism of her marginalisation".

Neiman cited far more examples of "wokeism" in practice in the latest edition. But this second chance also meant she could incorporate a major event that seemed to prove her point: Hamas's 7th October attack on Israel, and the response to it from some on the more radical left.

"I didn't see how I could ignore it," she tells me, of the evident denialism and justifications for the violence, "because I felt it has become, in many ways, such a clear example of what goes wrong when you define your politics tribally, and you do things like saying that Israel is the global north and Palestine is the global south. And Israelis are white and Palestinians are people of colour—all of that stuff, which just was so demonstrably ignorant."

Born in Atlanta, Georgia during the civil rights movement, the Jewish-American philosopher grew up with a "Jewish universalist tradition that I cherish". Neiman has spent much of her career in Germany, serving as director of the Einstein Forum since 2000. Her 2019 book, *Learning from the Germans: Race and the Memory of Evil*, looked at how Germany had reckoned with its genocidal past.

Neiman is also an Israeli citizen. She moved to the Jewish state in 1995, the era of post-Oslo accords optimism, and left before the Second Intifada. She is "extremely angry" that the current Israeli government is trampling on the Jewish values she holds so dear. "It's a deeply tribal, deeply repressive government that does not stand for anything I believe in," she says—its only interest is perpetuating itself as representing an ethno-theocratic state.

However critical she might be of parts of the left, Neiman seems at pains to clarify that she is also "an extremely outspoken critic of the occupation... and increasingly critical of this [Israeli] government, and of its horrible waging of war on Gaza". In Germany, where the nation's history and relationship to the Jewish state make for a particularly unwelcoming environment for such censure, Neiman has "gotten a lot of shit" for her views.

What does she make of the heavy-handed responses of some universities to campus protests against the Gaza war? In the US, a few "quite ugly" antisemitic statements have gone viral, she says, but "what most people on the ground tell me is that the protests are peaceful". Neiman thinks some administrations fear being accused of failing to tackle antisemitism. There might be fear, too, that rowdy demonstrations will put off donors.

At a time of extreme polarisation, Neiman points out the futility "of talking about being pro-Palestine or pro-Israel as if we were talking about football games". But amid the cacophony, amid the hardening binaries, she says, her rare voice "makes no bloody difference". ◆ *Alona Ferber*

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOHN WATSON

Alex Norris

Oh no!

A pink blob is going about its day. The word "exists" floats above its head. "You are so brave," interjects an orange blob to the pink blob. "I love that you are proud to be ugly and weird." The pink blob stays mute. "I admire that you don't feel the shame you should be feeling," insists the orange blob. Then the pink blob gives its immortal punchline, the same as it is in every strip: "Oh no!"

The online comic series, literally *Webcomic Name*, is the creation of Alex Norris—who since first publishing this pared back, three-panel strip in 2016 has amassed more than 760,000 followers on Instagram. From a studio in Margate, Norris (who uses they/them pronouns) tells me they hit on one of those "once in a lifetime, perfect things" with this series: something creatively fulfilling that happens to have found a mass audience.

Unfortunately, though, Norris has been unable to fully enjoy this rare livelihood: since 2019, they have had to fight to defend their copyright in a US federal court.

Back in 2017, Norris signed a contract with US-based tabletop games-maker Golden Bell to create a boardgame and toy based on characters from *Webcomic Name*. Golden Bell argued that this contract meant *Webcomic Name*, "Oh No!" and other aspects of Norris's work became the company's intellectual property, to do with as they wished; Norris, who had no intention of handing over their intellectual property or working with Golden Bell outside of the boardgame, sued.

The case, though still ongoing, has already seen rulings in Norris's favour on two counts in a summary judgment. "The judge has clearly stated that I own my comics, and that the other party has infringed on my copyright," Norris said of the rulings back in March. Now, however, Golden Bell has opened up a second lawsuit, this time against Norris and books publisher Andrews McMeel, who brought out a collection of Norris's comics in 2019 despite a cease-and-desist order from Golden Bell.

The legal battle has dragged on for five years—more than half the time that Norris has been publishing *Webcomic Name*. "It's kind of taken over my whole life," they tell me. Norris initially paid their legal fees with their own money, but in 2022 had no choice but to crowdfund the remaining cash. Having to ask for money this way felt "very ugly", Norris says, but the response has been heartening: as of this May, Norris has raised £325,000 from some 16,000 individual donors. "The comics community have rallied around me because they see it's the story you always hear about."

"I'm not doing this out of spite or revenge, or even for justice," Norris says. "I don't think that's a good reason to go through the legal system, unfortunately, because you don't get that." The fight, they explain, is for the right to carry on creating work on their own terms.

Norris's main takeaway from the US legal system is that it's "not built for people without much money". They also reckon the legalese of "intellectual property" is alienating for most artists, as it says much about art as a commodity without a word on the person who created it. "This is something I've made. How can it exist separately from me?" Norris asks, comparing *Webcomic Name* to a work of public art: free for anyone to read and share online, without the question of ownership entering the equation.

Norris says that, once the case is put to bed, they aim to match the crowdfunding sum by raising money for charity. "If I ever have money in the future, I really want to focus on giving it to other people who are making art as well," they tell me, "because that's the thing I really care about." For now, we can only hope the case ends on a more upbeat note than pink blob's punchline. ◆

David McAllister

> *"You don't get justice from the legal system*

PEOPLE »

Huda Ammori & Richard Barnard

Farewell to arms

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOHN WATSON

"This is the most ironic place to have this interview," quips activist Richard Barnard. We're a stone's throw from Buckingham Palace, and still in the shadow of parliament—both symbols of the establishment he and Huda Ammori have spent their lives resisting.

Members of their organisation, Palestine Action, have been branded "pernicious militants" by former Labour MP and life peer John Woodcock, whose new report argues that the government should keep under review "whether Palestine Action meets the criteria for proscription as a terrorist entity". The pair founded Palestine Action in 2020 to take direct action against Israeli weapons factories operating in Britain. Later that year, along with other activists, they climbed onto the roof of an Elbit factory in Staffordshire, where they spent three nights causing carnage with hammers and tools, before police hauled them down in stretchers. Ammori recalls looking up at a wrecked building, glass windows smashed, red paint streaked across all sides: "I just remember saying how beautiful it all looked."

Elbit Systems manufactures 85 per cent of Israel's drone fleet. Some are equipped with missiles that are marketed as "field-tested" once deployed in Gaza. Ammori argues the group has to resort to direct action as politicians won't listen to "facts and reason". "They already understand the situation. They're choosing to be complicit."

Ammori, 30, is the daughter of a Palestinian father and an Iraqi mother. Her great grandfather was involved in the 1936 uprising against the British. With a bounty on his head, he was killed by British soldiers, and the family's ancestral home was destroyed. It was rebuilt by the Palestinian community, but in 1967—with the Israeli military shooting at it—her family was forced to leave. Her father and his young siblings hid under the table in their front room and crawled out the back door. "That was the last time he saw his home."

Barnard, 51, is trickier to place. Below the sleeves of his "FC Palestina" shirt, he has almost 30 tattoos: Benedictine mottos, Buddhist chants, an Irish Republican slogan, "freedom" in Arabic. In Roman numerals, 77, the number of times Jesus says you should forgive your enemies". ("Contradicts this one, doesn't it?" Ammori laughs, looking at another tattoo of the code for "all cops are bastards").

Barnard, who tells me he raised himself Catholic, says his first tattoo was Aramaic for "peace". But his prayer is matched by radical action. He recalls "a massive cross" in his old church depicting the crucifixion. "That idea of sacrifice" resonated. Another formative Biblical moment was, "You know, Jesus going into the temple and destroying it in effect and kicking people out."

Barnard has broken into American Airforce bases in Germany nine times, alongside some local monks. He used to be part of a Christian anarchist group called the Catholic Worker, which aims to "comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable".

"Ultimately, for me, it's the belief in God. When I'm stood before the Almighty with everyone else, that's the legacy I want," he says. I ask whether he's still a Christian anarchist. "No, I'm Muslim now."

Recently the pair were interrogated under Schedule 7 of the Terrorism Act, which obligates detainees to hand over all electronics and removes their right to silence. But Ammori is not deterred. "When you do these types of actions, you do it with an understanding that you could end up in prison."

She cites South Africa's ongoing genocide case against Israel in the International Court of Justice. "Our law says that we should not export arms if there's a risk of it violating international law." And support from local communities has increased since the war began. "General people don't want an arms factory on their doorstep," Barnard reflects.

Palestine Action's sustained disruptions since 2020 have forced Elbit to permanently close two of its factories and abandon its London headquarters. Their protest action also scuppered a £280m deal with the Ministry of Defence.

In 2022, artists in Gaza painted a mural depicting Palestine Action stopping "the war machine". An "Elbit" conveyor belt, stamped with the British and Israeli flags, churns out a line of coffins. Palestine Action is pulling the "off" lever.

Ammori is optimistic that the group isn't going anywhere. "I mean, once you've got your first factory down..." ◆

Imaan Irfan

wealthify

Make lower value clients work for you with a Wealthify Partnership

Partner with us and start generating revenue from your smaller clients that aren't currently profitable.

We'll then let you know once they reach a scale that makes them commercially viable for you.

Want to find out more?

Get in touch
partnerships@wealthify.com
or call **02920 099216**

Capital at risk

MONEYAge AWARDS 2021 WINNER
INNOVATION IN CONSUMER FINANCE AWARD

24TH ANNUAL The Personal Finance Awards 2021/22 WINNER
BEST JUNIOR ISA

boring money BEST FOR CUSTOMER SERVICE 2022

Trustpilot

Wealthify Limited is authorised and regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority.


BREXIT
GAZA
STATE FAIL
RUSSIA
SECURITY
SOCIAL CA
RENEWABL
HINA
FICIAL
TELLIGENCE

ELECTION SPECIAL

IT'S NO JOKE

Rishi Sunak and Keir Starmer are complicit in the puerile performance that debases every British election campaign. It is a mode of politics hopelessly inadequate for the challenges that we face—and the victor should break with it

by
RAFAEL BEHR

The circus spirit is strong in British politics. It makes a rowdy theatre of parliament and a clown-car parade of election campaigns. Every show is different to the extent that no two candidates are the same, but convention and a fixed repertoire of plots make for a familiar experience. There must be farce (hot microphone broadcasts private conversation); slapstick (candidate hides from TV crew); audience participation (unscripted encounter with irate voter).

Personality trumps policy. Debate is lively but parochial. The antagonism is real but also camp and cartoonish in the Punch-and-Judy tradition. Many rising political stars have promised to do things differently. All end up joining in, because it is the only show in town.

The clash of Rishi Sunak's Conservatives and Keir Starmer's Labour over the coming weeks will be sometimes entertaining, often irritating and rarely informative. The spotlight will be trained on the characters of the two leaders on centre stage, leaving most questions about the needs of the country in shadow.

The stakes are high, but the trivialising tide of British politics can always rise higher. This was proved by the lack of sustained focus on Brexit's consequences during the 2016 referendum, or in either of the two subsequent general elections.

In 2024, there are strong incentives for the UK's two main parties to avoid candour about the challenges facing the country. It is hard for Sunak to describe a mess that also happens to be the legacy he is defending, while Starmer's clarion call to change risks being muffled by too many caveats about intractable problems and limited resources.

The fog of campaign war is also a shroud over hard subjects. The list of issues not being debated is long, but there are two overarching themes that would dominate if the election became an honest conversation about the nation's future: what kind of economy will Britain have; and what role can it play in the world?

Those questions arise from the decline of institutions and norms that once defined what it meant to be part of the west. They are made more urgent by Brexit—a misplaced bet that liberal globalisation would last forever and that geography was irrelevant to a nation's economic and political security.

Geopolitics is more dangerous now than at any time since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and more fluid than at any time since 1945. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine marked the return of a might-is-right, imperial land-grabbing statecraft that liberal democracies had complacently assumed was made obsolete by economic interconnectedness.

Conflict in Gaza has brought Israel and Iran, longtime antagonists by proxy, to the brink of all-out war. The apparatus of laws and treaties on which the postwar order was founded is challenged within Europe by resurgent nationalism, and beyond by the rise of China as a superpower capable of rivalling US hegemony.

American democracy faces an existential crisis: Donald Trump possibly returning to the White House with a clearer programme for tyranny and a better understanding of how to enact it than he brought to his first term. Even if Joe Biden holds on, America's allies have had their confidence shaken in Washington as their security underwriter.

"Strategic autonomy" on defence and trade is the concept dominating conversations in the European Union. Protectionism is on the rise. Disputes over tariffs, technology transfers, energy supplies and raw materials will play out at the level of continental blocs, making Britain's surrender of a seat at the top table in Brussels look increasingly unwise.

For decades, Britain's axiomatic foreign policy concept was the transatlantic bridge. London was Washington's favourite European capital and Europe's channel to the White House. Brexit blew that up. The old relationships are not entirely lost. Britain is still a major player by European standards: a nuclear power with a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council. But those assets are harder to leverage from a position of strategic dislocation, cut off from our neighbourhood alliance. The challenge is made harder by a political culture that denies there is even a problem.

It is hard for Rishi Sunak to describe a mess that also happens to be the legacy he is defending

That denial extends also to the question of how domestic economic policy must adapt to Brexit reality. The Leave campaign argued that Britain could quit the single market without cost. Brussels would bestow special trading favours on a former member and trade deals further afield would make up any shortfall. Reclaiming regulatory sovereignty would maximise competitive advantage at zero cost. This was nonsense.

The economic fiction was rolled into a fraudulent political bundle. Brexit snake oil was sold as the remedy to a broad spectrum of cultural and social grievances. Only one perceived ill—immigration via the free movement of labour—could plausibly be attributed to EU membership.

That strategy was necessary, because Eurosceptic economic doctrine on its own couldn't win a majority. It always was and still is a niche libertarian proposition: contemptuous of workers' rights as a drag on free enterprise, in favour of relaxed or even zero tariffs, with foreign competition putting domestic manufacturers and subsidy-hungry farmers out of business. For Brexit's champions, any ensuing loss of livelihoods was necessary, invigorating even—the purgation of inefficiency by forces of creative destruction.

That prospectus has a firm hold on the Conservative imagination but not much purchase on British voters. The electoral coalition that made this dream theoretically available contained a lot of people who had not signed up for a turbo-Thatcherite Brexit. That was especially true of voters in Labour's "red wall" strongholds of northern England and the Midlands, who went on to back Boris Johnson in the 2019 general election.

One of Johnson's talents is the ability to assert two incompatible things with equal conviction while believing neither of them—also known as having his cake and eating it, or

Amid the meltdown: Liz Truss addresses reporters in London on 14th October 2022

cakeism. He was in favour of state intervention and opposed to state meddling; a disciple of Michael Heseltine and a devotee of Margaret Thatcher; a liberal as London mayor, a nationalist for Vote Leave. He was unfazed by the contradictions intrinsic to Brexit and understood better than many Eurosceptic ideologues (and better than Rishi Sunak) that his "red wall" voters' allegiance was shallow. They would need prompt payback for the votes they had loaned the Tories.

The answer was "levelling up". This meant spending more in deprived areas but, by a feat of fiscal alchemy, avoiding levying the cost on affluent shires that had voted Conservative for much longer.

This egalitarian-libertarian chimera was killed by Covid. The pandemic response required stratospheric levels of public borrowing. It also triggered a chain of events that drove Johnson from office. Then war in Ukraine sent energy bills and inflation soaring. Liz Truss replaced Johnson's ideological incoherence with a monomaniac free-market faith so fundamentalist it spooked the very markets it venerated. By the time Sunak arrived in Downing Street, there was a smouldering crater where Britain's economic model should have stood.

Nearly two years later, the scene is still fairly bleak. According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, the parliament that was just dissolved presided over the worst material growth in living standards since comparable records began in 1961. Per capita growth in GDP has lagged behind the Eurozone average and that of the US.

Real wages have been stagnant for most of the period that the Tories have been in power. Research by the Resolution Foundation thinktank (which shares a common ownership with *Prospect*), shows average earnings only recently returned to their pre-financial crisis level.

Real wages are on the rise again, the economy has emerged from a shallow recession and inflation looks under control. But that doesn't translate into much of a feel-good factor when the public realm is so palpably decaying for want of investment. Public spending measured as a proportion of GDP is 44 per cent for the current fiscal year—higher than it was for much of the New Labour era. The tax burden is high by historical standards, but people who rely on services don't feel they are getting much in return.

In the Punch-and-Judy version of budget debate, Tories promise tax cuts (with eye-watering spending cuts scheduled in the small print) and bash Labour for refusing to do the same. Labour curls into a defensive crouch, agreeing that taxes must not rise while promising "reform" as the magic wand that fixes services without a massive cash infusion.

Neither will confront the reality that the Treasury will need new revenue, either from taxes or borrowing, to meet even basic public expectations of what government provides for its citizens.

An ageing population will place increasing stress on the health service and expose the woeful state of social care. At the other end of the demographic spectrum, an expanded entitlement to free childcare, promised by Labour and the Tories, is stymied by a shortage of nursery places. Schools are struggling to keep teachers. Among working-age adults, the prospect of buying a home—or affording the rent on a place sufficient to raise a family—is ever more remote without help from wealthy parents. Opportunity has become a hereditary privilege.

All of these challenges need to be managed in tandem with the demands of a transition away from carbon-intensive energy and adaptation to climate change. This will entail building new renewable power sources; adapting the national grid; replacing domestic gas boilers; insulating homes; installing far more electric vehicle charging infrastructure; and on it goes.

And those are the knowable challenges. A tidal wave of new technology powered by artificial intelligence is cresting over society, carrying benefits and dangers of unmeasurable proportion.

Britain is not alone in facing these issues, nor is it uniquely unprepared. Every nation has its idiosyncratic political issues. But Brexit contained special follies. It made a fetish of national sovereignty while depleting the national state's capacity to deliver change. It was a misspent revolution that squandered what political capital was available for radical upheaval on a project that satisfied no one. It mined disaffection with politics to fuel a machine that could deliver only further disappointment.

That makes it harder for any subsequent government to make a case for collective sacrifice today in expectation of better times tomorrow. Public patience and goodwill are spent. The currency of big promises is debased.

These problems did not suddenly appear the morning after the referendum. Archaeologists of policy error can burrow through George Osborne's austerity budgets, to New Labour complacency

in advance of the financial crisis, down to structural inequalities baked in by Thatcher-era reforms, past the squandering of North Sea oil revenues, going ever deeper, via Britain's diagnosis as the sick man of Europe in the 1970s, all the way back to the durable observation made in 1962 by Dean Acheson, one-time US secretary of state, that this country had "lost an Empire but not yet found a role".

Britain's next prime minister doesn't need to be a historian to grasp the dimensions of the hole that his country is in. But he should be able to articulate some sense of context, some perspective beyond the two-dimensional stage scenery of a campaign roadshow.

The speech with which Sunak launched the election is instructive. The content was lost in the cacophony of jeers at the dismal spectacle of a sad-looking man in the rain without an umbrella. But it wouldn't have been memorable if the sun had shone. It was laughably unserious, even though the prime minister was explaining how "the world is more dangerous than it has been since the end of the Cold War".

Sunak's narration began with his record in delivering the furlough scheme during the pandemic (back when his personal ratings were high) and continued on to his proclaimed triumph over inflation (although it is the Bank of England that decides the pace of monetary tightening). It amounted to a plea to trust the Conservatives to stick to a plan that no one has experienced as anything other than chaotic improvisation and failure.

The shallowness of Sunak's prospectus expresses paltry imagination applied to obsolete ideology. There is no reason to doubt the many claims by colleagues and officials that he is intelligent, but his cleverness is of the computational kind—he is good at crunching numbers and retaining detail. He isn't interested in ideas. His speeches eschew cultural references and historical arcs, rarely sustaining an analytical argument.

One exception was the address to last year's Tory conference, which blamed Britain's malaise on "30 years of vested interests standing in the way of change; 30 years of rhetorical ambition which achieves little more than a short-term headline". It was a bizarre charge when Sunak's own party had governed for half of the period he maligned. The implication was that the last prime minister of any merit was Thatcher, and that he was the one to reignite her flame.

He would say that, wouldn't he. The claim to be Thatcher's rightful heir is a mandatory boast for Tory leaders and anyone aspiring to the job. As foreign secretary, Liz Truss would pose in situations and costumes that made the government's official press photographs look like advertisements for an end-of-the-pier Thatcher tribute act.

The kitschy cult of the Iron Lady is symptomatic of intellectual stultification in a Conservative party that has given up trying to accommodate its beliefs to the modern world. Atrophied ideological muscle was temporarily bulked up with steroid infusions of populist rage, but the narcotic has worn off, revealing an underlying sagging unfitness for government.

The Labour counter-offer is also light on big ideas. Again, that expresses the leader's temperament, but it is also a calculation about the public's shrunken appetite for grandiosity. Starmer's slow-and-steady method reflects his background as a public prosecutor and the style that he was known for deploying as a barrister. He is a methodical builder of narrowly focused cases, not a flamboyant conjuror of convictions.

He and his closest advisers mistrust airy abstraction as a rarefied taste savoured by the kind of leftwing idealists who lose elections. Dogged pragmatism comes naturally to Starmer, but the absence of visionary ardour is a strategic choice. The opposition leader sticks to retail offers he thinks he has a decent chance of delivering: "6,500 new teachers"; "shorter NHS waiting times"; "a new Border Security Command". The pitch is tailored to an ultra-cynical post-Brexit, post-Johnson political marketplace where grandiose claims about the product provoke suspicion of the salesman.

The corollary of this calculation is that shrunken ambition looks unequal to the task at hand. Change that is overly caveated with incrementalism looks like rose-branded camouflage on more of the same.

Modesty of ambition and cautious messaging infuriate Labour's radical tendency. They also make many moderate centre-left liberals queasy. Pro-Europeans are dismayed at the way that Starmer has moulded his electoral offer to the hard contours of Johnson's Brexit settlement, ruling out any return to the single market and customs union. Veterans of anti-austerity campaigns despair that Rachel Reeves has signed up to suffocating spending constraints set by a Conservative chancellor who doesn't expect to honour them himself.

But those are rational choices given the task that Starmer faced when he took over the party. Plotting a road to Downing Street through Britain's electoral system meant winning in constituencies that had strongly endorsed Brexit. It meant

Rishi Sunak is clever, but he isn't interested in ideas

recruiting support from people who had written off Labour under Jeremy Corbyn as a party of spendthrift socialist fanatics led by an unpatriotic crank.

Reassurance and moderation were preconditions for Starmer to gain a cursory audience with his target voters, let alone audition to be prime minister (and a fair hearing is never easy when unhinged Tory press partisanship sets the tone).

From the outside, it isn't easy to distinguish expedient compromise from an absence of principle, which is the attack on Starmer that Tories think is likeliest to dent his polling advantage. And it is echoed on the left by people who see the whole enterprise as a re-enactment of betrayals perpetrated by New Labour.

The campaign methodology is certainly Blairite, and the whiff of putrescence around Sunak's Tories—knackered by incumbency—inevitably calls to mind John Major's terminal decline in 1997. But the analogy doesn't usefully go much further than that.

New Labour surfed the peak of post-Cold War globalisation. To the extent that Starmer's project has a defined economic doctrine, it begins with a burial of that era. Reeves read the last rites in a lecture earlier this year, arguing that a fragmenting global order, the climate crisis, energy insecurity and the rise of AI all demand an interventionist state.

A Labour government would be more committed to activist industrial policy than any administration since the 1970s, while hoping to avoid the sinkholes of Whitehall subsidy with which that decade is unhappily associated. Reeves says her version would be nimbler, more strategically focused and privately financed. That is plausible as an account of the kind of economy Britain might need in the 21st century, but naming the destination isn't a strategy for getting there.

The inspiration for Reeves is Joe Biden's Inflation Reduction Act, which subsidises Rust Belt renewal and green investment. But the US president's flagship programme has awesome financial heft—hundreds of billions of dollars; more than a trillion by some estimates. Britain can't muster equivalent fiscal firepower. Labour has already flinched from a 2021 commitment to spend £28bn a year on green industry.

Modest ambition and cautious messaging anger Labour's radical tendency and make centre-left liberals queasy

There is also a Europe-shaped problem on the horizon for Reevonomics. In theory, Brexit makes activist industrial policy easier by ending the duty to operate within EU state aid rules. But any competitive advantage is likely to be cancelled out by the cost of exclusion from the single market and customs union. Friction in supply chains and tariffs lurking in the rules-of-origin small print of Britain's trading arrangements will be a constant disincentive to invest in a country that isn't Brussels-aligned.

Exchanging single market access for regulatory sovereignty was a bad deal when the plan was the hard right-wing, deregulated utopia of Singapore-on-Thames. It won't get any better just because Labour envisages something closer to European social democracy. A Starmer government would deal with Brussels in a more neighbourly spirit, but good vibes don't buy concessions. Whether it is trade or security policy on the table, the EU will not grant concessions to Britain simply out of relief that it is no longer run by Tories.

Neither of the candidates to be prime minister wants to relitigate the terms of Brexit in public. But while it is possible to talk about the many challenges facing the UK without reference to the epoch-defining decision that was made in the referendum, it is hard to do so credibly. Without that conversation, all the portentous warnings about global volatility, China's rise, Russia's aggression, AI, climate change and energy security sound like the revving of rhetorical engines in a strategic cul-de-sac.

There is nothing new about politics that ducks hard questions. The campaign stump has never been the place for nuanced disquisitions on geopolitical doctrine. It's a sales pitch, not a seminar. But the trivialising idiom of British campaigns, the repertory performance of Westminster-on-the-road, feels exceptionally inappropriate to the gravity of the moment this time, and all the more demoralising because the effect is cumulative across multiple ballots.

Doubling down on a refusal to engage with the reality of Brexit in successive general elections created a parallel reality, a theatre of absurd policy where it was possible for vaudevillians such as Johnson and Truss to own the stage.

Sunak arrived promising "professionalism, integrity and accountability", but he lacked the courage and authority to impose those qualities on his party and lacked the judgement to choose policy priorities in keeping with the values he espoused. He shrank to the occasion.

Starmer comes across as the more substantial figure by default. But the terms on which he feels compelled to campaign require complicity in fictions that can't be sustained for long in government. It is hard to know for sure whether another opposition leader could have broken free from those constraints. The back catalogue of Labour defeats suggests not.

But if he becomes prime minister, as polls indicate is likely, there will be an opportunity to rewrite the script from a position of power. And he will have little choice. There is no way to manage the challenges Labour would face in office without confronting the public with hard truths about the true extent of the predicament. Regime change provides a rare opportunity for that kind of reckoning.

This election campaign will feel in many respects like a sequel, another iteration of the hackneyed set pieces and predictable storylines that are so wearily familiar. But it also contains the tantalising possibility that we are nearing the end of the season—that the show simply cannot go on; that the longest-running political pantomime will close; that on the 4th of July, the curtain will fall.

Rafael Behr *is a political columnist for the Guardian*

POLITICS

OUR ELECTION PANEL

WHAT WE AREN'T TALKING ABOUT

In the run-up to polling day, Prospect has invited political writers and experts to an election group chat. We will ask them one question each weekday. Here's their first: are we missing something?

Matthew d'Ancona

The official non-subject of the campaign is, of course, Brexit. But the more significant evasion will concern the colossal economic growth that is required to fund the public services of the 2020s and beyond—not the public services of a generation ago, but of today.

It is a matter of pragmatic reality (rather than an ideological claim) that the state is going to have to do much more in the years ahead. Any meaningful strategy to deal with climate change alone will require huge investment. So will pandemic resilience. And that's before we get to the NHS and social care, and how they are to be funded to support an ageing population—not to mention the savage inequalities that mean (for instance) that 28 per cent of young mothers are missing meals every day.

You will hear many banalities about a "skills revolution", "global Britain", mysteriously enhanced productivity, economic stability spurring bountiful investment, and—when the parties get desperate—cutting waste in the public sector.

It will almost all be meaningless. Our prospective prime ministers ought to explain how exactly they will generate the growth to pay for the bills that are coming their way. And—as far as humanly possible—they will avoid the issue.

Matthew d'Ancona *is editor-at-large at the New European and former editor of the Spectator*

Tim Bale

We're only in the early days of this campaign, so we can't be certain what the parties will and won't talk about. Still, we can make guesses about the subjects they'd rather steer clear of, even if *Prospect* and other outlets will be doing their best to ensure they can't ignore them.

The biggest elephant in the room, as others have pointed out—including veteran Tory Michael Heseltine—is Brexit. Labour doesn't want to touch it for fear of alienating "red wall" voters, while the Conservatives are well aware that Britain's departure from the EU has so far given them little, if anything, to crow about. In fact, reminding voters of Brexit risks, on the one hand, encouraging deeply disappointed Leavers to plump for Reform, and, on the other, making Remainers who held their noses and voted Tory in 2019 switch to the Liberal Democrats this time round.

The parties can't forget about education but, as per, they'll focus on mainstream primary and secondary schools. Don't expect to hear much about post-16 provision (often delivered by colleges that also cater to older learners wanting to upskill) and special schools, even though both deserve far more attention—and far more funding. University finances are also a mess, but neither party looks set to offer a realistic solution (see Glen O'Hara, p50).

The same goes, one suspects, when it comes to the increasingly pressing need to upgrade the UK's electricity grid to provide the power needed, where it's needed, to get to net zero.

And finally, there are the two Ps: prisons and poverty. Sure, they'll get passing mentions; but realistic pledges of funding? Forget it. Far too expensive—and neither Britain's 90,000 prisoners, nor enough of its 14m poor, will be voting on 4th July.

Tim Bale *is a politics professor at Queen Mary, University of London*

Nadine Batchelor-Hunt

What parties should be talking about, while arguably less eye-catching than national service or Ed Davey falling repeatedly into Lake Windermere, is what public sector budgets are going to look like after the 2024 to 2025 spending period.

Both Labour and the Conservatives are making spending pledges, but neither is truly acknowledging how difficult it will be for unprotected departmental budgets to meet current levels of need. As economists have been shouting from the rooftops, the planned 1 per cent nominal increase in public sector budgets after 2024-25 is leaving unprotected departments—including the Ministry of Justice—facing 20 per cent spending cuts. After a decade of austerity, and amid reports that the government is urging the police to arrest fewer people because the system simply can't cope, these cuts seem detatched from the reality of delivering services.

Both Jeremy Hunt and Rachel Reeves have pledged to ensure debt falls as a percentage of GDP. Economists have said that the cuts necessary to support both parties' spending plans would keep that debt commitment—but would resemble the austerity era. Except, this time, there is nothing substantial left to cut down. But if Labour and the Tories acknowledge this obvious reality (that economists from the Institute for Fiscal Studies [IFS] to the Institute for Public Policy Research have been warning about) they have to explain where the money is going to come from. And given neither major party wants to raise taxes, and instead both (in varying degrees) are signalling they want to cut them, it would point to borrowing. But, of course, neither party wants to admit they'll borrow more, either. It increasingly feels like there's a conspiracy of silence about departmental spending. Neither party truly wants to examine the issue—the numbers are downright scary.

Nadine Batchelor-Hunt *is a broadcaster, actor and political reporter at PoliticsHome*

Philip Collins

There isn't a lot of policy in this empty election campaign. The Conservatives have little to say and Labour has no great incentive to be more forthcoming. So, in a sense, you could have chosen any area of policy and identified it as the most neglected. But, in the fullness of time, the conspicuous absentee from the campaign will be foreign policy, as it so often is.

Rishi Sunak opened the campaign with a speech in which he described a dangerous world, namechecking Ukraine, Russia and China. There isn't, though, any great cleavage over foreign policy. The defence of Ukraine, the continuation of the nuclear deterrent, the commitment to increasing the percentage of national income on defence—these are all questions on which the Tories and Labour have converged. The Labour party is no longer what it was under Jeremy Corbyn.

Yet foreign policy is the right answer all the same. It is almost inevitable that Keir Starmer will be defined by events beyond the borders of the United Kingdom, as prime ministers so often are. Tony Blair is Afghanistan, Iraq and Ireland. David Cameron is Libya and Brexit. Boris Johnson is Ukraine. Sunak will take time off from campaigning to attend the G7 in Italy from 13th to 15th June. Five days after the election, there is a Nato summit in Washington DC. The day after the state opening of parliament on 17th July, a meeting of the European Political Community is scheduled for Blenheim Palace.

The Tories are aware of the fact that they really did rather mess it all up

In 1964, on the day that Harold Wilson came to power, Nikita Khruschev was deposed as leader of the Soviet Union and China tested its first atomic bomb. Starmer's accession might not be as dramatic as that, but the attempted assassination of the Slovakian prime minister and the death of the Iranian president, Chinese aggression around Taiwan, let alone the conflict in Gaza, show that foreign policy will soon preoccupy the new prime minister.

Philip Collins *is a former Number 10 speechwriter, founder of the Draft and columnist at the Evening Standard*

Marie Le Conte

What won't be mentioned over the next six weeks, even though it ought to be? That's an easy question—it begins with a B and it hides in plain sight, lurking out of the corner of your eye like a *Doctor Who* villain.

Britain finally left the EU in early 2020, then it fell headfirst into a global pandemic, meaning there was little time to think about what had just happened and what should be happening next.

Brexit fundamentally reshaped the country's foreign policy and, if you look hard enough, probably impacted most domestic policy in one way or another. Still, neither party is likely to talk about it at length during the election campaign.

The Conservatives are aware of the fact that they really did rather mess it all up, and the Labour party has no great desire to alienate the voters it's worked so hard to get back. It is a shame; the referendum is likely to be remembered as one of the most important political moments of the 21st century, but it disappeared from view as soon as its outcome was decided.

On a similar note, the Covid-19 years changed us and our societies in a million and one ways, but there was a collective decision at the end of the last lockdown to sweep it all under the carpet.

From kids failing to catch up at school and chronic illnesses to working and socialising patterns, the pandemic's effects on our lives can still be felt everywhere. Politicians should acknowledge this, as the only way to truthfully talk about the future is to be honest about

what happened in the recent past, even if it is uncomfortable for all involved.

Marie Le Conte *is a freelance journalist and author*

Zoë Grünewald

While the NHS consistently tops voter priorities, there is a nationwide cognitive dissonance regarding social care. Doctors and nurses are lauded, but carers are often paid minimum wage and considered unskilled. Political focus turns to reducing waiting times and retaining doctors, while local authorities are blamed for wider failures in the care system.

In March, MPs reported that the government had brought adult social care in England "to its knees" through years of under-funding and a "woefully insufficient" strategy to fill thousands of staff vacancies. Funding and reforming the UK's social care system has challenged multiple governments. Both Labour and the Conservatives have criticised each other's plans to fund the system. Labour's 2009 national care service, funded by a compulsory levy, was derailed by Tory claims of a "death tax". Labour then criticised Theresa May's 2017 proposal to assess the elderly's finances, including property, to determine care payments. Boris Johnson's promised "oven-ready plan" never materialised, and Rishi Sunak has largely ignored the issue. Now, none of the major parties are leading with a comprehensive plan to transform the system.

The truth is that without social care reform, the NHS will struggle to recover. Up to one in three beds at busy hospitals are occupied by medically fit patients with nowhere to go, clogging up A&E and increasing waiting times. The elderly are also forced into acute care settings as their conditions worsen without sufficient community support.

Reforming social care is expensive and ideologically polarising. Forcing people to pay for their care would divert funds intended for their children, a non-starter for conservative-minded families. Raising taxes to fund health and social care is equally controversial, risking generational conflict and a continuous rising tax burden as the population ages, birth-rates fall, and legal migration declines.

An ageing population with complex needs and the cost-of-living crisis exacerbate the problem, reducing the capacity of younger generations to care for their parents. Politically, the issue is a poisoned chalice—ignoring it or attempting to fix it both come with significant risks. But without addressing social care, no party's plan for the NHS can be taken seriously.

Zoë Grünewald *is a political journalist and Westminster editor at the Lead*

Peter Hitchens

The thing nobody talks about is how this country can live within its means, and what kind of country we wish it to be. Almost every problem we face is the result of delusions about how rich and advanced we are, plus a complete lack of interest in moral and social questions.

The NHS is not the envy of the world, as repeated inquiries have shown. It responds to its problems by withdrawing from things it cannot do—it simply refuses to bother with dentistry or the care of the old, and general practice is vanishing fast. We thunder like a great power while our armed forces shrink, break down and decay. Every major public account is in deficit, while private debt is beyond control. Our government machine, once smooth and efficient, is a jalopy. Thanks to "academies", nobody now has much idea what is even happening in the schools, as academisation has killed off accountability, but it is not good. University expansion has clearly been an educational disaster.

We appear to have a bipartisan immigration policy aimed at greatly increasing the population. But nobody will admit to this, and the social implications of it are never addressed. Our criminal justice system is so overwhelmed that we cope with it by ignoring crime in the hope that it will go away. We address the squalor of the prisons by allowing increasing numbers of dangerous criminals to wander the streets. The police force appears to have been abducted en masse, and is invisible both to the law-abiding and the law-breaking. We cannot provide adequate public transport outside London, and our answer to this is a plague of unlicensed electric motorbikes and a new ultra-high-speed train service, largely confined to a tunnel, between nowhere and nowhere. We are terrifyingly vulnerable to power cuts, as we rely so heavily on imported electricity and gas.

The one thing we seem to be good at is family breakdown and one of the few statistics in which we can show reliable growth is the number of abortions taking place each year. I see no sign of anyone even thinking about this.

Peter Hitchens *is an author, broadcaster and columnist for the Mail on Sunday*

The trackers of how well off ordinary people are all point to noon on the Doomsday clock

Peter Kellner

The easy bit is listing the important decisions that the new government will have to take, and which neither main party is discussing properly ahead of the election: how to reverse the damage that Brexit is doing to Britain's economy; a long-term plan for financing social care; restructuring the water industry so that it stops polluting our rivers and beaches; the need to raise taxes in order to end poverty, improve the NHS, repair our creaking infrastructure and fix our crumbling courts and prisons... and so on.

But is a general election the right time for the parties to air all these issues? When politicians are competing for our votes, is that when they should set out their big plans to tackle big problems?

The trouble is that, for this to work, other things have to happen. The parties need to be honest not only about themselves, but about their rivals. They should steer clear of slogans and cherry-picked statistics that inflate their own case and exaggerate the weakness of their opponents. Newspapers and all television stations should approach each election story with an open mind, a commitment to truth and a devotion to fairness. Social media should block lies.

Until that wonderful day arrives, parties must operate within a messy, destructive environment. They have no alternative but to use any method short of outright falsehoods to make their case, and to minimise the opportunity for their detractors—in politics, the media and elsewhere—to malign them.

As a result, I accept that, the moment the election was called, serious politics went on holiday. It will return on 5th July. The real test of our political leaders is not whether they are candid now, but whether, behind closed doors, they have worked out robust plans to tackle the problems they are currently evading. Have they? If not, that's the real scandal.

Peter Kellner *is former president of YouGov and a political analyst and commentator*

Matthew Lesh

Amid the farcical first weekend of the campaign, the page-two advert in the *Mail on Sunday* went largely unnoticed. But the full-page letter from Liz Kendall, Labour's shadow work and pensions secretary, could hardly be more significant for the nation's finances. It committed a future Labour government to supporting pensioners, including maintaining the triple lock.

This is an entirely sensible electoral strategy. Four in five elderly voters turn out at elections, compared to around half of those in their twenties. The Liberal Democrats have also committed to the triple lock, while the Conservatives have announced a so-called "quadruple lock". This would mean raising the income tax threshold just for the elderly, so their pensions are never taxed.

But this straightforward electoral calculus does not make the prospect of an ageing population any less worrying. The Office for Budget Responsibility estimates that it will cost an extra 11 per cent of GDP by 2072 to fund pensions, social care and healthcare for the over-65s. That amounts to £285bn in today's money, more than is raised by the combination of corporation tax, council tax and business rates.

At the same time, there will be significantly fewer people working compared to those in retirement. By 2072, there is expected to be 1.9 workers per pensioner, down from 3.3 today. So comes the toxic mix of a declining number of workers expected to pay higher taxes to support an increasing number of pensioners.

The parties should be talking about how we can ensure the needs of the elderly are met without placing undue tax burdens on younger workers. Ideally this would be achieved through a large amount of economic growth, making the pie big enough so we can afford our liabilities. It will also likely require better targeting of public spending towards the neediest, alongside the development of additional fees for the wealthy.

However, with the parties squarely focused on winning votes in the next five weeks, we are unlikely to see a difficult discussion about Britain's unsustainable welfare state.

Matthew Lesh *is the director of public policy and communications at the Institute of Economic Affairs*

Moya Lothian-McLean

Politicians aren't talking about money—not in an honest fashion. Of the two main contenders, the Conservatives are desperately trying to pretend they've returned the economy to an even keel, which might mean all the measures of "growth" centred around things such as speculative capital in the City are broadening out, but the trackers of how well off ordinary people like you or me are all point to noon on the Doomsday clock. Meanwhile, Labour is promising various improvements to the likes of the railways or the NHS, but isn't backing up these pledges with the sort of money that would be needed to really rebuild the UK's crumbling infrastructure. Both of these approaches are misleading to the general public. One is a lie of obscuration, the other is a lie of omission.

Both parties are bound by chains of their own making: the "fiscal rules" that treat the UK economy like a household budget. Time and time again, this approach has proved to further impoverish the country. But, at this stage, it doesn't look as though we're getting anything else.

Moya Lothian-McLean *is a contributing editor at Novara media and freelance writer*

Frances Ryan

One of the ironies of a general election campaign is that some of the biggest issues facing the country will barely get a mention. Few areas are going to show that more over the next six weeks than social care. The sector is crying out for reform and funding, but the memory of Theresa May's "dementia tax" disaster in 2017 will be a warning to Sunak and Starmer to treat it less as an urgent matter to fix and more a landmine to avoid.

That goes for wider local council funding too. Nearly one in 10 councils in England expect to go bankrupt in the next year. "A long-term funding solution for local government" isn't exactly sexy, but, outside the NHS and schools, these are the services that affect people most day to day: from playgrounds for their kids to regular bin collections. No one—particularly Starmer—will want to admit just how much cash is needed to get local councils back on track.

It may feel very 2010 retro but "austerity" is going to be the unspoken buzzword of the campaign. Both Labour and the Conservatives have effectively signed up to deep cuts in the next parliament. Yet it's unlikely either leader will admit to that. In fact, we're in the bizarre situation where the two major parties will spend the campaign pledging to improve public services whilst simultaneously promising not to hike taxes (or even claiming they can reduce them).

As Paul Johnson of the IFS put it last week: "It would be nice to hear from both parties where [austerity is] going to fall, or we're going to see some tax rises to avoid the cuts." It would be nice—but don't hold your breath.

Frances Ryan *is a Guardian columnist and author*

Keep reading online

Follow the campaigns with daily election analysis from our panel of writers by scanning the QR code

Phil Tinline

Snap elections can expose a party's problems

The phrase "snap election" suggests a bold strategic play, as a prime minister stakes everything on their knack for reading the nation. Yet when Rishi Sunak stepped out of Number 10 to spring his announcement, he didn't look like a psephological Napoleon. More a tetchy, middle-management King Lear, raging in the rain at an ungrateful country. The main thing that appeared to have snapped was his patience.

This is the first election that a prime minister has called early, without having to ask for parliament's blessing, in almost two decades. In 2019, Boris Johnson's repeated attempts at doing so foundered on the Fixed-term Parliaments Act from 2011, and a "snap" election was only called with the approval of other parties. Both instances of this gambit are unusual. Normally, the decision is a lonely but plausible gamble. Past premiers have used it to try to fatten a thin majority, to win backing for a new policy turn, or—if they have taken over mid-parliament—to win a "personal" mandate.

In theory, Sunak could have called a much snappier snap election in late 2022, as soon as he became prime minister. But as he took office only because of the Truss disaster, this was not a viable option. And even if Conservative support had not been tanking, the party was haunted by the memory of 2017. Like Sunak, Theresa May had become prime minister unopposed. Around 19 per cent ahead in the polls, she surprised the nation with a snap election—subject, under the 2011 act, to Labour accepting. Which it did. May's poll lead promptly evaporated and, with it, her majority.

This astonishing blunder reveals a lesson about snap elections: success depends not just on timing but on what the move lays bare about your party. The bravado of May's decision to go early was undermined by indecision over the objective. One of her influential chiefs of staff, Nick Timothy, saw the election as a way to win a mandate for a radically different programme, and drafted the manifesto accordingly. But Lynton Crosby, the party's lead strategist, insisted on promising continuity. In which case, why hold the election? The party has never really closed the divide that May's decision exposed: one reason for its predicament today.

In the right circumstances, asking the electorate for a fresh personal mandate can work. In 1955, Winston Churchill finally stepped down, and after years of waiting, Anthony Eden took over. He immediately staked his inheritance on a snap election—and won, more than trebling the Conservatives' majority to 60. When Gordon Brown succeeded Tony Blair in 2007, he seemed poised to follow Eden's example, before backing off. His position never recovered, but not because he didn't win his own mandate, which is not a constitutional requirement. The problem was the same as May's: his operation looked indecisive.

The other common justification for a snap election is to bolster a weak majority. Again, the success of this depends in part on what it reveals. In 1950, Clement Attlee had seen Labour's historic 1945 majority cut to almost nothing. Eighteen months later, he led his weary ministers back before the public, and fell from power altogether. But, in 1964, a dynamic Harold Wilson won power with a majority of three—and ran again after 18 months in Downing Street and bagged a landslide.

In the right circumstances, asking the electorate for a fresh personal mandate can work

Yet the happy-go-lucky 1950s and 1960s have less to tell us about today than the dilemmas posed by the crises of the 1970s. In the wake of the 1973 oil shock, faced with a second miners' strike inside two years, Edward Heath came under enormous pressure from his party to call a snap election for 7th February, to secure a mandate to confront the strikers. Heath hesitated, finally calling the election for a few weeks later than advised—and, very narrowly, lost. More than any other, that February 1974 election was a snapshot of a politics stuck between invidious options. For a time, Labour seemed to have replaced picket line confrontation with its "social contract" with the unions. By autumn 1978, this last-ditch fix was collapsing, too, with the first stirrings of the Winter of Discontent.

And that gathering crisis produced the moment which Sunak's snap election calls most strongly to mind. That September, prime minister James Callaghan went to address the Trades Union Congress, and was widely expected to call an early election—but didn't. After months of strikes, his government finally fell to a vote of no confidence. Now many Conservatives are just as unhappy with Sunak's decision to run as Labour people were in 1978 with Callaghan's decision not to.

But as Callaghan himself remarked as defeat approached: "There are times, perhaps once every 30 years, when there is a sea-change in politics. It then does not matter what you say or what you do. There is a shift in what the public wants..." Today, Sunak is discovering that it does not matter how clever he is, how hard he works or what decisions he takes—including the date of the election. No wonder he looked so miserable, out there on his own in the storm. ◆

independent thinking from polity

HAMAS

The Quest for Power

Beverley Milton-Edwards, Stephen Farrell

This book brings the story of Hamas up to the present and will be essential reading for anyone who wants to understand the Middle East today.

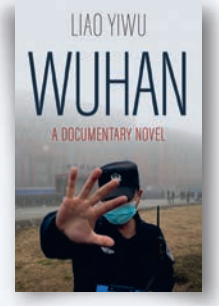
PB: 978-1-5095-6493-4 / £17.99 / June 2024

Wuhan

A Documentary Novel

Liao Yiwu

Translated by Michael M. Day

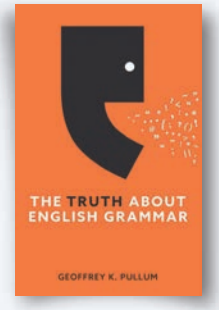


In this startlingly topical documentary novel, Liao Yiwu takes us into the heart of the crisis that unfolded in Wuhan and unpicks the secrecy and cover-up that surrounded the outbreak of the public health emergency that ravaged the world

HB: 978-1-5095-6299-2 / £25.00 / May 2024

The Truth About English Grammar

Geoffrey K. Pullum



Illuminating, witty, and incisive, *The Truth About English Grammar* is a vital book for all who love writing, reading, and thinking about English.

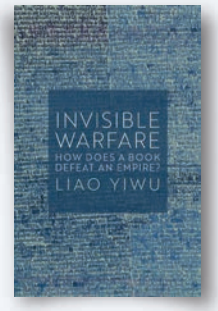
HB: 978-1-5095-6054-7 / £20.00 / June 2024

Invisible Warfare

How Does a Book Defeat an Empire?

Liao Yiwu

Translated by Michael M. Day



This small book is a poignant reminder of the human cost of authoritarianism and of the power of the written word to bear witness to evil.

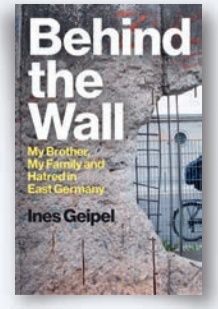
HB: 978-1-5095-6294-7 / £12.99 / May 2024

Behind the Wall

My Brother, My Family and Hatred in East Germany

Ines Geipel

Translated by Nick Somers



This powerful memoir, grippingly told, will appeal to anyone interested in the history of modern Germany, in the rise of far-right extremism and xenophobia and in the historical forces that shape the present.

HB: 978-1-5095-5997-8 / £20.00 / May 2024

Learn more about these and other titles at **politybooks.com**

@politybooks

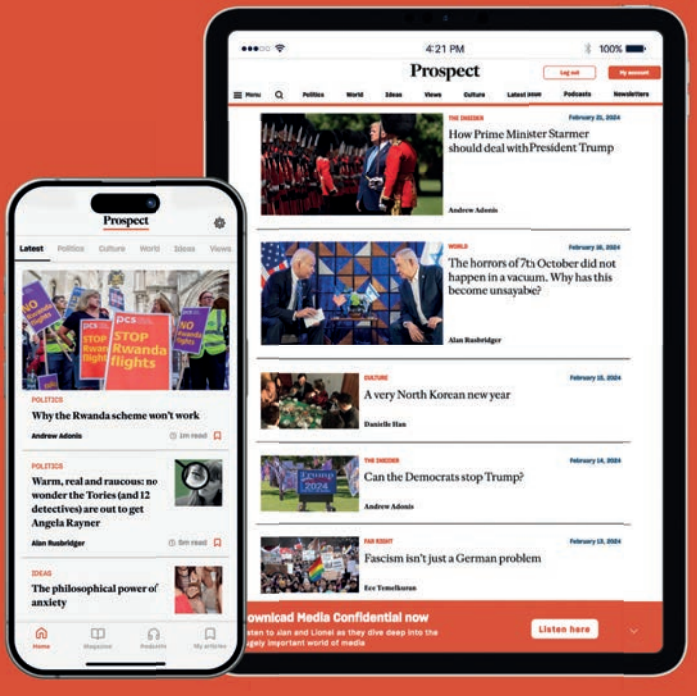
UNLOCK UNLIMITED DIGITAL ACCESS TODAY

Enjoy one-month's free trial to *Prospect* and get full access to the big ideas that shape society.

Digital subscribers enjoy instant unlimited access to the *Prospect* website, the app, podcasts and all our newsletters, including a weekly round-up, a cultural digest, an insider's view from Westminster and a look at how we create our cover image.

Start your free digital trial now!
Scan the QR code or visit
subscribe.prospectmagazine.co.uk/1mpage

Prospect



Letters

Spying danger

The methods used by certain newspapers to retrieve the voicemail messages of the famous ("The spy papers", June) now seem laughably simple in an age when mercenary spyware is used by foreign powers to surveille their exiled dissidents. Spyware allows attackers to view everything, including messages on encrypted apps, as well as to track locations, collect passwords and harvest information.

Nor do the most advanced attacks have to rely on the victim clicking on a phishing email, as happened in the Russian attack on the Democratic National Committee in the run-up to the 2016 presidential election. Now all that needs to happen is that the victim receives a message with a malicious attachment that does not even have to be clicked.

Nick Davies has exposed the use of criminal means to spy on the heart of democracy. We should recognise that this massive pollution of our domestic information space came from within our society. It will be bad enough, as major elections approach, to face the likelihood of hostile states compromising our information space with disinformation and AI deepfakes. We do not need to add to that misuse from within our own society.

The phone-hacking scandal is a tale not only about the past behaviour of our press, but a warning about the misuse of power.
David Omand, *former director of GCHQ*

Vacuum of accountability

David Allen Green writes that public inquiries are now used to get to the bottom of serious state failures because parliamentary mechanisms for accountability are failing. They have repeatedly struggled to achieve the honesty, insight and frankness of exchange that might uncover wrongdoing and failure when there is still a chance to address it.

In some ways, it is worse even than he describes. It is not just that information *could* have come to light earlier: it often did but was ignored. As we have seen in the report from the infected blood inquiry, politicians, public servants and others were well aware of what had happened but did little to alleviate the suffering of victims and their families, resisting change, accountability and justice for decades. This pattern is repeated again and again: those with power know that chronic failure is taking place but lack the resolve to address it. In May, we saw the fourth report into shocking, systematic failures in maternity care in a decade. We know this is happening, but seem incapable of acting to change it.

Though public inquiries have proved more effective at uncovering truth—with their powers of compulsion to force testimony and the release of information that would otherwise be hidden—they have found it hard to get the state to act in response to their findings. Inquiry reports into healthcare failures are filled with similar recommendations, decades apart. Findings from the Lakanal House fire investigation will likely be repeated in the final report of the Grenfell Tower inquiry. Accountability might abhor a vacuum—but even public inquiries struggle to force those with power to enact real change.
Emma Norris, *Institute for Government*

Imperfect protest

There is no hypocrisy in the position Alan Rusbridger describes ("Campus protestors are being silenced—where are the 'free speech' defenders now?", *Prospect* online, May). Campus free speech issues prior to this have almost always been about a group wanting to invite a speaker (usually from the conservative/right-wing end of the spectrum) to speak in an auditorium, and the speaker being threatened or prevented from speaking by leftist activists. No one is preventing the pro-Palestine side from inviting speakers to campus to address the community in an auditorium. What is objectionable is the setting up of illegal encampments on the campus grounds.
WFT, *via the website*

Good on the students for protesting against a hideous campaign of violence. But the selectivity is disturbing. US arms are key to the Saudi air campaign in Yemen that has killed 15,000 civilians.

The civil war there has claimed nearly 400,000 lives. Where are the student protests if they care so much about oppression and human life? Do lives matter more when people who are Jewish do the killing?
Fairly Accurate, *via the website*

Put one's house in order

The trouble with most plans for reforming the House of Lords is not only that they risk losing the merits Bill Keller finds in the present system ("A house of ill repute", April), but that they are next to impossible to implement. To set up new processes of election/selection to an entirely new body would be an enormous legislative task requiring far more parliamentary time than any government will sacrifice.

Yet it is possible, with relatively little legislative or logistical effort, to make the Lords (effectively) smaller, (indirectly) elective and (reasonably) secure against

Letters

government cronyism, while retaining all the qualities Keller wants to preserve.

Within the existing upper house, a chamber of 400 should be established to which all powers of the Lords should be transferred. After a general election, three quarters of the seats in this chamber should be assigned to political parties in the proportion in which they are represented in the Commons—the remainder being assigned to crossbenchers. Some seats might be reserved for elected mayors, so ensuring representation of the country's regions. Otherwise, individuals would be elected from the relevant caucus in the entire upper house (rather as the seats for hereditaries are currently filled).

Hereditaries could stand in such elections but would not have a vote. Dubious prime ministerial appointees would be unlikely to make it through such a competition. Lords not chosen for seats could still offer expertise as non-voting members of committees—and a separate, similar, but much smaller Chamber of Lords Spiritual could deal with church matters.

Governments would thus normally be able to get their business through the Lords, but the crossbenchers would ensure assent was not automatic. The risk that an elected upper house might claim constitutional parity with the Commons would be obviated, while the charge that the House is undemocratic would lose its force. And a single bill regulating procedures in "the Other Place" could do it all.
Nicholas Boyle, *University of Cambridge*

A qualified hope

My heart goes out to Alice Garnett and her fears over global warming ("OK doomer", May). I share them and I'm a baby boomer. For any gen Zer who cares to look, future prospects must be truly terrifying. Yes, there are many so-called "solutions", though only the high-tech ones seem to get publicity in the profit-motivated, tech-oriented economic and political spheres.

The truth is that technology alone will not rescue a liveable planet. We therefore need to look with determined realism at the future—a future that is already upon those who have suffered major flooding, drought, storms, wildfire and harvest failure—and recognise two things. One is that, in the rich world, we simply have to live and organise priorities quite differently, not just individually but collectively. The other is that we need to plan for how we can get the most out of life under the very difficult circumstances that are on their way. There are, in fact, many individuals, groups and networks engaged in such work, and the more people who join them the more power they will have.

One of these networks is the Deep Adaptation Forum, which connects people who are experiencing enormous fear and grief around climate change and ecological decline to a network of mutual support, enabling them to adapt emotionally to the truth they recognise. The stated purpose of the forum, of "embodying and enabling loving responses to our predicament", is unconventional and refreshing.

There are many such forward-thinking groups. They don't offer "solutions" in the conventional sense, but they do offer realism, collaboration, imagination and support, which together constitute the form of hope that is appropriate to the situation in which we find ourselves.
Teresa Belton, *Norwich*

Bonds of faith

Andrew Brown's reference to the Old Catholic Churches ("Candid Calvin", May) is misleading. "Old Catholic" is a term that includes a number of national churches that have at various times separated from Rome, and is far wider than the Union of Scranton, with which the Nordic Catholic Church allies itself.

The term "Old Catholic" primarily refers to the Union of Utrecht, which brought together the Old Catholic Churches of the Netherlands, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, the Czech Republic and Poland. These are Churches with which the CoE and Anglican Communion have been in full communion since the Bonn agreement of 1931, and with whom Anglicans would discern a shared sacramental and pastoral practice.

Brown's reference does not do justice to the rich intellectual, scholarly and liturgical tradition of Old Catholicism, and neither is it the case that Old Catholics have a strong sense of their own infallibility: indeed, such arrogance would be entirely alien to their way of life and thought. The word "Old" notwithstanding, they have a contemporary and inclusive engagement with social issues; same-sex marriage has recently been endorsed and implemented by the Old Catholic Church in Switzerland, for example. Women and men are ordained as priests and as bishops.

I write on behalf of the Society of St Willibrord in Britain and Ireland, which, under the patronage of one of the first English missionaries to the Germanic peoples, has existed for over a century and continues its work of affirming and strengthening the cordial relationship between the Anglican Communion and the Old Catholic Churches.
Bishop Peter Eagles, *Norfolk*

Redemption story

The model for genuine apology and repentance in politics is surely John Profumo ("In the age of apology, does forgiveness mean anything?", *Prospect* online, April). He resigned from the government and the Commons in total disgrace in 1963 after attempting to deny his affair with Christine Keeler, but then disappeared completely from public life and devoted himself to working for a charity in the east end of London.
Stephen Wright, *via the website*

Down to a science

I am a PhD student in astronomy and I am amazed (in a good way!) at how perceptive and accurate Marcus Chown's article is ("The anomaly hunters", May). Coverage of science in the popular press is dire, to say the least, so it has been great to read an article by someone who really knows what they are talking about. More, please!
Ian Kemp, *via the website*

Crumbling courts

I was a civil litigation solicitor for nearly 40 years. The county court provided

access to civil justice for ordinary citizens and small businesses and was the mainstay of much of my caseload. I am shocked by the current state of the system. As David Allen Green says ("The quiet collapse of the county court system", *Prospect* online, April), if there is no access to justice or remedy at this level then ordinary people will lose faith and possibly the compensation they deserve, even their business.

If wrongdoers know they will not face pursuit to judgment and enforcement, if debtors know they will not be sanctioned if they do not pay up, the fabric of civil society will begin to crumble. Some will resort to criminal enforcers rather than the limbo of a court case...

The problem now is that every aspect of the state has been ignored, allowed to decay, left underfunded and understaffed. Each area is crying out for substantial investment... Both the criminal and the civil justice systems are failing the public. Another serious crisis in the making.
Nigel Day, *via the website*

Old school

Many of us will have read your review of Charles Spencer's book with surprise ("You'll be a man, my son", June). I attended both prep and public schools in the 1950s and 1960s—antediluvian times to many of your readers. Yet so little from the review was familiar. I remember no paedophiles or sadists among the teaching staff. Beatings were fair and relatively rare—if we got it, we were due it. I was a particularly badly behaved child but can recall only one such occasion in nine years, and that was administered by a prefect, not one of the staff.

Yes, there were oddballs, and one prep school tutor who had the hots for the school handyman, but he was an excellent and entertaining English teacher and we loved him. More of a problem was the quality of the teaching, especially at public school, where only our physics master (an especial oddball) stood out. He was dedicated to his charges and frankly inspirational. Otherwise, all was drabness.

For sure, I was horribly homesick on my first night, but there were no tears and we all adapted quickly. Human beings are social creatures and by being enthusiastic at sports (but never terribly good) I avoided bullying, and so did almost all boys. Were we exceptional, or lucky?
John Dyer, *Poole*

Shit show

Sarah Ogilvie makes an interesting and pertinent comment ("The joy of lex", June) about the problem with the UK's water services, but she does seem to be voting for the use of the word "poo" when there are other, "more grown-up" words available.

What she means, and what the problem actually comes down to, is shit. I use the word advisedly. The weaker substitute only diminishes the shocking truth of what is going on, and infantilises any sensibly angry discussion about the matter.

We have in living memory had many usable words—faeces, stool—to serve the same purpose. But the fact is that our water is not safe. It is, literally, full of shit, only matched by the shit flowing out of the mouths of the CEOs of the various water companies up and down the country. Any proper democracy would hold those responsible to account by taking action, rather than continuing to hold "dialogue" with these utilities, diminishing the seriousness of their behaviour by the use of cutesy language.

As long as "poo" remains in the lexicon of the problem, everyone will continue to be able to talk around that problem and no one will be happy. Or safe.
Gilbert O'Brien, *St Leonards-on-Sea*

Write to us...

Email ***letters@prospectmagazine.co.uk****. Letters require a full name and address and may be edited*

...or join the debate online

Comments are open on the Prospect website. Visit ***prospectmagazine.co.uk*** *to continue the conversation*

IN FACT

In the UK, one in 200 households live in temporary accommodation, the highest figure by far among developed countries.
Financial Times, 17th May 2024

All the eels in Europe were born in the Sargasso Sea, in the Bermuda Triangle.
Atlas Obscura, 10th May 2024

Of the $68bn in military and related assistance Congress has so far approved for Ukraine, 90 per cent is being spent in the US.
Washington Post, 18th April 2024

60 per cent of Britons think that life was better in the 2000s than it is now, the highest proportion for any decade from the 1900s on.
YouGov, 12th April 2024

If current rates continue, by 2050 about half of the global population will need corrective lenses for short-sightedness.
Conversation, 24th April 2024

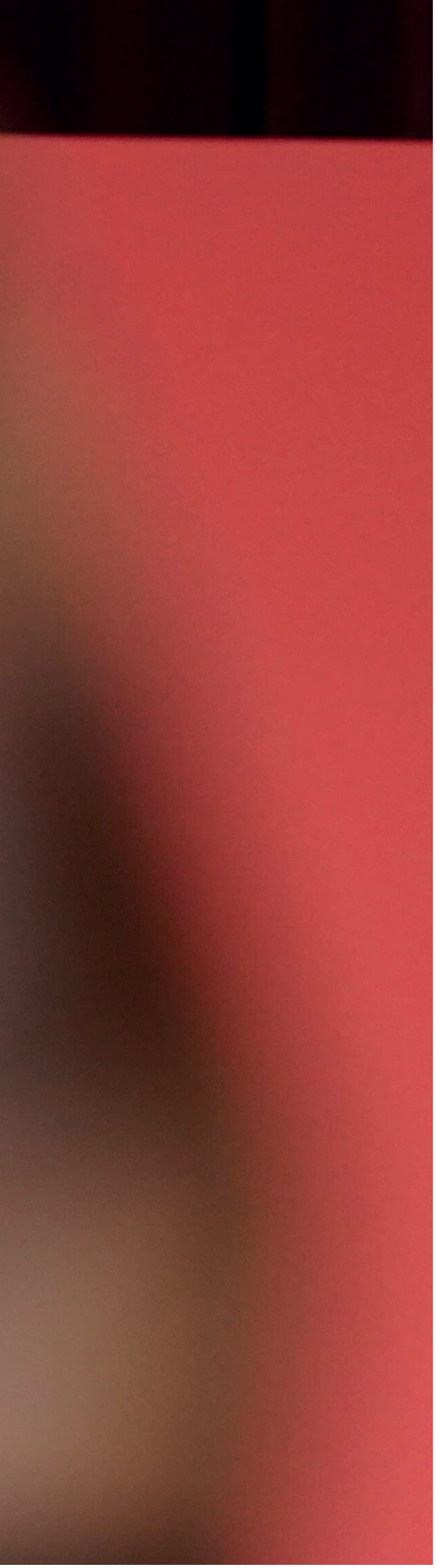
Sheffield United has broken the record for the most goals conceded in a Premier League season, letting in 104 league goals in 2023–24.
Analyst, 19th May 2024

From 2000 to 2023, the amount of sexual content in films—judged by the 250 highest-grossing movies in the US each year—fell by nearly 40 per cent.
Economist, 1st May 2024

Since it opened in 1994, Japan's Kansai International Airport has lost no luggage.
Nikkei Asia, 29th April 2024

In 2023, natural disasters killed over 86,000 people worldwide. More than 70 per cent of those deaths were caused by earthquakes.
Sustainability by numbers, 25th April 2024

The chancellor is authorised to consume alcohol during the budget speech to the Commons; this last happened in 1995, when Ken Clarke drank from a glass of Scotch.
@PoliticsMoments, 27th April 2024



CHANGING OF THE GUARD

IS LABOUR READY?

No opposition party is truly prepared for government, but the most successful transitions are built on clarity of purpose. Does Keir Starmer's party know what it wants?

by
SAM FREEDMAN

On the morning of 12th May 2010, I was sitting in a café in parliament waiting nervously. The Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government had been formed the previous night and David Cameron was appointing the cabinet. I had been working in Cameron's policy team for the past year as an education specialist, but had no idea if I was going to have a job in government or not.

My best guess was that I would join the Number 10 policy unit. But unbeknownst to me, Cameron and his policy chief Oliver Letwin had decided to have a much diminished unit with just a handful of advisers.

Then, around 11am, I got a call from Dominic Cummings, who had been Michael Gove's chief adviser in opposition. "Dwarf, get to the education department, there's no one with Michael." Dwarf was his (mostly) affectionate nickname for me, based on my stature.

Gove had gone into Number 10 to be appointed, as expected, to the job of education secretary, but had been informed that this was conditional on sacking Cummings. Andy Coulson, Cameron's director of communications, had reasonably enough identified Dominic as a troublemaker. (Coulson was later sentenced to 18 months in prison for his role in the *News of the World* phone-hacking scandal. It takes one to know one.)

This meant Gove had no adviser, so I was dispatched to meet him. When I arrived at the department, I was greeted by someone who said they were my private secretary, which was curious as no one had offered me a job yet. They took me to an office and it turned out I was a senior policy adviser. I was never formally offered the job, but I started it anyway.

Such is the confusion in which governments are born—a process in which people like me play very minor parts. Unlike American presidents, who get nearly three months of transition time between winning election and taking office, the shift in the UK is immediate and jarring. When the next (almost certainly) Labour government takes office in just a few weeks' time, it will have to be ready for this.

In opposition there are a handful of your people in each policy area. Your primary focus every day is beating the government. You have no resources, but you're nimble and can react to news immediately. Your policy programme is high level and only needs to survive contact with journalists, not reality.

In government, you sit atop a vast machine. We had thousands of civil servants in education alone. Every day there are dozens of problems that need decisions, most of which never get any public exposure and many of which are deeply obscure. Within hours of starting my job, I was being asked my opinion on a highly technical question about the role of local authorities in child protection, which I had never thought about before in my life. The learning curve is a vertical line.

Your focus changes completely. Rather than having a single enemy—the other party—you are now fighting battles on multiple fronts, not just with the opposition and the media, but with your own colleagues in other departments whose interests have suddenly diverged from yours. Ministers and advisers spend vast amounts of their time bogged down in arguments over spending allocations or the timings of announcements with people who are supposedly on the same side.

Then there's the civil service. Contrary to the popular imagination, civil servants are not trying to block everything; indeed, most senior officials are desperate to ingratiate themselves. But faced with this huge bureaucratic machine, there is inevitably a time-sapping need to chase issues and to understand the preoccupations and procedures of your department. As in any large organisation, you only learn who's competent over time. There are a few "access" meetings between opposition teams and senior officials before an election, and these help, but they only give a small glimpse of what's to come. Labour has not had the chance to hold many.

Every prime minister realises, a few months into the job, that the levers they're pulling don't work as expected

It's an even harder transition for those going into Number 10, as they are supposed to be keeping track of what's going on across government and imposing strategic order on it. Every prime minister realises, a few months into the job, that the levers they're pulling don't work as expected (or, in Liz Truss's case, that they open a trapdoor marked "economic meltdown").

One of the great challenges of modern government is that attempting to exercise tight control as prime minister creates a cross-government bottleneck—this is the mistake Gordon Brown, Theresa May and Rishi Sunak all walked into. But equally, giving ministers too much leeway risks creating uncoordinated havoc. This is then blamed on the centre of government, given the presidential treatment now afforded to prime ministers who are assumed by the media and public to have total executive power. It didn't take long before Cameron decided that he did need a proper policy unit after all as, among other things, Andrew Lansley's health reforms careened out of control.

In early July it will, most probably, be Labour shadow ministers and advisers moving into the departmental offices and facing this transition. Can they tame the machine?

They will have very little time to do so, because of the array of policy problems that will hit them immediately. One big difference with the last two transitions is how much of a mess everything is in. In 1997, the incoming Labour government faced deteriorating public services but inherited an economy that had grown by 2.5 to 4 per cent every year for the previous four years. There was space to spend—initially cautiously, and then munificently.

In 2010 the economy was in a mess, and, even if George Osborne's austerity measures had been less drastic, cutbacks would have been necessary. But services were largely working well. NHS satisfaction was at an all-time high. Schools were improving. Child poverty had fallen. Rough sleeping was, if not quite a thing of the past, well down on historic levels. Numbers seeking asylum had dropped. There was space to make policy, and still a bit of financial fat in the system that could be repurposed for new ideas.

In 2010, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition faced an economic mess, but public services were largely working well. In 2024, almost every public-sector metric is pointing in the wrong direction

And in 2024? The economy has hardly grown in the last five years, and almost every public sector metric is pointing in the wrong direction. As in 1997, more investment is badly needed, but the fiscal space is tightly constrained. And taxes are already rising, even if they remain lower than the average for rich countries.

It's not just about money. There is also a deficit of ideas. In 1997 the "third way" was more than a slogan. A traditionally centre-left approach to public sector investment, particularly in the workforce, was combined with Thatcherite approaches to boosting productivity through the use of accountability targets and sanctions for failure, together with greater operational autonomy. There were big gains to be made from this approach. Just look at the press coverage of state schooling in the late 1990s—when education was a top three issue for voters—compared to the late 2000s, or rates of satisfaction with the NHS.

By 2010 there was still some mileage in such policies: the more successful reform programmes, such as in education and welfare (including, after a great deal of pain, the introduction of universal credit), were ones that most Blairites would have been happy to support. This seam, though, has now been exhausted. The benefits of this kind of approach have been realised and the weaknesses are now becoming ever more apparent.

The welfare system is a good example. We have had 30 years of successive governments creating more onerous conditions for benefits recipients and increasing sanctions on those who fail to meet them. This may have helped get more people into work initially, but is now having undoubtedly negative effects, creating ever deeper poverty traps and pushing people away from the labour market.

Or take the NHS. Blairite success was built on substantial investment combined with targets. It reduced waiting lists and A&E times very successfully, but it did little to shift resources from acute to preventative healthcare or build physical capacity, which has meant pressure has continued to build on the system. Successive governments have frequently talked about prevention but felt unable to let the target-based model go and embrace decentralisation.

Even if money could be found, there are policy culs-de-sac all over the place,

Starmer could be the first ex-senior civil servant to become prime minister since Harold Wilson. He and his chief of staff, Sue Gray, formerly of the cabinet office, understand what's coming better than their predecessors

and neither the government nor the Labour party, to date, have offered a convincing sense of having an alternative model for public services in mind.

So Labour, in managing its transition, faces three questions: how does it make the machinery of government work as well as possible; how does it find the money to do anything; and how does it deliver public service reform in a way that doesn't pursue ever diminishing—or even negative—returns.

Senior figures have given a lot of thought to the first of these challenges. Starmer will be the first ex-senior civil servant to become prime minister since Harold Wilson (his former role as director of public prosecutions was at permanent secretary level) and his chief of staff, Sue Gray, worked at the heart of the Cabinet Office for many years. They will have a better sense of what's coming than most of their predecessors.

Various Labour-associated thinktanks have been considering how to organise the centre of government more effectively, such that it can drive ahead on Labour's long-term "missions" (a phrase, it's fair to say, that has not caught the public imagination), rather than the usual day-to-day firefighting. The party is also likely to appoint a new head of the civil service—a move intended to boost morale and encourage many of the talented officials who have left since Brexit to return.

But it's not clear they're thinking radically enough. Over the past 14 years, Number 10 and the Cabinet Office have become progressively less effective, partly because of prime ministerial churn, while the Treasury is effectively all-powerful. It is chancellors, with their fiscal rules, who have determined government strategy—to the extent there has been one. Every analysis of the centre of government highlights this as a major problem. Will Starmer and Gray be able to balance a broader policy agenda with the Treasury's concerns?

Which goes to the second challenge. It is not feasible for Labour to stick to the current government's fantasy spending plans, which have been set purely to allow for pre-election tax cuts. The party has, though, committed to fiscal rules similar to the current government's, and to not increasing the major revenue raisers such as income tax or National

Insurance contributions. They have left themselves some wiggle room to squeeze out a small amount of additional borrowing and to increase second-tier taxes, but not much.

Maybe they'll get lucky and economic forecasts will improve: things do seem to be getting a little brighter. But they can just as easily deteriorate, given the huge range of potential global triggers, such as widening conflict in the Middle East or a trade war between the US and China. The Conservatives have left no buffer whatsoever.

Moreover, new ministers will have almost no time to assess the situation before having to make decisions. Labour will have to do a spending review this autumn to set departments' budgets. The first one will almost certainly be limited to covering a single year, because it needs to be done quickly. But it would still present the party with difficult choices. As things stand, there are no budgets for any department or public service, except defence, from April 2025 onwards. This creates paralysis.

A one-year spending review will allow a little space for a more comprehensive one the following year, but the available choices still look tricky to say the least. It would cost over £25bn by 2028/29 just to avoid the cuts pencilled in by the Conservatives while maintaining implied levels of NHS and defence spending. That would do nothing to deal with any of the problems that indisputably require more cash, like the lack of prison space, or huge maintenance backlogs for schools and hospitals. Nor would it allow for any measures to make the welfare system less brutal, such as ending the two child benefit limit, or for investment in growth-oriented policy like transport infrastructure or industrial strategy.

Unless Labour gets lucky with the economy (and that might happen—forecasts from the UK's fiscal watchdog, the Office for Budget Responsibility, swing around often) then it will be left with a simple choice: change the fiscal rules to allow more borrowing; increase one or more of the big taxes; or leave its backbenchers and their constituents in a state of fevered unhappiness. Many Labour candidates work in the public sector or for charities. They are simply not going to accept years more of the status quo on spending. While senior Labour figures are, of course, aware of all this, you get the sense they are seeing this as a post-election problem, and are just praying it will solve itself.

The refusal to engage with the financial reality has also made it hard to come up with an alternative approach to public service reform, because almost anything likely to help would require upfront investment. For instance, allowing disabled people to keep more of their benefits if they attempt to get back into work could see the overall welfare bill reduced over time, but only after a short-term increase.

Even policies that seem as if they shouldn't cost anything turn out to do so in practice. For example, we could make more efficient use of court space and judicial time to reduce the backlog of cases, but not unless we fund more prison spaces to cope with the higher number of convictions.

But there's an even bigger barrier: the tactical approach employed by Labour to win the election actively works against its ability to engage in serious reform subsequently.

Campaign chiefs have rightly identified competence as the Conservatives' main weakness. The summer of 2022, with Boris Johnson battling to stay in Downing Street amid multiple scandals, followed by the Truss calamity, severely damaged their reputation as a party fit to govern. This has been true for all kinds of voters—left, right, socially authoritarian and liberal, Leave or Remain.

This has allowed Labour to target its campaign rhetoric at the widest possible audience, focusing entirely on competence rather than ideology or the underlying validity of policy choices. Which has worked well in building a commanding poll lead, but has also boxed them in.

Government is unpredictable—you have some choice over priorities, but none over the crises you'll be dealing with

Criticising the Conservatives for increasing the tax burden, or pushing up the disability benefits bill, or not having tough enough sentencing policies, or for paying NHS managers too much, may appear clever right now. It is broadening Labour's appeal to voters who might have ideological concerns about the party. But the problem with turning Tory attack lines back against them is that it affirms the underlying principle. It is a move predicated on the assumption that their policies are just badly implemented, not wrongheaded.

There is little evidence that Labour is willing to take on any of the major policy shibboleths of the past 30 years—whether it's ever increasing sentences for an ever wider range of crimes; or increasingly aggressive welfare sanctions; or the imbalance between the taxation of income and wealth. Doing so would require persuading the public that achieving its desired outcomes might require a different approach from the one pursued for the past four decades.

This highlights, perhaps, the core paradox of politics over recent decades: that the more political parties have tried to pander to public opinion, the less popular they have all become. There seems to be little understanding that messages that poll well but lead to worse outcomes ultimately reduce public trust. Despite all the talk of "difficult" or "unpopular" choices, the unwillingness to risk a few days of negative headlines in return for a strategy that might work has become endemic.

It's possible, if unlikely, that post-election there will be a shift to worrying more about policy than communications. But even if this happens, the lack of planning pre-election, plus the current rhetoric, will make it harder to pivot. There will be a honeymoon period in which problems can continue to be blamed on Tory incompetence, but at some point Labour will have to commit either to the policy status quo or a new approach. And either choice, in every policy area, will risk fracturing its voter coalition.

None of this is to say the party offerings are identical. Labour would not continue with some of the madder schemes the Conservative right is plotting in order to, ineptly, tackle the threat from the Reform party to its right. Starmer will not be threatening to leave

the European Convention on Human Rights or scrap the Supreme Court. Both he and Rachel Reeves are institutionalists who see the danger in undermining the architecture of the state. Nor will Labour employ such aggressive rhetoric against various dispossessed groups.

In a couple of carefully chosen areas like planning and devolution, the party is offering some differentiation from the Tories, though in both cases the substance is less dramatic than the rhetoric. But it's hard to look at the state of the country and think that Labour's current policy package, plus more competence and energy, will be enough.

No opposition party is ever ready for government. Back in 2010 I'd argue our education team did as much as could have been done with the resources available: we had a clear list of things we wanted to do, we'd even drafted a bill. This was an unusual level of preparedness. Yet we were still overwhelmed by the reality of government; hit with an endless series of problems we had no way of knowing about or no opportunity to understand in advance.

Government is inherently unpredictable: you have some choice over priorities, but none over the particular set of crises and screwups you'll end up spending most of your time dealing with.

What oppositions can do is develop core principles that allow them to survive the storms of power. The only way for prime ministers to cope in our system is for those around them to be so clear about their beliefs that they can act on their behalf knowing it will be in line with expectations. The same applies to ministers trying to marshal vast departments and the officials working for them.

The tactical adeptness required in government flows from strategic clarity. In opposition, Labour has found that clarity in a focus on competence. But this will not translate into government—competence is a desired outcome, not a principle. If Labour is to be a successful government, Keir Starmer and his top team need to decide—and communicate—what they really believe. There's no amount of detailed planning that can compensate for that. ♦

Sam Freedman *is a former senior policy adviser at the Department for Education*

CHANGING OF THE GUARD

WATCH YOUR STEP

Keir Starmer says he has 'six first steps for change'—but like all the best laid plans, writes **Tom Clark**, *that could all come back to bite him*

Many in the Westminster village, journalists and politicians alike, love a winner—and that really is as far as their thinking goes. Now that Keir Starmer is 20 points ahead in the polls, some of the same people who prematurely wrote him off when he crashed and burned at the 2021 Hartlepool byelection are weirdly entranced by the workaday "six first steps for change" with which he prefigured his "stability is change" general election pitch.

It is a strangely numbered set of first steps to take en route to Starmer's five "national missions" (if Labour wins the election). But most Westminster-watchers are less concerned with how it all fits together than they were impressed with the fact that he'd etched his six steps on a pledge card. This was deemed to certify the alchemical transformation of the mundane (a border force reorganisation, some extra teachers, Asbo-tribute "respect orders") into magic. Why? Because a previous "winner", Tony Blair, also had a pledge card.

Fixate on winners, and you'll attribute disproportionate power to their campaigning. In reality, all politics is relative, and the main driver of relative standing is usually the government, not the opposition. For all of Blair's undoubted talents, the disintegration of John Major's administration explained far more of Labour's 179-seat majority than the five-point pledge card. And whatever the merits of today's 61-year-old Keir Starmer, they can't be so different to those already possessed by his 58-year-old self. It's not some shift inside the soul of Labour's leader that accounts for the extraordinary swing in his fortunes over the last three years. Nor is the biggest change any decision that he's made. Instead, the difference is found on the government bench. The Conservative party has gone from rolling out vaccines to rolling leadership crises.

Excessive faith in winners clouds understanding not only of how we got to where we are, but also about where we are headed. Boris Johnson was the all-conquering hero of a realigned political map in December 2019, but by summer 2022 he was a defenestrated zero. In retrospect, it is obvious that tensions in his electoral coalition, the incoherence of his programme and flaws in his character were bound to cause the unravelling. But few saw it coming—the scale of his victory blinded most commentators.

Labour's vast poll lead, and its impressive local election results, suggest that the party is now broad enough—or hazy enough—to mop up the full range of voters it needs to win. Inevitably, victory will be followed by a burst of press coverage hailing the virtues of being "a bit boring". But the mania for the dull won't last.

No matter how spectacular the polling day arithmetic proves to be, look closely and you can already spot hairline fractures in the Starmer coalition that could, in office, threaten the best-laid plans for steady governance. These splits could overwhelm any political dividend from the modest changes Labour is shooting for. To avoid a repeat of the misreading of Johnson's fortunes, let me follow Starmer's six steps with "six slips"—places where, within a couple of years, the next Labour government could trip up.

© ALAMY

1. Young, diverse Britain

Amid generally excellent local and devolved election results there were striking pockets of trouble for Labour. This was particularly so in the young and diverse inner cities, where analyst Dylan Difford reports that the party's vote share plunged by nearly 30 points from a notional December 2019 baseline.

There is evidence that ethnic minority voters, a large proportion of whom are Muslim, have been turned off the party by its hesitancy in wholeheartedly condemning Israel's bloody Gaza war. Defections over the issue saw the party lose control of some large councils, including my own in Kirklees. For the most part, though, the damage is hidden because Labour votes have recently piled so high in the cities that it can "afford" substantial losses.

Things could be very different in government. All the more so because, as the Greens' rise to being the largest party on Bristol City Council underlines, it's no longer safe to bank disgruntled anti-Tory votes. They can go elsewhere.

2. The grey vote

Where Blair talked up a "vision of a young country", ageing demographics leave Starmer courting an old one. His acceptance of Brexit, his penchant for Union Jacks, and now his campaign commitment to a 100-day "security sprint", in which Britain's spies and police review myriad threats, reflect a laser-like focus on the older patriotic types whom his strategists have identified as the "hero" voters for redrawing the political map.

There is an undoubted campaigning logic here—already by 2019, the median vote cast was by someone well over 50—but it is a logic that could rapidly unravel the government. The one politically "brave" plank in the Starmer platform, "bulldozing" through planning laws, could alienate many older homeowners the moment this abstract rhetoric is translated into (literal) concrete, obstructing cherished views. Westminster politics is paralysingly cautious about "tax bombshells" that have blown up in past elections, but strangely complacent about other potentially explosive subjects, simply because they haven't yet detonated on the national political stage.

Planning is one of these. Tremendous care is needed to get planning reform right: a London-dominated political class has less feel for the issue than those who regularly knock on doors in middle England. The dangers of the smallest missteps are redoubled because opportunistic Tories, localist Liberal Democrats and conservationist Greens will ensure that Nimbys of every ideological hue have somewhere to escape.

3. Working Britain

Labour's most straightforwardly progressive "offer" concerns employment rights. Though the party's New Deal for Working People was last year caveated with consultations and trimmed around the edges, a show-down with the unions recently ended with Labour recommitting to the core of its plan. For the million on zero-hours contracts, and perhaps another couple of million who work unreliable shifts or have other contractual insecurities, this is good news. The bulk of the workforce, however, who have secure jobs but squeezed pay, will not feel any early relief. This is especially true in the public sector, where austerity has left real wages lower than 15 years ago.

No matter how shrewdly Starmer manages expectations, the reality is that the single most important phalanx of current Labour loyalists are exhausted public servants hoping for a return to the better terms they enjoyed when their party was last in power. These days, more than half of trade unionists are public sector, too. If they're banking on a payrise that Rachel Reeves's fiscal rules preclude, expect not only industrial strife, but—given the unions' internal role within Labour—political trouble too.

4. Disillusioned dreamers

A retreat from Jeremy Corbyn's radicalism towards centre-ground respectability was the obvious, and in some ways the right, lesson to draw from 2019. But the impressive 40 per cent notched up under this uniquely unsuitable frontman in 2017 should not be forgotten. Even 2019's eventual "worst defeat since the 1930s" ranks as such only because of the vagaries of our electoral system. Labour attracted a higher vote-share in 2019 than either 2010 or 2015. Indeed, across his two elections, Corbyn's Labour averaged 36 per cent of the vote, against the average 35 per cent it has managed across all 13 general elections of the last half-century.

A substantial chunk of the population, if rarely a winning one, is drawn to audacious promises of transformation. After publicly diluting his own climate plans, and having hugged the Sunak government so close on Israel that it's tough to spot the difference between them, Starmer's standing on university campuses and at music festivals is already akin to that of a pro-Vietnam War centrist in the 1960s (see Tariq Ali, p41). And if idealist apathy gives way to idealist animosity in power, Labour will discover that there are an awful lot more people on campuses and at festivals today than there ever were in the 1960s.

5. Disappearing activists

Disgruntled unions and disillusioned idealists have already thinned the ranks of the Labour activists responsible for on-the-ground campaigns. In a worrying contrast with the mid-1990s, when membership climbed in the run-up to victory, the party has recently lost around 165,000 members, a third of the total. Labour's reigning clique dismisses the deserters as "Trots", but the numbers are too big to make that plausible: there's never more than a few thousand who get involved in fringe revolutionary factions. Parties need a loyal base of foot-soldiers when the going gets rough. It's hard to imagine that activist army being rebuilt while Labour remains on the wrong side of the archbishop of Canterbury on capped children's benefits, and the wrong side of the public on uncapped bankers' bonuses.

6. Devolved Britain

The burgeoning army of regional mayors could create huge headaches for Starmer. Each has a very personal mandate. The likes of Labour's Andy Burnham have retained huge majorities by making it clear they are not party placemen, but independent local champions. In the northeast, Jamie Driscoll notched up over a quarter of the vote as an independent running against London Labour's decision to block him. How much better would he have done running against a mid-term government rather than a resurgent opposition?

The script, played masterfully by the SNP for many years (until the weight of internal problems caused it to fluff its lines) is to ignore the local opposition and run against an alien, metropolitan capital. Once the unpopular Tories are ousted from Westminster, some Scottish force or other could relearn the old trick—and thrive. As may many of the mayors elected this May, irrespective of their red rosettes. In time, regional rage against the Whitehall machine could rebound on local parliamentary candidates on the government side.

If the Tory response to defeat is more infighting and conspiracy, the force of revulsion against the party could be enough to hold together a broad Labour vote

As I have stressed, all politics is relative, so the exact damage done by these prospective fractures will to some extent turn on what happens on the opposition benches. If the Tory response to defeat is only more infighting, Trussian conspiracy theories, or wilder culture war rhetoric, the force of revulsion against the party could be enough to hold a broad Labour vote together for a while.

But the current campaign is, perhaps, especially ripe for concealing dangerous contradictions because it is one in which the country looks set to move to the left, while both main parties are almost exclusively focused on their right flank. Rishi Sunak's 11th-hour National Service scheme is all about stemming Conservative losses to Reform; Starmer's first big campaign interview was explicit about his pursuit of "Tory voters in particular". Even with the Conservatives still in power, however, Labour's progressive competitors have begun to put a material squeeze on the official opposition: the combined gains of Liberal Democrats, Greens and independents in the recent local elections easily exceeded those of Labour. Those advances took the Greens to more than 800 councillors, against just a few dozen in the 1990s. How high could their vote share go when it's Labour ministers saying "No" to union pay demands or "Yes" to controversial housing schemes, and having—in the nightmare scenario—to maintain a diplomatic pretence that a re-elected President Trump is something other than a dangerous, chauvinist buffoon.

Those who like to present themselves as being—in Starmer's phrase—about "power, not protest" brush off the Greens as a joke. But canny politicians from across the spectrum—Charles Kennedy and Boris Johnson, as well as Ken Livingstone—have understood there is always quite a chunk of the electorate that is less interested in grappling with the intricacies of power than in protesting against something or other. Winning once you're responsible for difficult times depends on keeping at least some of them with you. Disregard them all with an unremitting establishment pose, and six steps forward could be followed by one long slide back. ♦

Tom Clark *is a contributing editor at Prospect*

Diary
Margaret Hodge, *former MP for Barking*

I decided it was time to leave the House of Commons shortly after the 2019 election. After nearly 30 years as the MP for Barking, in east London, it seemed right to pass the baton to a new generation. I might have quit sooner, but I wasn't willing to let Jeremy Corbyn place one of his supporters in what is regarded as a safe Labour seat. So I waited until he had gone.

But nothing prepared me for the abruptness of the actual end. On Wednesday 22nd May, the prime minister, looking wretched and bedraggled in his rain-soaked suit, proclaimed the proroguing of this parliament to the sounds of the New Labour anthem "Things can only get better".

On Friday 24th May, I gave my last speech from the green benches alongside others leaving parliament. The following Thursday I was locked out of the office that has been my home for nearly 10 years. This was brutal for me and my brilliant staff. Like others, we had been planning for the autumn. If Rishi Sunak wanted to surprise us, he succeeded.

◆◆◆

Suddenly one's political identity, one's status, the structure of each day and the focus of one's energy is disrupted and dismantled. No wonder we all felt not just weird, but emotional.

Politics is like a drug that is difficult to give up. I originally stood for Islington Borough Council in 1973. At the time I thought it was a temporary role that would keep me sane while I was changing my babies' nappies. All these years later, I reflect on what a privilege it has been to spend so much of my life as a councillor and an MP. I've met amazing people and listened and responded to thousands of individual problems. I've had the opportunity to campaign on issues that I care passionately about, and have managed to make a small contribution to changing the world for the better. There have been difficult lows and extraordinary highs.

Defeating the British National Party (BNP) in Barking in 2010 will always be top of the list of highs. Nick Griffin, the BNP's leader, had promised a "political earthquake", but he came third in Barking, where I was re-elected. The BNP lost every councillor it had on Barking and Dagenham Council. Not only did we stop a despicable ideology from gaining democratic legitimacy, but the experience transformed the way that I did politics. I stopped going to ribbon-cutting events, cut back on Labour party meetings and ceased talking to local people about the latest Westminster bubble obsession. My focus was on reconnecting with voters and rebuilding trust. Through coffee afternoons, street meetings, targeted campaigns and doorstep discussions, we talked directly with people, listened to their concerns, responded where we could and communicated regularly.

It's not rocket science. Everybody's politics starts from the local. It may be broken pavements or it may be a national issue that has an impact locally, such as immigration, but by enabling your voters to set the agenda, you can listen, respond and start to build trust. That is when you will earn their vote.

It's not rocket science. Everybody's politics starts from the local

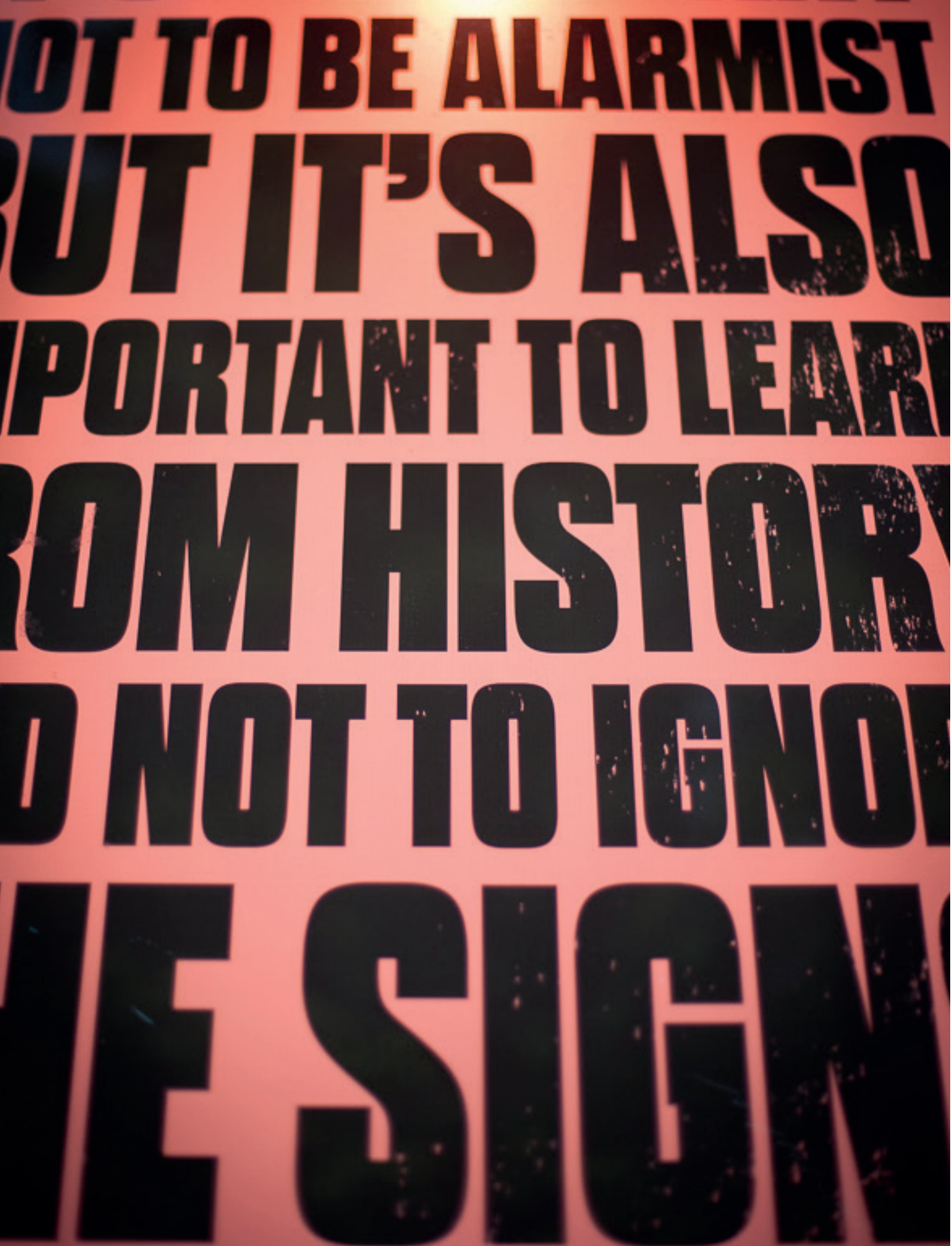
◆◆◆

As I leave the House of Commons, the lack of trust in politics and politicians is an enormous challenge for the new generation of MPs. Over the last decade there has been a completely understandable erosion of trust in politics, with Boris Johnson leading the charge by regularly lying with impunity; with money—sometimes dirty money laundered into the UK by Russian kleptocrats—used to buy access to politicians and gain honours; with people being given jobs and contracts because of whom they know; with individuals moving seamlessly from government jobs to private sector jobs while continuing to exploit their political contacts.

At the same time, the government has systematically weakened the institutions that provide a check on the executive's power, from parliament to the judiciary, the civil service and even the media.

Rebuilding trust will be a major mission for the incoming government, essential in enabling them to tackle all the problems they face in the economy, with our depleted public services and growing child poverty.

Cleaning up politics should be a first order task for an incoming Labour government. It will involve being more transparent and accountable in how we govern and how political parties are funded. It means giving up executive power and strengthening the role of parliament and local government. And if we don't enshrine these changes in law, covering how ministers are held to account, how honours and peerages are awarded, how we control the revolving door and how we fund our politics, we won't build the trust we need to change our country. So good luck to you all; I wish you well. ◆


OT TO BE ALARMIST
UT IT'S ALSO
PORTANT TO LEARN
ROM HISTORY
O NOT TO IGNOR
E SIGN

ANTISEMITISM

FRACTURED MINORITY

With antisemitism at record levels, the war in Gaza is reshaping Britain's Jewish community

by
RACHEL SHABI

Outside JW3, the Jewish community centre in northwest London, the wall is lined with posters. The typographic display, curated by graphic designer Max Bloom, went up in February and features quotes from conversations with British Jews. "It's getting scarier and scarier to be a Jew," reads one. "I've been avoiding social events because I'm scared of people speaking to me about it," says another.

The posters capture sentiments that I have heard repeatedly from British Jews around the country—and across the political spectrum—since the 7th October attacks and the launching of Israel's war on Gaza. They echo the expressions of isolation and devastation wired into the conversations that Jews are having as the onslaught in Gaza continues. Reading them on a recent visit to JW3, I was reminded of the man in his twenties who told me that he had friends round to his flat one day, only to be gut-punched by their "soft-core denialism" over the brutality of Hamas's violence. Or the woman in her early thirties, opposed to Israel's war, who said that her identity as a British Jew had never felt so under threat—from factors inside and outside the community: "I wasn't prepared to feel that sense of abandonment and alienation."

Amid an alarming spike in antisemitism, Britain's Jewish population, a minority numbering less than 300,000, is fearful. British Jews feel overwrought, over-scrutinised and under pressure. There is a shared devastation and grief over the Hamas-led attacks from last October, in which some 1,200 were killed and around 250, including children, taken hostage. But that might be where any agreement ends. Across some two dozen interviews for this piece, and in the course of speaking with many others over several months while researching a book on antisemitism, what became clear is that the Jewish community is fractured. British Jews are "intensely divided, across different lines and in new ways," as one rabbi put it to me. "People are struggling to talk to each other."

These ruptures cut painfully across family ties and friendships. They reflect a polarisation: some are horrified by Israel's destruction of Gaza; others view the war as a just and defensive fight—the stance of the majority of Jewish-Israelis. In London, one young woman told me she is aware of an "uncomfortable paradigm", increasingly common, "that there are 'good Jews' and 'bad Jews'". Both inside and beyond the Jewish community, she explains, it is your beliefs that determine which category you are in.

Eighty-five per cent of the total population of Gaza is internally displaced

All this is happening during a particularly horrifying chapter in the decades-long Israel-Palestine conflict. The war on Gaza, a narrow strip of land besieged since 2007, has killed more than 35,700 people. Thousands more are missing, likely dead, under the rubble of collapsed buildings. Save the Children estimates that the death toll includes around 13,000 children, while the United Nations Children's Fund spokesperson James Elder has said this tiny strip of land is "the most dangerous place in the world to be a child". Thousands have been orphaned and one in 30 Palestinians have been injured, many with terrible burns, shrapnel wounds or broken bones. Around 1.9m Palestinians, 85 per cent of the total population of Gaza, are internally displaced, facing starvation and in dire need of humanitarian support. Gaza itself has been rendered uninhabitable by Israel's bombardment. The levels of violence that Gazans have endured over the past eight months—on top of the existing trauma of several previous wars—will scar lives for decades to come.

The bombardment followed Hamas's rampage on 7th October, in which civilians in southern towns and cities that border Gaza were gunned down in the streets, in their homes, in shelters and at an outdoor rave. Families were burned. Bodies were found mutilated and with signs of sexual assault. Some of the attackers filmed the carnage on bodycams and phones, the violence on show to the world in real time. The nature of the attack, its scale and its imagery, reminded Jews around the world of the

PHOTOGRAPHY BY PAUL BLACK

darkest days of deadly European antisemitism. While more than 100 hostages were released as part of a short ceasefire agreement last November, 125 or so are still in captivity. This too has agonised Israelis and Jews worldwide.

Eight months on, tens of thousands of Israeli families are living in hotels or other temporary accommodation while evacuated from the northern border with Lebanon and the southern towns bordering Gaza. At the JW3 community centre, the walkway leading to the entrance has become the Lovelock Hostage Bridge. It is covered in padlocks bearing messages of support for those still held in Gaza.

And British Jews are keenly aware of the antisemitism unleashed by these horrors. In 2023, of the 4,103 incidents recorded by the Community Security Trust (CST), a British charity that monitors antisemitism, two-thirds took place after 7th October, with 31 instances on that day. Anti-Jewish abuse was shouted by random people on Britain's streets, mostly from cars. The CST has reported 151 instances of assault, 151 of damage or vandalism, and 228 threats. In some cases, stones, bricks and bottles were thrown at victims. Verbal abuse has spiralled, as has vandalism of Jewish property, such as schools, synagogues and cemeteries. A spokesperson for the CST explained these incidents could not be confused with straightforward criticism of Israel, even on the occasions when the slogans match. For instance, chanting "Free Palestine" at a demonstration is clearly about Israel. But it is not the same as phoning a synagogue to deliver this message (as one London rabbi described to me), or arbitrarily shouting it at Jewish-looking passers-by.

Reactions to the dismaying spike in antisemitism vary, as my interviews show. Some British Jews have taken to removing or hiding Star of David necklaces; others wear them more proudly and visibly—"for defiance, to stand up for ourselves", as one woman in her fifties tells me at JW3. Some Jewish men refuse, for religious or cultural reasons, to remove kippas (head coverings) but report being harassed in the street or "asked about the genocide" in Gaza while at the pub as a result. Some told me that the increase in antisemitism strengthens the case for Israel's existence; others said that they are more preoccupied with the carnage in Gaza. Still others are worn down trying to speak out about both.

What is perhaps hardest to discuss—or unpack—is the attachment that the majority of British Jews have towards Israel. According to polling from the Institute for Jewish Policy Research (IJPR) conducted in late 2022, 73 per cent feel very or somewhat attached to the country. This is higher than in the US, which has the largest Jewish population in the world outside of Israel. According to Pew polling from 2020, 48 per cent of US Jews under 30 describe themselves as very or somewhat emotionally attached to Israel, compared with two-thirds of those aged 65 and over. The people that I spoke with described connections ranging from family living in Israel, to holding the country central to Jewish culture, religion and identity. This itself is the result of growing up within Jewish communities—going to synagogue, say, or a Jewish school or youth group—where Jewish identity was bound to Israel.

This was not always the case. Prior to Israel's creation in 1948, you could find plenty of disagreement across global communities over Zionism, the Jewish national movement founded in the late 19th century. In Britain, community bodies worried that the founding of Israel would adversely affect Jewish communities, hindering efforts to integrate. But after the Holocaust and Israel's founding, many Jewish community bodies began to view the new state as a core part of Jewish identity, and survival. That deepened in the aftermath of the 1967 Arab-Israeli War. With tensions escalating between the Jewish state and neighbouring Arab countries, Israel launched a pre-emptive air strike on Egyptian troops mobilised on its southern border. Within six days, it won a ground victory against Egypt, Syria, Jordan and Iraq. That was the start of Israel's occupation of Palestinian East Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza, as well as the Syrian Golan Heights—for Palestinians the "Naksa" (setback) in which almost 400,000 were displaced.

Verbal abuse has spiralled, as has vandalism of Jewish property

While many in the west saw the Israeli victory as a David and Goliath moment, nations across the Arab world and the global south saw in Israel's conquests the expansionist hallmarks of a form of settler colonialism, one that ethnically cleansed Palestinians from the territory that now makes up the Israeli state. Upwards of 700,000 Palestinians had been displaced, while thousands were killed, in the war leading to the formation of Israel in 1948.

But for British Jews, much like their American co-religionists, the 1967 war was existential: they believed that, had Israel lost, it would have meant the end of the state. The crisis accelerated the rallying around Israel, the fixing of this ethnonational state to Jewish prayers and practices and identity. Theodor Herzl, the Viennese journalist who was Zionism's founding father, understood early on that the symbols of Judaism, and the spiritual connection to Jerusalem, would help the movement grow. After the Six Day War, which also heralded the rise of messianic settlers in the occupied Palestinian territories, diaspora Jews were increasingly raised to see Zionism as integral to being Jewish (with the exception of certain ultra-Orthodox communities that tend to anti- or non-Zionism).

The scale of this binding-to-Israel seemed alien to my family arriving to Britain in the 1970s—actual Israelis, who have moved there as refugees from Iraq. Certainly, many in the Jewish community are now questioning it, too. The IJPR polling found that the proportion of British Jews identifying as "Zionist" dropped from 72 per cent to 63 per cent over the decade up to 2022.

What should non-Jews make of this attachment? Everyone can, hopefully, agree that a connection to Israel should not make British Jews a target for antisemitism, which spikes every time that tensions in the region escalate. We might also agree not to infer that anyone with a

PHOTOGRAPHY BY PAUL BLACK

On the walkway to the entrance of the JW3 community centre, padlocks bear messages of support for hostages in Gaza

"connection" to Israel automatically supports the state's violent policies towards the Palestinian people. But from there on, things get murky. One can passionately disagree with a British Jewish person's appraisal of the Gaza war as "self-defence", but not be motivated by anti-Jewish hatred. One can be distressed by the apocalyptic images coming out of the Palestinian strip and wonder how anyone might justify such horrors, yet not be fuelled by antisemitism. But the different motivations lying behind criticism have been terribly conflated amid a fearful Jewish minority and its established leadership.

Hannah Weisfeld is director of Yachad (Hebrew for "together"), an organisation that builds support in the British Jewish community for a political resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. "Where is the line between 'I am scared and offended' and 'You are being antisemitic'?" she asked when we spoke by phone; "It is almost impossible to distinguish now." The rise in antisemitism is undeniable, Weisfeld noted, but she added that there is an inability among some British Jews to hear disagreement. Still others can't take offence "without assuming that the person who has offended you has the worst intentions that you could possibly imagine".

The division over the chant "from the river to the sea, Palestine will be free", a popular and longstanding feature at pro-Palestine demonstrations, is a classic case study, Weisfeld said. While Palestinians and their allies explain that this is a call for freedom and human rights for the Palestinians who live in the area between the Jordan river and the Mediterranean Sea, some people insist that it is an antisemitic call for Jewish-Israeli expulsion. "That is a prime example of people making a decision that a perspective they profoundly disagree with means: 'People want to kill me'," Weisfeld said.

The Board of Deputies of British Jews (BoD), which claims to be the largest Jewish communal organisation in the UK, is lobbying the government to restrict what it describes as London's "anti-Israel" protests. In March, the government's commissioner for countering extremism, Robin Simcox, said that London had become a "no-go zone for Jews every weekend". In February, the current home secretary James Cleverly called on the protesters to stop since they had "made their point"—his predecessor, Suella Braverman, had also disparaged them. That same month prime minister Rishi Sunak said that he wanted a clampdown on protest and "mob rule". Jewish fears of antisemitism are legitimate. And yet, the concerns of this minority have been cynically invoked by a right-wing government to justify clampdowns on free speech.

I have been to several London protests but, again, opinions vary. Some Jews have told me that they do not want to be in central London while the demonstrations are taking place. Others have said that, while they agree with the protesters' aims, they still don't want to be at those marches. Others attend either individually or as part of a growing Jewish bloc. A 24-year-old whom I spoke with at JW3, explained what he sees as the problem: "There is a very vocal minority who cross the line... and you never know if you are looking at someone who is that vocal minority, or is the nice majority saying reasonable, correct and justified things." Nobody I spoke with suggested banning demonstrations.

Yet the impression created by some of the leaders of communal Jewish bodies, and by the British government, is that most British Jews want to ban these marches because of antisemitism. Community groups are also policing who is deemed an appropriate representative of British Jewry on the subject of the Gaza war. Those vocally opposed to it have been marginalised. In March, Mark Gardner, chief executive of the CST, told BBC Radio 4 that there were two types of Jews who attend pro-Palestine marches: ultra-Orthodox Jews who don't believe in the state of Israel (a reference to the Naturei Karta sect, who often attend pro-Palestinian marches) and revolutionary socialists who were "using their Jewishness so that people get the impression this movement is not fundamentally antisemitic." In other words, religious anti-Zionists and useful idiots.

In May, the New North London Synagogue in Finchley, north London, placed Rabbi Lara Haft Yom-Tov under internal investigation after they used the term "war criminals" to describe Israeli leaders in an essay written around the Passover holiday. Yom-Tov apologised—although a week later the International Criminal

Court agreed with them, applying for arrest warrants for Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu and defence minister Yoav Gallant, alongside three of Hamas's leaders, over allegations of war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Some of the British Jews I interviewed believe community leadership bodies do reflect the mainstream Jewish view, but this elides the fact that there is a greater mix of opinion over Gaza than these organisations portray. The chief rabbi of the UK, Ephraim Mirvis, may have recently described the Israeli army as "our heroic soldiers", but would British Jews uniformly agree that this army is either "theirs" or "heroic"? The BoD may have made statements opposing calls for a Gaza truce, but the New Israel Fund UK (a branch of a major Israeli NGO) has called for a ceasefire, a hostage release deal and a return to genuine negotiations for peace. The Jewish anti-occupation group Na'amod, which has nearly doubled its membership in recent months, is a regular part of the weekly Gaza marches. In mid-May, 34 British rabbis signed a letter calling for Israel to accept a ceasefire and halt its attack on Rafah in the southern Gaza strip.

The impression from Jewish leadership organisations is that there is an Israel-right-or-wrong monolith, where the "correct" view is somewhere on the right when it comes to Palestinians and Israel's military. I have some experience of this, having been called an "asshole" on the BoD's official Twitter account in March last year—in a hastily deleted post—for not having the "right" view on the lessons of the Holocaust.

The framing over Israel's responsibility for Gaza's ruin is "completely myopic", and "unrepresentative" of those "who are quietly embarrassed, or ashamed, or want to lay low because the whole thing is a shit show," said one woman in her early forties and in the Jewish mainstream. Several people that I spoke to mentioned efforts—either within the organisational structure itself or through external appeals—to tug the Board of Deputies to more progressive positions, efforts that have repeatedly failed. In response to my reporting, the Board stated that its "democratic structure makes it the most representative organisation in the UK Jewish community", that its membership spans a range of "political and religious affiliation" and that it is "proud of the diverse range of voices in the community we encompass". It also added that "while there are different perspectives on some aspects of policy relating to Israel, there is near unanimity on a few key points: the need to see the hostages released; the need to counter the threat of Iran and its proxies like Hamas; and the desirability of expanding the Abraham Accords and promoting peace in the Middle East."

In May, Na'amod launched a campaign to divest from the BoD, in particular over its stance on Gaza. A Na'amod spokesperson told the *Jewish Chronicle* that the Board was promoting a damaging agenda—rather than speaking out against the consequences of Israel's actions in Gaza, it has "been complicit in a right-wing project to repress public outcry and calls for an end to the violence".

Divisions over Gaza are most apparent across the generations. This is expressed both by young Jews alienated by the pro-Israel stance of their community bodies and by their parents' generation, who worry about young people growing distant from the community. One 22-year-old from Leeds described how reactions to the Israel-Gaza war caused him to drift away from the mainstream. The communities he grew up in "can't quite grasp the enormity of it. The trauma of 7th October looms so large that even those with the best intentions can't grasp this is a Nakba-level event," he said—citing the Arabic word for catastrophe, a reference to the ethnic cleansing and dispossession of Palestinians that led to the creation of Israel (and which Palestinians say is ongoing).

"Our kids are miles more progressive than the mainstream congregation in our synagogues," one woman in her fifties said. She sees a change with younger Jews, for whom Israel has become not the refuge from persecution her generation was brought up to believe in, but a racist and ethnonationalist state that oppresses Palestinians. And she embraces the idea of them growing up with a different sense of what Jewishness means: "Maybe for them it will be about fighting for a better world." This is exactly what some of the members of Na'amod describe as central to their movement. One, in his early thirties, tells me that "with Na'amod we feel more Jewish than ever and our love of being Jewish is stronger than ever".

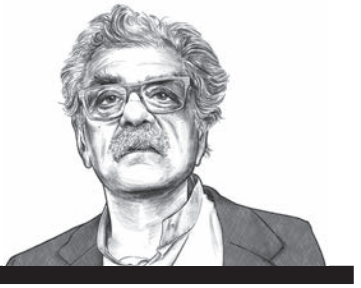
'We feel more Jewish than ever and our love of being Jewish is stronger than ever'

Standing with Palestinians in this moment has left many young people estranged from the mainstream Jewish community. But it has enabled a reconnection to Jewish values that resonate with their progressivism, antiracism and moral compass. And this includes combatting antisemitism. Several that I spoke with worry that accusations of antisemitism made against critics of Israel's violence in Gaza—from students to celebrities to the UN—is making this an impossible task. "People are so desensitised to [antisemitism] now, there is no patience for it," one young woman who has organised with Na'amod says. "You don't feel protected on either side."

Might we see the generational shift over Gaza percolate through the Jewish community? It is possible, as the younger cohorts take up leadership roles and become the ones who pay the synagogue fees. One recently retired rabbi says that the rising generations of leftist Jews standing with Palestinians could well herald a swing in that direction more broadly in the British Jewish community itself. Combined with the growing pressure from young American Jews who are increasingly vocal over Israel's violent oppression of Palestinians, this swing might be a force for progressive change, at least in helping to end the unconditional support the country enjoys among western allies, despite routine violations of international law. "The good thing is their Jewish engagement," the retired rabbi told me. "If they remain engaged as Jews then of course it is going to change. There is no question about it." ◆

Rachel Shabi*'s "Off-White: The Truth About Antisemitism" (Oneworld) is out in October*

Tariq Ali
Echoes of Vietnam in the protests over Gaza



History repeats itself. Never exactly the same, but its echoes rarely disappear. As a new generation grows conscious of Israel and Palestine, those echoes have got ever louder. But the times are different.

The period from 1965 to 1975 was marked by an explosion of cultural, political and anti-imperialist upheavals across the globe, a revolt against capital, against the sexual norms of the time, for the liberation of workers and women. The anti-Vietnam War movement played a significant part in helping end what some people (myself included) believe was a genocidal conflict—a war which left two million Vietnamese dead and millions more injured. Nearly 60,000 US soldiers perished and almost three times as many were maimed or disabled. GIs came out in huge numbers and marched outside the Pentagon, chanting "Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh, the NLF is gonna win"—a reference to the Vietnamese communist enemies. They knew. They had fought there.

In 1968, the ghettos in every major US city were set on fire as angry black people (many of them ex-GIs) fought against the state that oppressed them. The depth of hatred shook white America and forced reforms on the White House. US campus occupations were larger in those days, and the police on most campuses were vicious. At Kent State University, the National Guard shot four students dead in May

1970, re-igniting the anti-war movement. "Revolution in the air", sang Bob Dylan.

The Vietnamese resistance triggered pre-revolutionary unrest in France, Italy and Portugal. Students in Pakistan toppled a military dictatorship. Fearing a spread of communism in South America, the US backed military takeovers in Bolivia, Brazil, Argentina and Chile. In the middle of the Cold War, not a single European country sent troops to Vietnam. Even the British Labour prime minister resisted Washington's pressure.

That was then. The occupation of Palestine continued, through wars and raids and settlement, but never has the plight of the Palestinians been as globally prominent as it is now. Western media networks have failed to report crimes of the worst magnitude, presenting Israeli propaganda as unvarnished facts, and encouraging hysteria about perfectly legitimate opposition to politicians and their funders. Mass protests in solidarity with the Palestinians suggest that, across the world, many don't believe them.

I cannot recall any targeting of the print media or the CBS and BBC during the Vietnam War. Not because they opposed the war, but because they made space for dissident voices and mainstream critics. Morley Safer's nightly dispatches for CBS were electrifying. As cameras revealed US Marines burning a village, and women and children on fire, Safer's cold anger came through: "This is what the war in Vietnam is all about."

Today, the mainstream coverage of Gaza is a travesty. Some of these news sources, which once proudly published the Wikileaks revelations, will never be trusted again. The student demonstrators chanting "*New York Times* supports genocide" are a case in point. The *Los Angeles Times* coverage of the thuggish attack on UCLA encampments by masked pro-Israelis was a complete disgrace. Victims were shamelessly presented as attackers.

It reminds me of words my late friend, the US historian Howard Zinn, spoke at an anti-Vietnam War rally in 1971: "And they'll say that we are disturbing the peace. There is no peace. What bothers them is that we are disturbing the war." When, before one of the huge pro-Palestinian demos in London, a veteran radio journalist asked me "What do you think of the home secretary's [Suella Braverman's] charge that these are 'hate marches'?", I couldn't refrain from replying: "Yes, they are hate marches. We all hate her."

With tens of thousands of Gazans being killed in what many people globally, including venerable human rights organisations and some governments, regard as a genocidal bloodbath (enacted by Israel and backed by the US and its allies Germany, the UK and France) it would have been a democratic tragedy if US campuses had remained quiet.

The social and ethnic composition of the student body has been transformed since 1968. Today there are many Palestinian, Arab and African students. And the most heartening fact is that a sizeable number of young Jews have discarded Zionism. On their own they occupied Grand Central Station. In Britain the Jewish bloc marching for the Palestinians gets ever larger. Politicians and hedge-fund blackmailers can threaten as much as they like, but the war on Palestine has created a generational shift. This is the only good news around. ◆

DEFENCE

A BALANCE OF FEAR

In response to Russian aggression and Chinese ambition, Rishi Sunak committed to increasing the defence budget, writes **Malcolm Chalmers**. *To what ends?*

In a speech in Warsaw on 23rd April, prime minister Rishi Sunak made an alarming declaration. The world, he said, is "the most dangerous it's been since the end of the Cold War". Just as during the decades of hostility between the west and the Soviet Union, preventing a large-scale war between Nato and Russia has taken centre stage in British and European military planning. This new urgency has increased calls for more money. The Ministry of Defence (MoD)'s past calls for added resources have had little effect. But the government's recent, pre-election, announcement that the UK would raise military spending to 2.5 per cent of GDP by 2030 suggests that the MoD is beginning to win that argument—and not before time. Labour has committed to making the same increase, though neither party has explained how it will be funded.

UK parsimony on defence is not a new story. In the early days of the Ukraine war, the UK was one of the countries which provided the most military support to Kyiv. But now Britain gives less military aid than either Germany or Scandinavia (the US remains the largest single donor to Ukraine, despite Republican opposition). Since the first Russian invasion in 2014, UK defence spending has risen by only 20 per cent in real terms, a lower percentage increase than in any other European Nato member. The rest of Europe has increased its military expenditure by some 57 per cent over the same period.

This record challenges the common British belief that the UK is still Europe's pre-eminent, and most reliable, military power. What explains its shifting commitment? There are three plausible theories. First, Britain got a head start and others are catching up. The UK began the past decade spending proportionately more of its GDP on military expenditure than almost all of its European allies. In 2014, Nato agreed, at American urging, to require that all member states aim to spend 2 per cent

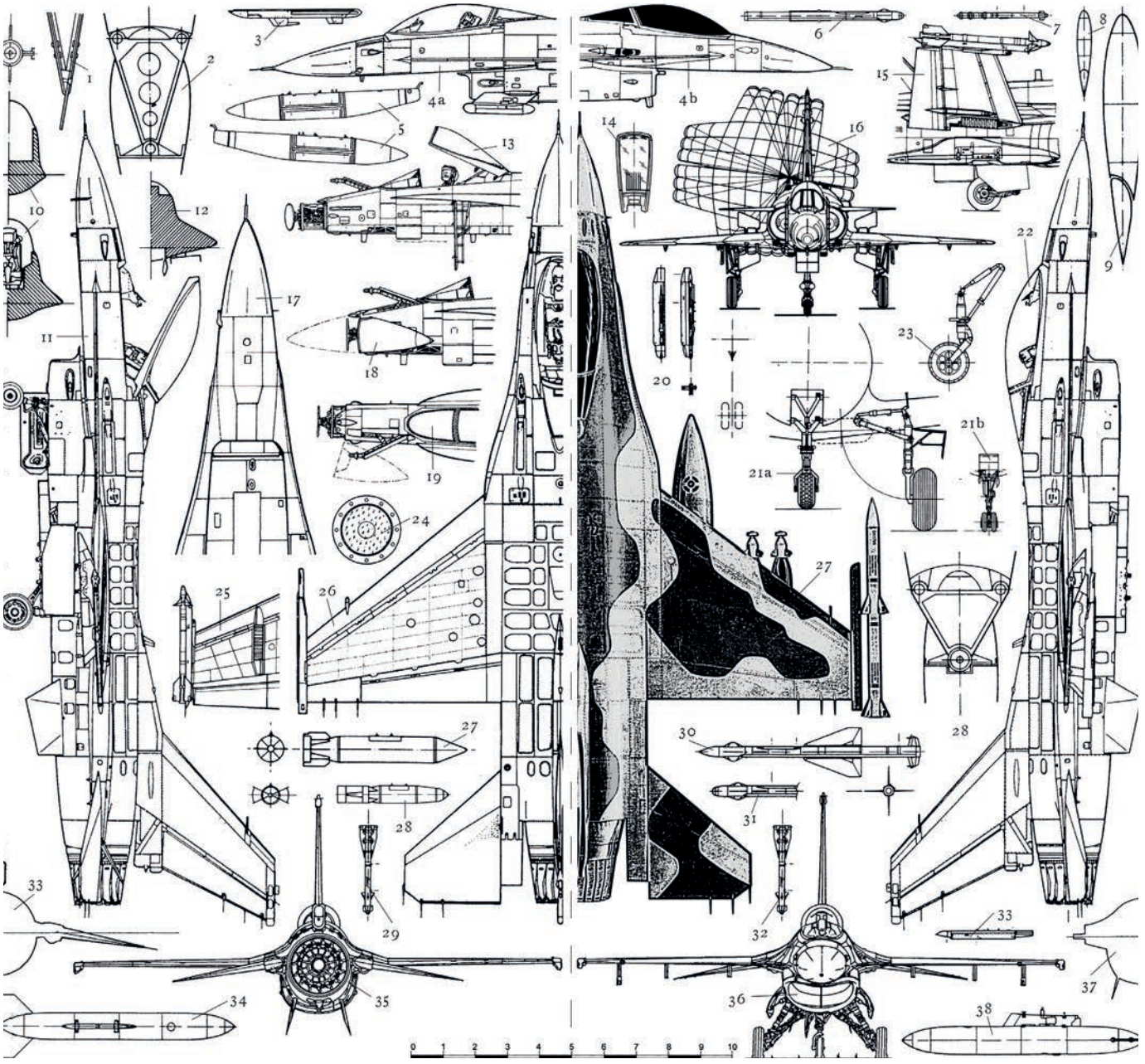


ILLUSTRATION BY GREGORI SAAVEDRA

of their GDP on defence—which only the UK, the US and Greece were already doing. This put considerable pressure on countries with defence budgets that were well below this level, and they are now responding with big increases. By the end of 2024, around 20 member states will have met the target, up from three in 2014.

Second, the low priority given to military spending is part of a wider turn inwards following the Brexit vote. The steep cut in the UK's aid budget—even as humanitarian needs have intensified in Ukraine, Gaza and Sudan—is one of the clearest signs of this isolationist tilt. Successive governments have struggled with the fiscal consequences of low growth, the Covid pandemic and deteriorating public services. It has been tough, against this backdrop, for the MoD to argue for more money.

There is another, underestimated, third factor. Unlike most other European countries, the UK's armed forces were busier than ever after the end of the Cold War, fighting in conflicts in the Balkans, the Middle East and Afghanistan. As recently as 2021, Boris Johnson as prime minister emphasised the need for the UK to restore its military role "everywhere east of Suez", a commitment largely abandoned in the early 1970s as part of the withdrawal from the former empire. The extent of this Indo-Pacific tilt, as it became known, turned out to be relatively limited for the MoD. The transfer of two offshore-patrol vessels across the region was the only significant new deployment. Even so, after three decades of long-range interventions, discussions about the tilt may have reinforced a sense that defence was still as much about projecting an image of global influence as about combating real threats to the UK.

Perhaps in part because of this perception that current conflicts remain at a distance from the UK, most of the public have not focused on these issues. The cross-party support for Ukraine, underpinned by strong public sympathy, is

now competing with the crisis in Gaza. In neither case has humanitarian concern translated into strong support for more money for the MoD. In the most recent Ipsos survey, only 4 per cent of respondents named "defence, foreign affairs and/or terrorism" as the most important issue facing the country. After two years of full-scale war in Europe, the British public's priorities are still the economy, inflation, immigration and the NHS.

The UK's core defence budget has not grown in real terms since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, but its future commitments have risen sharply. The MoD's 2023 Defence Command Paper contained a long list of new requirements, many of them derived from shortcomings exposed by the war. Similarly, the most recent National Audit Office report, published in December 2023, showed a gap between projected equipment plans and budgets of about £17bn over 10 years—the largest such gap since 2012.

The government's timetable for getting to 2.5 per cent will close this gap and provide additional resources for new priorities. Meanwhile, MoD officials are working on a Future Force Design Review, which should provide ministers with clear choices on how to spend extra money (for consideration in the Defence Review to take place at some point after the election). As part of this exercise, whoever is defence secretary will need to show that the MoD has a plan to focus its budget on what matters for national security, and to spend taxpayers' money efficiently. This will require an understanding of how Britain's defence got into its current state.

© GEORGE HENTON / ALAMY

The Arab Spring led briefly to a revival of hope for democracy in the region—and of the viability of military intervention by the west

At the turn of the century, the UK was the world's second-highest defence spender in absolute terms (not as a percentage of GDP), behind only the US. The disintegration of the Soviet Union had left the Russian military enfeebled and underfunded; it struggled to put down rebellions in the breakaway republic of Chechnya. China's total GDP was less than that of the UK. Its future rise to global superpower status was a matter of speculation.

When the Cold War ended, the need to prepare for major conflict in Europe disappeared almost overnight. With the Army and RAF no longer required in Germany to deter Soviet aggression, the UK was able to send around 30,000 troops to the Middle East as part of the coalition to expel Iraq from Kuwait, after Saddam Hussein's invasion in 1990. In the years that followed, the frequency with which the UK military was deployed for operations returned to levels not seen since the end of empire. Political support for foreign intervention grew in the first ten years after the Cold War, buoyed by early successes in Iraq, Bosnia, Sierra Leone and Kosovo.

This ambitious turn in UK policy was encapsulated in Labour's 1998 review of military capabilities, which promised that British defence would be a "force for good" in the world. After the 9/11 attacks, Tony Blair set himself the task of becoming the US's most important ally in the Global War on Terror. "This is a moment to seize," he told the Labour party conference in October 2001, "The kaleidoscope has been shaken. The pieces are in flux. Soon they will settle again. Before they do, let us re-order this world around us."

Over the next decade, the UK was the exception to the European norm. Both France and Germany were vocal in their opposition to the 2003 invasion of Iraq and took no part in the troubled occupation that followed. There was wider European participation in the coalition operation in Afghanistan, including by Nato partner states in northern and eastern Europe. But most of these contributions were modest and largely symbolic, driven more by the need to show solidarity with the US than the commitment to secure Afghanistan. The UK, by contrast, stood out as by far the largest European contributor to the mission. Britain deployed around 10,000 troops to Helmand province to pursue a long and ultimately unsuccessful effort to suppress the Taliban insurgency.

The costs were substantial. Between 1998 and 2010, under a Labour government, defence spending rose by some 23 per cent in real terms. The UK, as a result, remained the largest military spender in European Nato. In 2010, it devoted some 2.5 per cent of its GDP to defence.

But the high tide of interventionism had begun to recede by the last year of the Labour government. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan turned out to

be strategic failures. In 2011, the Arab Spring led briefly to a revival of hope in the possibility of democracy for the region. During this window of optimism, David Cameron ordered British forces to take part in a coalition effort to overthrow Muammar Gaddafi as leader of Libya. The country's elites failed to reach an agreement on post-conflict governance and Libya soon descended into a bitter civil war. More than a decade on, the country is divided and impoverished.

The Arab Spring countries in which the west refrained from direct intervention did no better. Parliament's 2013 vote against air strikes on Syria, in response to the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons, helped persuade Barack Obama to abandon his own "red line", and opened the way for large-scale Russian involvement. Syria became a proving ground for the brutal tactics and firepower that Russia subsequently deployed against Ukraine. Even today, in both Syria and Yemen—the site of another Arab Spring revolt—there is little hope of reconciliation between warring parties, far less national reconstruction.

Among the main beneficiaries of the Arab Spring's failure was Islamic State. The jihadist terrorist group took advantage of the chaos to establish a quasi-state in eastern Syria and northern Iraq. The subsequent coalition campaign against IS was a rare operational success, with the UK assisting allied forces in retaking territory from the group. That air campaign was the RAF's most intense foreign commitment for more than two decades, involving more than 1,700 air strikes. Now, as the British armed forces turn their attention towards Russia, it is questionable whether those assets would be available for a comparable new operation in the Middle East today.

The UK's retreat from intervention came during the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis and the decade of austerity under Cameron. Defence was not spared the public spending cuts. Between 2010 and 2016, total defence spending fell by 13 per cent in real terms. Personnel numbers fell sharply, and the decision was made to tolerate gaps in key capabilities—aircraft carriers and maritime reconnaissance aircraft—on the assumption that major conflict would not occur in the next 10 years. British forces pulled out of Helmand by 2015, leaving only a limited training presence in Afghanistan.

By 2026 or 2027, the UK is set to fall to eighth place in the global ranking of defence budgets—down from second place in the decade after the Cold War. The most dramatic change is in relation to China, whose rapid economic growth after the financial crisis allowed it to boost defence spending. In 2024, China's GDP is five times that of the UK and its defence budget is four times the size. Until the onset of the Ukraine war in 2022, growth in Russia's defence budget had been relatively constrained. But Russia's spending now dwarfs that of Britain, and is increasing rapidly to feed the demands of the war. It is unlikely to return to pre-war levels any time soon.

Amid higher rates of growth in the Middle East and Asia, as well as creeping geopolitical tensions, states across these regions have invested more in defence. The result is that, by 2023, the UK had fallen to sixth in the global league table of defence spenders, behind the US, China, Russia, India and Saudi Arabia.

Over the last two years, a further trend has emerged that is more surprising, but potentially of great significance. In 2024, Germany—despite its decades of anti-militarism—is due to overtake the UK as the biggest European defence spender in Nato for the first time since the Second World War. Japan is also cranking up its defence budget and aims to spend 2 per cent of its (much larger) GDP by 2027. Their decisions are driven both by growing worries about their large neighbours—Russia and China respectively—and by concerns about the reliability of the US as a security guarantor.

Humanitarian concern has not translated into strong public support for more defence spending

It is in the UK's interests that two of its staunchest allies, together with other smaller northern and eastern European allies, are rearming. It means, however, that Britain will have to work harder to maintain its influence within the west. The UK's unique strengths—the special intelligence and nuclear relationship with the US, Britain's membership of the UN Security Council, its cultural educational assets, and the global role of the City of London—will remain. Given the prospect of a reduced American commitment to Europe's security, especially if Donald Trump wins a second term as president this November, the UK will also be more vital than ever for European defence.

In the wake of Russia's brutal onslaught, and the rapid ensuing militarisation of its society and politics, any talk of restoring a peaceful relationship with the country must wait. For the foreseeable future, the main objective of the west's policy towards Russia must be to convince its leadership that belligerence does not pay. This requires every effort to frustrate Russia's ambitions in Ukraine. It also requires a Nato that is strong and united enough to convince Moscow that it could only lose by further aggression.

The lack of a clear dividing line between Nato and Russian spheres of influence in Europe means that the risks of escalation are greater than they were in the 1970s or 1980s. Today Russia is militarily weaker than it was then, as the performance of its army against the much smaller opponent of Ukraine has shown. But Nato must contend with a problem of its own—the very real prospect that the US will not be able to provide the backbone of Nato's defence in Europe, as it would have done in the past.

In the period of US global hegemony after 1990, there was a logic to shaping the UK's defence priorities around the "special relationship" with Washington. In return, Britain gained privileged access to intelligence assets

and nuclear technology. Such a model makes less sense as the geographical interests of the two powers diverge. It is no longer enough—indeed it never was—to decide UK defence priorities by asking: "What would the US want us to do?"

The key questions for next year's likely Defence Review should be: what is needed for defence of the UK homeland? And how can the UK best work with its European Nato allies to secure the continent? America's supporting role is critical, but it can no longer be relied upon to always be there.

What does this mean for Britain? First, the nuclear deterrent should be a higher priority. In 2006, when the government decided to buy a new generation of ballistic missile submarines, it was assumed these would begin to enter service in the early 2020s. But, as part of wider cost-saving, the 2010 Defence Review delayed this programme, slowing preparations for a replacement warhead.

Defence is paying the price for these delays, with strenuous efforts being made to maintain continuous patrols. Meanwhile, the total cost of the nuclear programme, Trident, has spiralled. The latest MoD estimate suggests that a remarkable 38 per cent of total equipment spending over the next decade will have to be ringfenced for the nuclear and submarine programmes—a massive increase from the 25 per cent projected share of just two years ago.

There is little scope for savings. The nuclear programme—based on four submarines carrying US-supplied Trident ballistic missiles armed with UK-built nuclear warheads—is at the minimum size necessary to ensure a boat is always on patrol. Hopes for future nuclear disarmament, set out in Obama's Prague speech in 2009 and strongly supported by the UK, have all but disappeared. It seems inconceivable that Britain will give up its nuclear arsenal while its most concerning potential adversaries maintain their own.

But what role should the UK's nuclear force have? Deterrent threats are most plausible when directed at preventing a nuclear attack on the UK itself. If Russia—or any other state—were to destroy London, it would have to reckon with the strong probability of a retaliatory strike. Could the UK nuclear force also provide protection for Nato's non-nuclear states in eastern Europe and elsewhere? This is less clear. To do this, the UK (and France, Nato's only other European nuclear power) would not need to have an arsenal as large as Russia's, or an ability to use nuclear weapons in battle. It would depend on Russia—and Britain's European allies—believing that Europe's two nuclear powers might be willing to take a nuclear risk in a future crisis.

Either way, the UK needs to focus defence efforts on its most acute threat: Russian aggression in Europe. The prospect of US disengagement only adds to the urgency. Given the competing pressures that the US military faces in Asia and the Middle East, however, even a re-elected Joe Biden will expect European states to do more for their own security. Recent rises in defence budgets, and increased awareness of the Russian threat in northern and eastern Europe, are signs that this message has been understood. The UK could play a critical role in helping build the strong conventional deterrent that is needed.

A further priority is technological transformation. Both the Ukraine war and other recent conflicts have demonstrated that effective conventional defence today requires a much wider orchestra of capabilities than in the past. Mass is critical, and the armed forces need the munitions, spare parts and reserve forces to fight beyond the first few days. Artillery, which the British Army has neglected over the last three decades in favour of infantry, has been central in the prolonged land battles in Ukraine. That conflict has also seen the emergence of new types of uncrewed aircraft, more sophisticated electronic warfare and cyber technologies, and new ways of processing enormous amounts of battlefield data to maximise the lethality of frontline forces. The pace of change in battle is such that the effectiveness of any new weapon system peaks at the time of its introduction into action. It then often declines rapidly—within weeks—as the enemy works out how to counter it.

The need for a strong UK commitment to Europe is greater than it has been in four decades

New, and expensive, ships and crewed aircraft will be needed. It is a popular caricature, especially favoured by armies, that aircraft carriers are sitting ducks, ready to be overwhelmed by the drones and ballistic missiles of even a semi-competent foe. But most major powers, including the US and China, invest heavily in their surface fleets, along with the weapons (drones, missiles and lasers) necessary to make them survivable and effective. The recent deployment of Royal Navy warships to the Red Sea to protect the civilian shipping on which international trade depends, in the wake of attacks by the Houthis in Yemen, proves that the maritime battle matters.

Another lesson from today's wars is the importance of defence against air and missile attack. The ability to shoot down projectiles that Russia has fired at it has been vital to Ukraine's survival. The erosion of that capability, in large measure as a result of the recent freezing of US aid, undermined Kyiv's ability to protect its cities. Missile defences are equally important for Israel in the face of Hezbollah, Hamas and Iranian threats. Yet the UK, after decades of fighting insurgents, has relatively little air defence capability. This will need to change. If there were a war, Russian submarines and long-range aircraft could attack the UK from the Norwegian Sea. Any ground forces deployed to eastern Europe or Norway would need protecting, too.

Despite all the hyperbole about new tech, people are central to defence. And they will need to be better paid, and better treated, if the armed forces are to attract the brightest and most capable. Take-home pay for the military has

The optimistic days of nuclear disarmament—which Barack Obama set out in his famous Prague speech in 2009—are long gone

declined in real terms since 2010, falling behind civil comparators, especially in technical, nuclear and cyber specialisms.

The relationship, and sometimes tension, between Britain's position in Europe and in the world has been at the heart of UK foreign policy since the 16th century. Brexit gave fresh impetus to those favouring a more international role, encapsulated by Boris Johnson's commitment to an Indo-Pacific tilt. A future Labour government seems likely to put more emphasis on repairing relations with the EU, albeit without returning to either the single market or the customs union. No matter what third-party partnership the UK can negotiate, however, there will be limits to its ability to influence EU policy as an outsider. This could result in a political temptation to look elsewhere for arenas where the UK can "make a difference".

Yet when it comes to defence, too great an emphasis on global commitments would risk diverting scarce effort from Europe and its neighbourhood. This would be dangerous. Given Russian aggression and US retrenchment, the need for a strong UK commitment to the continent's defence is greater than it has been in four decades. If Ukraine loses and American leadership is absent, Europe's ability to adopt a coherent response to a resurgent Russia is far from assured. Ensuring Europe remains a bulwark against Moscow will be a central UK defence priority as long as the Russian threat is as acute as it is today.

All this will require more money. In the Defence Review that will at some point follow the election, the MoD will need to prioritise ruthlessly. It will need to demonstrate that it is improving the effectiveness with which it spends its budget. In return, the Treasury will need to find the resources for a sustained increase in military expenditure.

The current political debate is too focused on committing to spending a set percentage of GDP on defence, whether 2.5 per cent or 3 per cent. But a one-off uplift of cash would be a recipe for inefficiency and waste. To deliver sustained increases in capability, the MoD needs a steady commitment to real-terms increases every year for the next decade, in exchange for a clear strategy and a commitment to deep reform. The white paper released by the government this April, with its pledge to increase military expenditure at a steady pace until 2030, with spending growing at a steady pace between now and then, is therefore a step in the right direction. If translated into concrete plans, it should make it possible for the MoD to plan long term, rather than rely on injections of unpredicatable sums every year.

Such a move would give greater confidence to defence companies looking to invest in the necessary industrial capabilities. Like the rest of the economy, the defence sector has a public investment problem. The inability to sustain long-term investment, glaringly evident with chaotic major infrastructure projects such as HS2, makes the sector less attractive to industry and deters people from investing in training and longer-term careers.

The UK faces the most challenging international circumstances since the 1980s, with major conflicts in Europe and the Middle East, and China committed to a "no limits" partnership with an openly revisionist Russia. If Nato can put in place the defence capabilities it is promising, and if Ukraine survives and begins to recover, Russia might abandon its imperial ambitions. But worse is possible. A fundamental change in Russian policy is likely to be years away.

In the meantime, the UK cannot ignore the more comprehensive, and growing, challenge China poses to its interests and those of its closest allies. The world is probably in the early stages of a decades-long Cold War between the US and China. This competition will shape British foreign and defence policy for decades to come. The immediate priority, boosting the role of the UK's military in deterring Russian aggression, will help us face the emerging multipolar global (dis)order. It will ensure, too, that international cooperation on key issues such as climate change and global health, where it exists, is robust—and that a balance of fear between the major powers underpins it. ♦

Malcolm Chalmers *is deputy director general of the Royal United Services Institute*

Ethan Zuckerman
Why I'm suing Facebook

A mistake I made as a young man has haunted me for the rest of my life.

I was in my early twenties, working for an internet startup called Tripod that offered free homepages—an early precursor to social media—to anyone who wanted one. Eventually, more than 15m people took us up on our offer, which forced us to find a way to pay for servers and bandwidth. Like virtually all startups in the mid 1990s, we gravitated to banner ads, gaudy digital billboards that users rarely clicked. We told advertisers they were useful for "brand building" even if they didn't lead to transactions.

There was a major problem. Advertisers liked banner ads on sites like *Wired*, the technology magazine, where they appeared next to carefully edited content. But on our site, a homepage author might be talking about fringe politics or sexual fetishes, and our advertisers told us we were not "brand safe". My boss asked me to figure out a way to "distance" the ads from our sometimes-sketchy users, and I came up with an idea: when we loaded a user's homepage into a web browser, we would also open another window, independent from the page, with an advertisement in it. Yes, dear reader, I invented the pop-up ad.

Before you turn away in disgust, let me mention two things. First, I've apologised, extensively and in print. But second: you probably haven't encountered many pop-up ads lately. Most modern web browsers block pop-ups by default, at least on your laptop. (As we'll discuss in a moment, it's another thing entirely on mobile phones.) Even if the website owner really wants you to see an ad, your browser is loyal to you, giving you a degree of control over your online experience that the business selling ads wishes you didn't have.

This battle between what users want and what companies selling ads want has taken two dramatic turns in the past dozen years. First, as social media came to dominate the web, companies like Facebook and Twitter got very good at claiming lots of users' attention. The updates from your friends turned into an infinite scroll, and, if your friends didn't have enough to say, the algorithm would suggest other content to you, paired with an endless sequence of ads. That had major downsides, but if you were using a web browser and were tired of seeing promotional material, you could at least install an ad blocker. If you were worried about developing a dependence, you could install software to limit the time you could spend on a social media site.

The Facebook app is loyal to Mark Zuckerberg—not to you

The second revolution—the rise of the mobile phone—fundamentally shifted the balance of power. On our laptops, we interact with the internet through web browsers, which we can customise and control. But on our mobile phones, we mostly use apps. These apps are made by the same companies that run websites like Facebook or Twitter. While we might be able to use our loyal web browser to shape our experience of Facebook on our computer, we have no such freedom with the Facebook app. The app is loyal to Zuckerberg, his ad sales team and his engagement metrics—not to you.

In 2021, programmer Louis Barclay came up with a clever way to make Facebook less addictive, even if you accessed it through the disloyal mobile app. He wrote a little piece of software called Unfollow Everything. If you installed it in your web browser it would log into Facebook on your behalf and, well, unfollow everything. Your algorithmically curated feed of updates from your friends would be empty, though you could check in on any of your friends by visiting their pages. Barclay was delighted with his less-addictive Facebook experience and made his software free for anyone to download.

Meta, the parent company of Facebook, was not delighted. It deleted Barclay's accounts on Instagram and Facebook and banned him for life. And it threatened a costly legal battle unless he removed his software from the web. Barclay was forced to comply.

It seemed to me that Barclay should have a right to encounter Facebook the way he wanted it, much as you have the right to block my dreadful pop-up ads. My friends at the Knight First Amendment Institute, a nonprofit law and research organisation that argues cases defending freedom of speech in a digital age, agreed with me, and over the course of many months we found a legal argument that looked promising.

In 1996, the US passed a piece of legislation called the Communications Decency Act, a law focused on combatting the perceived threat of obscenity online. Much of the law has been overturned, but a critical section has remained—Section 230—which American internet scholars sometimes describe as "the 26 words that created the web". These words limit the liability for platforms such as Facebook by declaring that a user who posts content—rather than the owner of the website that hosts it—will be considered its publisher.

Businesses like Facebook would be legally untenable if it were considered the publisher of everything its users—in Facebook's case, three billion of them—say. By providing limits to liability, Section 230 made businesses like Facebook, and like Tripod, possible.

But there's more to Section 230 than those 26 words. Much of the section concerns the idea that users have the right to control what they encounter online, stating that it is the policy of the United States "to encourage the development of technologies which maximize user control over what information is received by individuals, families, and schools who use the Internet and other interactive computer services".

That sounded a lot like what Barclay was trying to do with Unfollow Everything. And so, on May Day, 2024, I sued Meta in US federal court.

The complaint, drafted by the brilliant lawyers at the Knight First Amendment Institute, explains that I want to release an updated version of Barclay's tool and conduct a research study to see whether users feel more in control of their Facebook experience when using it. Because Meta has forced Barclay to take down his software, we are asking for a "declaratory judgement" that what we propose to do is protected and legal.

It would be great to recreate Barclay's software, but there's much more at stake. Should a court find in our favour, it might open a path towards limiting the power of the big web platforms not just through legislation, but through technology. My lab at the University of Massachusetts Amherst has been building tools that allow social media users to choose what algorithms they want sorting posts from their friends. We can use this technology only on a very few social networks—Mastodon, Bluesky, Reddit. The most popular networks—X, Facebook and Instagram—prohibit tools like ours. But a finding that Section 230 protects our right to develop tools to increase user control means we might be able to force these powerful companies to cooperate.

I made a mistake years ago when I tried to inflict pop-up ads on an unwary internet population. Facebook is making a mistake when it insists that its tools and preferences are the only ones that count. It's possible that a US federal court will give us a chance to put control back in the hands of social media users. ♦

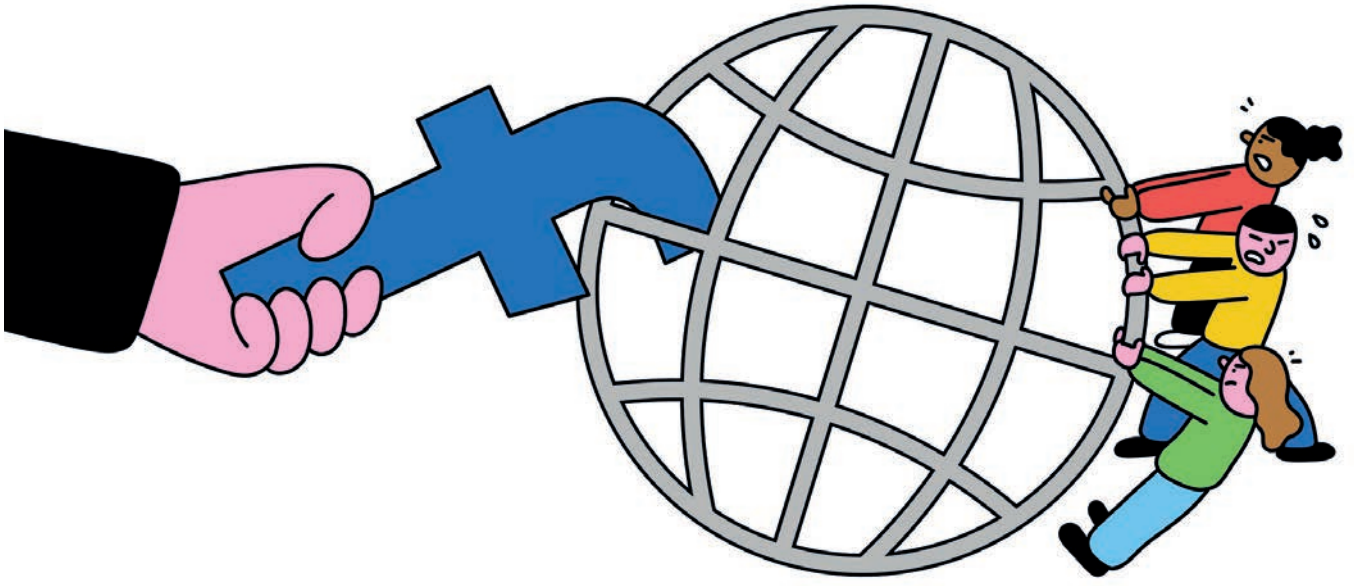


ILLUSTRATION BY VINCENT KILBRIDE

UNIVERSITIES

CRASH COURSE

The UK's universities are among the best in the world. So why do many appear close to collapse?

by
GLEN O'HARA

It's a miserable time for Britain's universities. Their funding has declined and will fall further; cuts and closures are everywhere; their management and staff are divided as perhaps never before; they are berated as a key target of the right's "culture war"; and they are uncertain as to their very purpose.

Yet they should be a success story. They bring in a huge amount of revenue: higher education providers across England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland have a collective income of more than £48bn a year. They earn the country a fortune, pulling in nearly £22bn a year in export earnings—for the most part, made up of the fees and living expenses of international students. British research is strong by any yardstick: the UK has the third largest share of the world's academic publications, after the US and China. And universities are at the heart of "levelling up"—efforts by the UK government to address differences between London and the southeast of England and the rest. There are 21,000 companies active that emerged from our universities, which directly employ 96,000 people. Regional policy is, or should be, dependent on them: they add more than £14bn to output in England's northwest and northeast combined, as well as supporting more than 100,000 jobs.

Even so, the hallmarks of decline are both unmistakable and inexorable. One in four universities is in the red. The sector's annual losses stand at £2bn. Almost every day, news of more job cuts comes in. Universities of all kinds are slashing staffing: Coventry, for a while the doyen and leader of the post-92 "modern" universities; Goldsmith's in London; Kent, which always sold itself as Britain's most "European" institution; Lincoln, a vibrant and apparently successful new university that had been making a big name for itself. The list goes on and on: Aberdeen, Brighton, Cardiff, Essex, Northumbria, Queen Mary (part of the University of London), Sheffield Hallam, Surrey and more. It begins to look as though most universities will make large-scale cuts.

Most of that downsizing is coming, and will come, through retirements and voluntary severance schemes—for now, at least, a bloodbath of compulsory redundancies everywhere seems a way off. What is more likely is a kind of fading away or greyout. The facade of the once-grand university as stately home will remain, but lots of the rooms will be cordoned off, some of the silver will be sold, dust will fall over everything and the furniture will be allowed to rot. Eventually, as in the case of lots of those huge houses that fell into disrepair during England's postwar years, the paint will peel and the floors and ceilings will fall in. We're not there yet, but we will get there eventually.

To the wider public, universities will seem to be trundling along, keeping the lights on, teaching students, putting on conferences and pumping out research findings. But something ineffable, effervescent, will have been lost: perhaps, indeed, the whole point of a university. Goodwill, and the sense of being part of a shared endeavour, is already thin enough, and industrial relations can only deteriorate. Time, that key element in any sector that relies on its people, will get more and more pressed: academics are already losing much of "their" summers to endless exam resits and bureaucracy. Original thought—and that, after all, is what a university is for—will be at a steep premium.

Even if most jobs are saved for now, life inside higher education has become pretty depressing. Vignettes abound that are straight out of *A Very Peculiar Practice*, a surreal campus TV serial from the 1980s. More and more, day-to-day toil in our universities feels strangely like a David Lodge novel, or perhaps a less upmarket *Porterhouse Blue*. The heating is turned down, and then off; lifts are roped off at a moment's notice; IT start ripping out cable internet connections in favour of weaker wifi; old computers creak along, endangering online security because they can't be updated; seminar rooms are taken out of use unannounced; hot-desking is brought in and then everyone stops coming onto campus. "You couldn't make it up" is a phrase on many lips.

In the end, of course, one or more universities will spectacularly fall apart. It's hard to say where that will happen, exactly, but how it could happen is fairly clear. Some of them (for instance, Surrey

PHOTOGRAPHY BY SARA MORRIS

or Chichester) are now very indebted, and not just to their banks, but to a range of lenders who are starting to get quite anxious. If news leaks out that one is in existential trouble, then parents, students, creditors, business partners and suppliers might run for the doors. The death spiral can be quick. Bankruptcy, as Ernest Hemingway famously put it, comes gradually, then suddenly.

What on Earth is going on? Reading the newspapers, you could be forgiven if you thought that every issue on campus was about the culture wars: free speech, "wokedom", gender, decolonisation and race. Far from it. Most academics are too busy trying to hang onto their jobs, book travel on impossible-to-navigate third-party portals, claim their expenses and fill out endless audits to think about beguiling young people with dangerously radical concepts. Indeed, having any ideas would be a welcome novelty.

The academy is skewed to the left, of course, very likely more than it was during the second half of the 20th century, and the wilder shores of theoretical dispute are off-putting for both voters and their elected representatives. But academic radicalism and student protest are not exactly surprising if you recall the sit-ins, screaming matches and marches of the 1960s and 1970s. Today's universities are remarkably sedate compared with the days when visiting Conservative ministers were harangued before they could even get inside the campus. Students are too busy with paid jobs to riot, since even the maximum loans for living costs fail to cover the basics in some areas.

The absurd idea that our universities are a hotbed of novel ideologies is worsening the situation, because it is dividing the public from their local campuses, and making lecturers feel as if they are under constant attack. We need to do better than these ridiculous caricatures.

The real crisis is buried deep within the finance and organisation of our higher education sector. It is a tale of ideological over-commitment, unexpected consequences, economic misfortune and financial blunders. No one comes out of it with much honour, and still less credit.

The first problem is just the usual one: money. In England, undergraduate tuition fees for home students have not risen significantly since 2012, and not

Tough Tynes: Northumbria university, the Times Higher Education university of the year in 2022, has been rocked by planned cuts

risen at all since 2017. Government funding in the other three parts of the UK has also fallen. There's little else in the world that hasn't risen in price, especially since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and that's a real problem for universities "selling" a fixed-price service in a new world of unpredictable inflation.

Once you take inflation into account, nearly 30 per cent of the value of tuition fees has been stripped away since the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition of 2010 brought them in. A settlement that was generous at the time has since become miserly. Universities make a loss of £2,500 on every home student they take. Funding is still above the level it collapsed towards in the late 1990s, but it won't take many bursts of inflation to drag it back to that nadir.

All many universities feel they can do is cut. So they take on the mantle of axe-wielders

For a while, some vice chancellors could patch up losses by recruiting more and more students in the arts, humanities and social sciences: "seminar-based" subjects that were cheap to teach and fairly easy to staff, and the costs of which certainly undershot the £9,000 and then the £9,250 paid for them by students every year. That money could then be used to subsidise the heavy sciences, and everyone would rub along as long as they didn't think too much about the implications of that cross-subsidy. As chancellor, George Osborne made all that even easier when he removed student number caps for each English institution between 2015 and 2016.

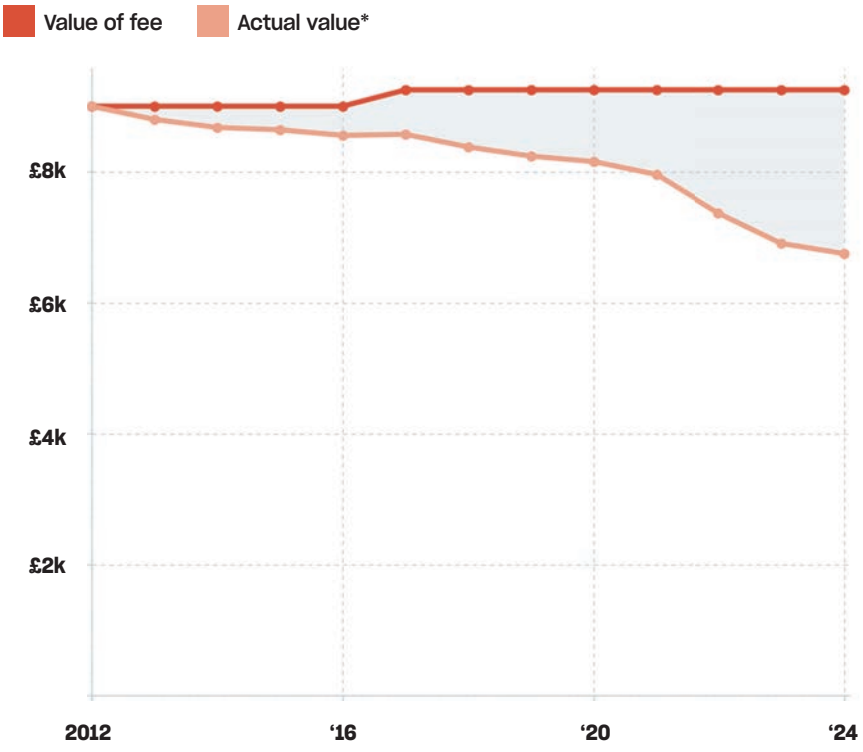
The problem was that this approach to teaching (say) the humanities was one-dimensional, as universities stacked the courses high and sold them cheap, without a thought for the system as a whole—such as it was by this point. This was a zero-sum game that took students away from other providers, a beggar-my-neighbour policy reminiscent of the competitive devaluations and protectionism of the 1930s that back then helped ruin the world economy. As in the global Depression, so in the academic recession England's big guns tried to leave everyone else in the dust.

That couldn't continue indefinitely. Huge redbrick universities with big names and some kudos with middle-class parents could drop their grades a little, allow seminars to get bigger and bigger, put on overspill rooms for lectures. But sooner or later everyone would notice the drop in quality and complain—an emperor's new clothes moment once headteachers, parents and students began to protest.

A "squeezed middle" also emerged, its ranks full of traditionally good and well-regarded universities that reacted to having their usual student cohorts drawn away by desperately dropping their grade offers and advertising everywhere they could think of. Many were eventually forced to pull arts and humanities courses altogether. If more do the same, that could leave some areas of the country completely bereft of such provision: the far southeast of England, say, or East Anglia. That would mean that low-income students who want to stay at home can't study those subjects. It was this middling

Picking up the tab

Inflation has eaten away at the real value of a tuition fee since 2012



*Adjusted to consumer price index

stratum of universities whose financial woes started to become obvious as Covid made its grim way through the country, and their complaints have now raised the alarm about the bad behaviour of a few running down the many.

Nor could that merry-go-round keep spinning forever. Some subjects, such as languages and English, have declined vertiginously in secondary schools, for which government ministers' rhetoric must take a share of the blame. Eventually, too, the accounting rationale for hoovering up these students declined as costs in the arts, humanities and social sciences rose above the level of home tuition fees or government funding. Once these subjects were no longer of financial use, they could be downgraded or discarded. Some huge and prestigious Russell Group providers, such as Bristol, are still trying to expand further, but this threatens to exhaust the patience of their home cities, including local residents and councils. There are, after all, only so many students you can fit into even a vast city.

Universities' next answer to declining budgets was foreign students. If capped home fees covered less and less, perhaps teaching people from outside the UK would plug the gap. Fees for these undergraduates were never limited by statute, and they are often charged much more than locals, on average about £22,000 a year and sometimes approaching £40,000. In 2010, just under a tenth of UK universities' revenue came from that source; by 2022, that number had doubled to nearly a fifth. That, too, was all very well for a while, but there are probably limits to how politically acceptable the numbers are. Nearly half a million students were given UK study visas in the academic year that began in autumn 2022, an 86 per cent rise from the year between 2018 and 2019. All while the government talked about taking back control of immigration.

The dependence on foreign students was also a gamble. Their numbers now seem to be falling, with a 27 per cent fall in applications for taught postgraduate places in the academic year starting this autumn (other, more alarming figures are also doing the rounds). For a long time, the Tories seemed quite keen on bringing in overseas students, setting a target for 600,000 enrolled on British courses that was met easily a decade early. As prime minister, Boris Johnson even brought back post-study work visas in autumn 2020, after Theresa May as home secretary had abolished them in 2012. Now the government has blocked access to the UK for students' dependents, and has even talked about restricting the right to work after study has finished to those attending only the "top" universities. Understandably, students are beginning to look elsewhere. The increasingly tarnished reputation of Britain's universities, and strong US competition, are not exactly helping. The gamble looks like a bad one.

So we are at an impasse. The money is running out. Mid-ranking and mid-sized universities are in real trouble, and a few could eventually go under if nothing is done. Little more can be wrung out of the existing structure. Cross-subsidies across home fees are now played out, while Russell Group providers cannot take every student in the country. The number of foreign students is declining. The well is dry. It's this dead end that is causing the despair inside higher education, because only complex reconstruction can save it.

The problem is that no one knows what that would look like, or who would do it. Once upon a time, the government's Higher Education Funding Council would dole out money on the basis of fixed student numbers. The future was steady, dependable, even boring. It ran like clockwork. Now it has become almost impossible to work out how many students you will get next year, let alone in three or four years' time. The result feels like chaos.

All our higher education structures are based on presumed stability. Around £2bn of Quality-Related (or QR) research funding is paid by Research England to universities every year on the basis of how well subjects are rated in periodic research audits. The time horizon for that money actually being paid out might be six to eight years. Now there's no way of knowing if the subjects winning that money will be taught, or the departments that housed them will even exist. Large-scale research projects funded by the seven Research Councils amount to around another £2.6bn this year: but if core members of those projects' teams were to lose their jobs,

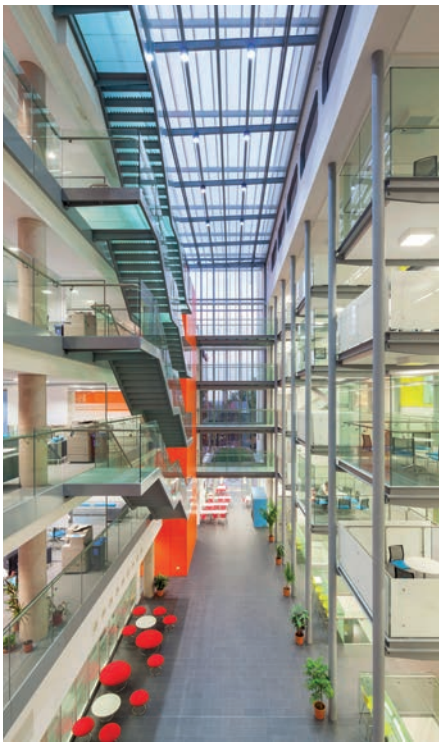
no one seems sure what will happen to that research or that money.

The government seems to want British science and its wider research culture to play a key role in projecting the country's "soft power". But that cannot be conducted in an ecosystem that is getting harder and harder to understand, let alone govern. The senior management teams of every university have been forced into a position where their job, indeed their responsibility, is to fight tooth and nail against other universities for every single extra student they can get their hands on. That makes strategic direction of the sector impossible. There's no point patching it up: it requires fundamental re-engineering that allows for at least some measure of command and control.

Universities' management systems are not up to that task. They are often made up of ex-academics who have gradually learned to be managers—some good, but others bad. The quality of university leadership is variegated: the nimble mixed with the static, the precise blended in with the clumsy, and the forward-looking cheek-by-jowl with the antediluvian. Public relations, media management, advertising and image-making are not their forte, to say the least. Nor are imaginative or novel blends of courses that might appeal.

In this situation, all many universities feel they can do is cut. So they take on the mantle of axe-wielders as if they were Gordon Gecko, the archetypal tough-guy of capitalism, in the 1987 film *Wall Street*. The effect can be comic, but it's also deeply dangerous. Universities abolish courses, and whole departments, on the basis that they are not making a big enough contribution to "the centre"—that is, not building up enough of a surplus to pay for the services that make a university run smoothly, from the library to estates through to payroll and HR. By so doing, they gradually undermine their own critical mass and income, until there is little left.

This disorder and disarray is holding Britain back. The country actually needs far more undergraduate places if it is to merely keep up with the birth boom of two decades ago: the numbers of 18-year-olds are rising and will rise further until the early 2030s. One estimate is that 45,000 more places will be needed every year by then, which would mean perhaps an 8 per cent rise in capacity. In those circumstances, slashing departments and cutting places is nothing more than vandalism.



The university of Bristol has a modern department of biological sciences, and is building an entirely new campus in the city

First degree burns: Many felt financially scorched by the 2012 tuition fee hike

In the end, the retreat of British higher education is simple. There's not enough money in the system to sustain the high-quality experience that British and foreign students are used to. There's not enough planning to juggle student numbers, regional policy, urban policy, scientific research and development. Will and promise are draining away.

British higher education is like the Titanic after it had hit the iceberg. It is fatally flawed below the waterline, but it is still floating, and many passengers have difficulty believing that it will go under. Yet the water is pouring in and rising. It has gushed right up past third class, flowed through second class and is about to lap at the doors of first class. During the next parliament, the lights will go out and the ship's keel will break.

A rescue mission is some way off, partly because Labour as the likely next government seems unable to grasp the gravity of the situation. What universities and policymakers therefore really need is a breathing space and a pause, so that we can work out what in the world to do. The next government may be forced to drop in a small amount of money, concert a slight rise in fees (outside Scotland), and perhaps place a cap on English student numbers at "the top" to bail out the others. It could again encourage rather than disparage the post-study work visa. Universities may be encouraged to merge, though that will be fiendishly complex. In the end, however, those are stopgaps, and nothing will stop the ship going down if it has no directing mind on the bridge.

Then it will not just be export earnings and output that are lost. Attracting teachers, doctors and dentists will get much harder outside London and the southeast. At an even deeper level, the whole local ecosystem of life will be disrupted. University drama, theatre, arts, adult learning, evening classes, school visits, walking clubs, discussion groups, sports facilities, museums, displays, galleries—they could all be gone. Everything, in fact, that makes life worth living. That would be the unkindest cut of all. ◆

Glen O'Hara *is professor of modern and contemporary history at Oxford Brookes University*

Sasha Mudd
Philosopher-at-large: Free speech is not simple

Student protests against Israel's war in Gaza—and the violent clashes they have provoked on campuses in the US—raise profoundly difficult questions: when does criticism of Israel cross into antisemitism? Does hateful antisemitic speech ever deserve protection? How should universities balance respect for free speech with their obligation to provide a safe environment for all?

As the political climate continues to boil, these questions are presented as though they have clear-cut answers, with the suggestion being that anyone who fails to parrot such answers is guilty of gross moral failure. When the presidents of Harvard and the University of Pennsylvania struggled in front of the US Congress to say unequivocally whether calling for the genocide of Jews violated their school's policies, they were excoriated for their supposed lack of "moral clarity". Both replied by saying "it depends", an answer that helped cost them their jobs. But what if the truth is that it does, often, depend—on context, on circumstance, on our legal, moral and philosophical starting points? What if that is the more honest, morally sensitive reply to many of the free speech questions tearing us apart?

While we can all agree antisemitic hate speech should be treated no differently than other hate speech, it is much harder to agree on when sincere political speech becomes unacceptably hateful and what to do about it. The problem is not only that the slogans and symbols used by the protesters in the UK, US and elsewhere mean different things to different people, but also that the underlying values and principles at play interact in complex ways, and we have no universal moral algorithm with which to sort them out.

There are, of course, points of consensus, for instance that the state may sometimes legitimately restrict harmful speech without running afoul of free speech values. But just what are these values?

For many, the paramount issue is the individual's right to self-determination as a speaker, listener and thinker. From this perspective, the idea that the state should get to decide what we are able to say, hear or consider represents a dangerous affront to our basic liberties, the free exercise of which allows us to figure out for ourselves what we think is right, good and fair. For others, the chief problem is the way that state limitations on speech hamper our collective pursuit of truth.

But many philosophers go beyond an appeal to individual autonomy or truth, arguing that free speech is justified by the role it plays in democracy. Some claim free speech promotes the values democracy is meant to serve (for example, tolerance and pluralism); or that it is vital to citizens' capacity to hold power to account. Still others appeal to the democratic virtues it supposedly instils. If we are by nature inclined to ostracise those who think differently, we might need freedom of speech in order to practise the respect for difference that fortifies our commitment to liberal principles.

Drawing on any of these perspectives, one might defend the free speech absolutism associated with the US First Amendment. The late US legal philosopher Ronald Dworkin argued that, by banning hateful ideas, the state excludes those who defend them from democratic deliberation, undermining democratic legitimacy. The famed 19th-century free speech champion John Stuart Mill held that the best way to neuter dangerous ideas is through exposing them to public scrutiny, while outright legal suppression can aggravate the danger.

Moral clarity should not be confused with black-and-white certitudes

Of course, governing a campus is not the same as governing a state. Still, though, in line with Mill or Dworkin, many hold that proscriptions on campus speech should be a last resort and as narrow as possible. For them, it is better for schools to engage pro-Palestinian protesters in dialogue, rather than prohibiting the use of phrases such as "From the river to the sea..." But more proscriptive approaches to hate speech also have robust philosophical backing. The esteemed legal philosopher Jeremy Waldron argues that hate speech is best understood as a form of group defamation. He believes the state has a legitimate role in preventing it because it erodes the rights and equal moral standing of citizens. For him, the same democratic values that justify free speech also determine its rightful limits.

What does this reasonable disagreement on the issues reveal? That you can stand against hate while holding a variety of different, reasonable views on the limits of free speech, on campus or elsewhere.

In this fevered political moment, there is an understandable desire for clear principles that gratify our us-versus-them political passions. But moral clarity should not be confused with black-and-white certitudes. What such clarity more often reveals is a tragically messy world, where we must weigh competing moral concerns against each other in the face of staggering complexity. In that context, it does us all good to appreciate the truth in that simple, now notorious, phrase: "It depends." ◆

Write to Sasha

Each month Sasha Mudd will offer a philosophical view on current events.

*Email **editorial@prospectmagazine.co.uk** with your suggested topics, including "Philosopher-at-large" in the subject line*

Sarah Ogilvie
The joy of lex: Unclubbable

Several hundred members of the all-male Garrick Club recently crowded into a conference room in central London to vote in favour of admitting women. Nearly 200 years after the Garrick was founded for "actors and men of refinement and education", the club has decided that women might not be as "unclubbable" as originally thought.

If the language of clubs is anything to go by, these elite institutions have always been more about exclusion than inclusion. The word *unclubbable*, a derogatory label for those considered too unsociable for membership, was coined in 1764. It took several decades for its opposite, *clubbable*, to appear. The expression *blackballing* was coined at the same time as unclubbable, after a voting system in which club members decide whether to admit someone new by casting white or black marbles as ballots. In the final count often the presence of just one or two black marbles, which signal dissent, is enough to reject a candidate. The expression *whiteballing* never took off because, in clubland, rejection was more comment-worthy than acceptance.

Club names alone are cause for linguistic intrigue. Some of the oldest and most exclusive clubs, still all-male, were named after men: Garrick (1831), in honour of the actor David Garrick; Boodle's (1762) from its head waiter, Edward Boodle; and White's, which started as a chocolate house, got its name in 1693 from its founder, Francesco Bianco, an Italian chef who anglicised his name to Francis White. Then there is the pompously named The Club (1764), which famously excluded Winston Churchill, prompting him to start his own in 1911, called The Other Club. Not to forget those names that win on sheer quirk: the Wednesday Club (from which the Bank of England was started) which met on Friday Street in London during the reign of William III; and Nobody's Friends (1800), founded for Anglican clergy of the High Church tradition, which still exists, now with female members.

The 19th century was a period when clubs proliferated, especially on Pall Mall and the area between Trafalgar Square and St James's Palace which became known as *Clubland* (1885). Someone who spent too much time in a club was called a *clubmonger* (1837); a member of a club was a *clubman* (1853); and the term *clubocracy* (1882) was modelled on "aristocracy" to refer to the class who are members of clubs. There was a specific language within clubs, too: the dining room was known as the *coffee room* (a fossilisation of the fact that clubs emerged from London coffee houses in the mid-late 17th century); a *stranger* was a guest; and *club table* was the long table in the coffee room at which solo members could join others for dining and conversation, as in Oxbridge colleges. ◆

STEPHEN COLLINS

Conor Gearty
Can legal power save Gaza?

The application to the International Criminal Court (ICC) for the arrest and trial of Benjamin Netanyahu, his minister of defence and three Hamas leaders is a huge moment for international law. The prosecutor, Karim Khan, took the precaution of seeking advice from eight distinguished experts (most of whom are based in the UK) who were unanimously supportive of his decision to pursue the individuals for war crimes and crimes against humanity. But uncertainty remains on multiple levels.

Will the warrants be granted? Approval must be obtained from the judges of the pre-trial chamber of the ICC, and they need to be satisfied that "there are reasonable grounds to believe that a person has committed a crime within the jurisdiction of the Court and the arrest of that person appears necessary". After a reorganisation in March, the pre-trial division is composed of six members, with judges Reine Alapini-Gansou (Benin), Socorro Flores Liera (Mexico) and Iulia Motoc (Romania) making up the most likely panel to be involved. If the warrants are denied this could precipitate a crisis within the whole system, given the evident care the prosecutor has brought to framing his case, and the relatively low bar of the "reasonable grounds" stipulation before warrants can be issued.

There are further procedural questions. Are the political and military leadership in a state that has not signed up to the ICC—such as Israel—lawfully to be treated in this way? The Court says yes, with Netanyahu vulnerable on account of an earlier ruling that Israel's conduct within Palestine brought it under the Court's remit. (Palestine has already signed up.) Can the current leader of a government be subject to a warrant for arrest? Again the Court says yes, the cases against presidents al-Bashir of Sudan and Charles Taylor of Liberia being the legal authorities (albeit this point remains controversial).

Then there is the practical effect of the ICC's move. If warrants are issued, will any of the five men be arrested? The 124 state parties to the ICC will be obliged to arrest them if they turn up in their countries, but that leaves quite a few bolt-holes: the US for the Israelis (as well as Israel itself of course), Qatar and Iran for Hamas. And if arrested, will any of them be convicted? The Court operates on the presumption of innocence, with proof required "beyond reasonable doubt" of which it has to be "convinced".

A question that is often central to international law is whether an intervention will impede the chances of an early end to violence in the region. The Hamas leaders are probably fairly indifferent to the ICC, and their strategic position is unlikely to be affected by it. Netanyahu and the government he leads are in a different, altogether more vulnerable position. It is possible the warrants will be a last straw, leading to the collapse of an already embattled administration—one whose civilised exterior has been rent asunder by the cumulative legal consequences of its actions in Gaza. Netanyahu may be aware that it is not unusual for those who end up in ICC custody to have been turned in by their own countries, a useful way for new regimes to mark a break with the past. It is no longer only domestic criminal proceedings that he has to worry about.

The extraordinary impact of what is, in one sense, a technical procedural move can be seen in the reaction. Joe Biden denounced the prosecutor for his "outrageous" implication of equivalence between Israel and Hamas, while Netanyahu called the decision a "moral outrage of historic proportions", committed by one of the "great antisemites in modern times". Like the proceedings under the entirely separate genocide convention currently before the International Court of Justice (ICJ)—which have now produced a demand for the immediate cessation of the Israeli offensive in Rafah—the fact of court proceedings (or, in the ICC's case, the initiation of a process that might lead to such proceedings) is a huge event in a way that is quite separate from whatever the outcomes might be. In a post-truth world, where assertions are amplified into supposed facts by the power of those making them and what we see with our own eyes is subverted by distortion, law stands out as an old-fashioned exception to what has become the norm. Law retains a commitment to facts that is compelling precisely because it seems to come from another era—it is a holdover from a time when truth mattered, and when it was not ridiculous to think it could be established.

International law, long viewed as the servant of power, is developing its own autonomy

Finally, there is the shifting balance of power. From its inception, international law has been viewed as largely the servant of power: colonial, imperial and, more recently, that of the global north. Those currently in custody awaiting trial at the ICC are all African, and those for whom warrants have been issued but who have so far escaped the clutches of the Court are also overwhelmingly from that continent.

The current proceedings before the ICC show this regional focus is no longer inevitable. International law has been developing its own institutional autonomy, its staff and judges believing in the global idea that underpins their mandates. The powerful states that created these bodies made the mistake of believing their universal jurisdiction could be safely conceded because it would never be turned on them. No more. Law commands its own loyalties to rules, not rulers. ◆


LA GIOIOSA
PROSECCO
Fizz & Chips anyone?
(It's the perfect Summer pairing!)
Family-made Prosecco.
Born in Treviso. Loved around the world.
@LaGioiosa_UK
Available from Sainsbury's.
Selected stores. Subject to availability.
bedrinkaware.co.uk
for the facts
CAMPAGNA FINANZIATA AI SENSI DEL REG. UE N. 2021/2115
CAMPAIGN FINANCED ACCORDING TO EU REG. N. 2021/2115

THE CULTURE »

State of the nation special

Seven books, five reviews, all about **England** *today*

Pages 60 to 71

More than just bowls of fruit?

Francesca Peacock *explains how still life is far from dead*

Page 72

DomTube, reviewed

Our TV critic, **Imogen West-Knights**, *on Dominic Cummings's foray into video*

Page 74

POSTCARDS FROM ENGLAND

ILLUSTRATIONS BY HARRY TENNANT

THE CULTURE »

Reviews

Books

England, our England

This election year, the stories we tell ourselves about the United Kingdom's largest polity are under additional scrutiny—and rightly so

by
PETER HOSKIN

It all starts in Runnymede. Or at least Tom Baldwin and Marc Stears's *England: Seven Myths That Changed a Country* starts in Runnymede—though many people would have us believe that a lot more began there too. The circumscription of the powers of kings, for instance. The protection of the God-given rights of the people. Democracy. Liberty. Even England itself.

For Runnymede—a corner of Surrey that's now enclosed by the River Thames and the six-lane M25—was, of course, the place from where Magna Carta, the Great Charter, emerged in mid-June 1215. On its own terms, this was a significant agreement that sought to spare the country from an immediate, full-blown civil war. A group of rebel barons, unhappy at King John's rampant unilateralism—particularly when it came to the raising of taxes—had already seized control of London. The meeting at Runnymede, between monarch and monied classes, was meant to resolve these tensions. After several days of discussion, a final list of regal concessions—the charter itself—was drawn up, including such humdingers as: "All fish-weirs shall be removed from the Thames, the Medway, and throughout the whole of England, except on the sea coast."

Magna Carta was not mythologised immediately. How could it have been? Although King John's placations were enough to resecure the barons' oaths of homage that June, they did not secure a lasting peace. Only a few months later, John sought papal permission to rescind the charter—and civil war did break out. Then, in subsequent years, including 1225 and 1297, Magna Carta was reissued by other kings in need, and often diluted in the process. Runnymede became more water than watershed.

No, as Baldwin and Stears make clear in the deft opening chapter of their book, the mythologisation of Magna Carta has happened sporadically over centuries. It is true that some of its clauses are historically significant: four of the original 63 clauses are on the statute books today, including the famous pledge that "No free man shall be seized, imprisoned, dispossessed, outlawed, exiled or ruined in any way, nor in any way proceeded against, except by the lawful judgement of his peers and the law of the land." But it is also true that Magna Carta has become something more than the sum of its provisions: in a large international poll conducted by Ipsos MORI on the occasion of the charter's 800th anniversary in 2015, over a fifth of British respondents who were "aware" of its existence reckoned that it had "helped to guarantee" trial by jury—when it did no such thing. Much the same could be said of freedom of speech, freedom of religion and many other basic human rights. If you believe that Magna Carta helped to guarantee those too, then British history has a few lessons for you.

England: Seven Myths that Changed a Country
by Tom Baldwin & Marc Stears (Bloomsbury, £22)

Another England: How to Reclaim Our National Story
by Caroline Lucas (Hutchinson Heinemann, £22)

The fact that the notion—and it is mostly a notion—of Magna Carta still resonates is at least partly due to its usurpation by political actors. It was seized upon by the proponents of the Glorious Revolution in the late 17th century, who wanted historic underpinnings for their new Bill of Rights. It was raised by American-English colonists in their rebellion against the motherland in the 18th century. And, of course, it was brandished during the Brexit campaign as the ur-example of Britain's—England's—total specialness. To quote Nigel Farage—who else?—tweeting nine years ago, "#MagnaCarta is something we should be immensely proud of."

As its subtitle suggests, Baldwin and Stears's book deals with seven stories that English people have told themselves (or had told to them) over time—not just about Magna Carta, but also about the achievements of William Wilberforce, the "rivers of blood" that would result from immigration, and more. It appears to be a good moment to be in the thinking-about-England business. Caroline Lucas's *Another England: How to Reclaim Our National Story* has also been published recently, following Andy Burnham and Steve Rotherham's political prospectus for the north of the country (see review

on p64). There are new novels about how modern England rewires the minds of its young men (p68). There are books about English filmmakers (p66) and architects (p70). And just wait for all the printed words that will be expended on the English men's football team during this summer's Euro 2024 tournament.

Perhaps the heightened interest is because this is the year of a general election—now just weeks away—in which England will play an outsized role. This is not to knock the other home nations of the United Kingdom—Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland—nor is it to make a claim of English exceptionalism. It's merely a statement of psephological fact. In the last general election, in 2019, England accounted for almost 27m of the 32m votes cast, or about 84 per cent. It returned 533 of the 650 seats on offer, or 82 per cent. Win in England, and you tend to win overall—which has basically been the Conservatives' strategy over the past decade, if not for longer. The Tories have secured the most English seats in 21 of the 28 general elections since 1918.

And it's not only general elections. In 2016, famously, England voted to leave the European Union by 53.4 per cent to 46.6 per cent (or by even more if you exclude London), which was greater even than Wales's 52.5–47.5 split—and worlds apart from the remain votes in Northern Ireland and Scotland. But, of course, it was the sheer weight of one nation's votes, all 13m of them, that carried the day. What England wants, England gets.

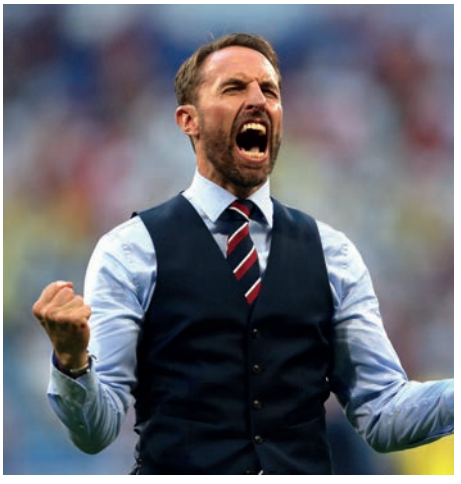
This may, in turn, help to explain why much of the recent thinking about England has been done by people on the political left; they have lost more from the nation's dominance, but also, potentially, have more to gain. Baldwin, one of the mythbusters, is a former Labour party communications chief and worked on both the Ed Miliband and People's Vote campaigns. Stears, the other, is a political academic who also advised Miliband, though he's surely best known for being my tutor at university (what a pleasure it is to mark his homework for a change). Meanwhile, Lucas, the author of *Another England*, is one of the most exemplary politicians of the 21st century—for many, the face of the Greens, which she has led on two occasions, and is still its only ever MP, though she is standing down from her Brighton Pavilion seat in July's general election.

Lucas's book also seeks to bust a number of the myths that have accumulated around England, though it does so in a different way. Baldwin and Stears's *England* is more an act of concerted analysis, presenting a myth (that Francis Drake was a jolly good chap, say) and unpicking it until it falls apart (Drake's piratical pursuits included trading in slaves), all while taking a couple of diversions down (literal) English byways and speaking to some of its people, both well-known and not. Whereas *Another England* is part memoir, part manifesto, but also a guided tour of some of Lucas's favourite works of English literature. Its method is more to suggest how, instead of relying on myths about Magna Carta and empire and the EU, we can spy—and aspire towards—a new England through the examples offered by the nation's novels, poems and other texts. She quotes the British-Nigerian writer Ben Okri to the effect that "Nations and people are largely the stories they feed themselves."

This makes *Another England* not just another book by another politician; if only

ILLUSTRATIONS BY HARRY TENNANT

THE CULTURE »



Collage of a nation, clockwise from top left: a frieze depicting the wedding of Robin Hood and Maid Marian; Stonehenge; the signing of Magna Carta by King John; England football manager Gareth Southgate; flags adorn a building in London; Francis Drake

more departing MPs would write about Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848) and John Wyndham's *The Kraken Wakes* (1953)! But the emphasis on literature also makes it a strange book. Yes, there may be lessons for how we ought to cherish and protect the English countryside in the poetry of John Clare—but a different politician, with different points to make, could claim that Enid Blyton's Famous Five books show how the policing of England's coastlines should simply be left to groups of pre-teen vigilantes, at much lower cost than the current arrangements.

Besides, parts of the textual analysis veers towards blandness—Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) is invoked, *pace* climate change, as an exploration of whether "humans fully understand the consequences of their untrammelled pursuit of science and technology"—or just plain oddness. Show me someone who claims, as Lucas does, that Robin Hood has never been transplanted out of England—in the way, she says, that the film *Seven Samurai* (1954) was transplanted out of Japan for the 1960 western *The Magnificent Seven*—and I will show you someone who hasn't seen the Sinatra-starring, Chicago gangsterland-set *Robin and the 7 Hoods* (1964).

Lucas's strength as a writer—and perhaps also as a politician—is her fierce reasonableness. Despite picking the literature that makes her points, and despite clearly yearning for a progressive English national story, she does not sweep away other perspectives entirely. Towards the start of *Another England*, she lists some of the "myths, half-remembered fragments of history, nostalgia and outright misrepresentation" that make up our national consciousness: England's victory in the 1966 World Cup, *Dad's Army*, Dunkirk, the Falklands and more. "The 'story' works," she adds, "because there is so much in the individual stories from which it is constructed – the creativity of the Enigma code-breaking, the courage that liberated the Falklands – that is genuinely admirable."

Baldwin and Stears's book is also at its best when it is at its most undogmatic. The chapter about Greenwich in London takes as its myth not a right-wing hero or ideal, but the notion of "England shedding history and bypassing time so that it could stride unburdened into a global future"—which is, the authors note, "most obviously associated with Tony Blair and his New Labour government". What follows could hardly be classed as a takedown of Blair, but rather a firm prodding-away at our former prime minister's impatient desire for an entirely new England, more futures markets than market towns, more cyber than *Carry On Up the Khyber*. Not only did the great, globalising effort predate New Labour—with Margaret Thatcher's governments laying the groundwork for the sky-scraping houses of international banking that have arisen alongside Greenwich—but the results of that effort have been patchy, at best. As Blair himself predicted, in his 1999 party conference speech, the "forces of progress" would have to do battle with the "forces of conservatism" in the 21st century, though he might not have foreseen the outcomes of each individual encounter. Globalisation, meet Brexit. Immigrants, meet firmer borders. Money markets, meet Liz Truss.

So what can be made of it all, of this England? If there is one new text—a Magna Carta—for the current century, then it may be an open letter written by the English men's football manager, Gareth Southgate, under the headline "Dear England", in 2021, ahead of his team's participation in that year's Euros. It was a letter that spoke of Southgate's own pride in "Queen and country", but also of a younger generation whose "notion of Englishness is quite different from my own". "I understand that on this island, we have a desire to protect our values and traditions," he continued, "but that shouldn't come at the expense of introspection and progress." This letter is referred to, with approval, in both *England: Seven Myths That Changed a Country* and *Another England*. It has lent its name and its author to a play by that other great summariser of modern England, James Graham.

When it comes to the future and its persistent challenges, something more solid than words is required

But perhaps "Dear England", too, is a myth—or mere comfort. When it comes to the future, with its persistent challenges of populism, national fracture and technological disorder, something more solid than words is required. Something, perhaps, like an English parliament? "I don't want progressives to fall into the trap of opposing calls for an English parliament," writes Lucas, noting how it is the right—even the far-right—that has so far led the calls for such an institution. There certainly is a positive case to be made, and not just for England. The introduction of an English parliament could result in more powers being granted to Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland; it could see clearer boundaries around what counts as a UK matter to be dealt with in the UK parliament; it could inspire a rethink of the voting system so that our representative bodies are more, well, representative. Lucas quotes John Denham, another figure of the left who has paid great attention to Englishness: "Only when England can see itself as England will it be possible to challenge the idea that Britain is England and allow the other nations to feel like partners of equal status."

In this respect, we might think of England as the thick end of the wedge. If lasting change is to be made in the UK as a whole—the sort that will keep that kingdom united—then change in England, the biggest of the home nations by population and political footprint, needs to be hammered through as hard as possible. Just like the final penalty, courtesy of Jude Bellingham's right foot, that will win us the Euros on 14th July. ♦

Peter Hoskin *is books & culture editor at Prospect*

THE CULTURE »

Books

North stars

Two Labour mayors have a plan for rebalancing northern and southern England, along with the wider UK. Can it become a reality?

by
STU HENNIGAN

In England, in this election year of 2024, it's difficult not to feel despondent.

Austerity is in its bitter endgame, with reports that councils nationwide are collectively in debt to the tune of £97.8bn. Even the bloodbath facing what's left of the UK's public services will do little to shore up budgets: many authorities face the prospect of issuing Section 114 notices over the next few years—effectively declaring bankruptcy.

Presiding over this mess from Westminster, since 2010, we've had five prime ministers—three of them in 2022 alone. They include Liz Truss, of course, whose kamikaze economic policies crashed the financial markets and provoked huge mortgage hikes for tens of thousands of homeowners already struggling against extraordinary inflation and extortionate energy prices.

What's more, the ongoing Covid inquiry is confirming what many already suspected: that the government's mishandling of the pandemic was feckless at best and opportunistic, profiteering and murderous at worst.

Need I go on? I could—the catalogue of disasters is long and terrible. But the question that really needs asking is: what is to be done? *Head North*—billed as "a rallying cry for a more equal Britain"—puts forward some possible answers. The authors, mayor of Greater Manchester Andy Burnham and his Labour party colleague and Liverpool City Region equivalent, Steve Rotheram, propose "a ten-point plan to rewire the country" and a "move away from the mindset that Westminster is the only show in town".

The book describes itself as "half-memoir, half-manifesto" and so is split into two parts: "Our Journey" and "Our Vision". In the first, Burnham and Rotheram are in full bloke-down-the-pub mode, alternately narrating how they, two working-class lads from the north-west of England, became MPs before becoming mayors. They paint a stark picture of growing up in "Granadaland" under Thatcher, when "jobs were going at an alarming rate" and chancellor Geoffrey Howe recommended a policy of "managed decline" for Liverpool after the Toxteth riots of 1981. They establish the north-south divide at the outset; Burnham writes explicitly that "England was in fact two different countries".

The second part is more urgent, telling, as it does, of Burnham and Rotheram's entries into Westminster—and how quickly they became disillusioned with a system that prioritises party dogma over individual freedom of thought. This, for them, is encapsulated by the phenomenon of party whipping, which "disincentivises and disempowers" MPs. When it comes to voting on legislation, Rotheram notes, "the decisions have already been made for [you]."

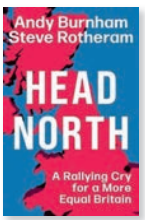
The extra financial support made available to London during the pandemic is cited as a major driver of their new vision. "I don't think any other episode in our political history has more starkly exposed the dark truth about life in Britain," says Burnham. Another driver is the decades-long establishment cover-up around the Hillsborough disaster of 1989, in which 97 Liverpool football fans died: "A pivotal example of how the structures of power in this country do not work for ordinary people."

So, again, to that question: what is to be done? The book's 10-point plan stems from a recognition that the London-centric nature of politics and its centralised legislative structure has exacerbated—some would say, deliberately—the fiscal and social chasm between the southeast and the rest of England, as well as between England and the rest of the UK. Moving away from this awful arrangement, Burnham and Rotheram are keen to emphasise, isn't a matter of self-interest on their part—but would benefit all parts of the country.

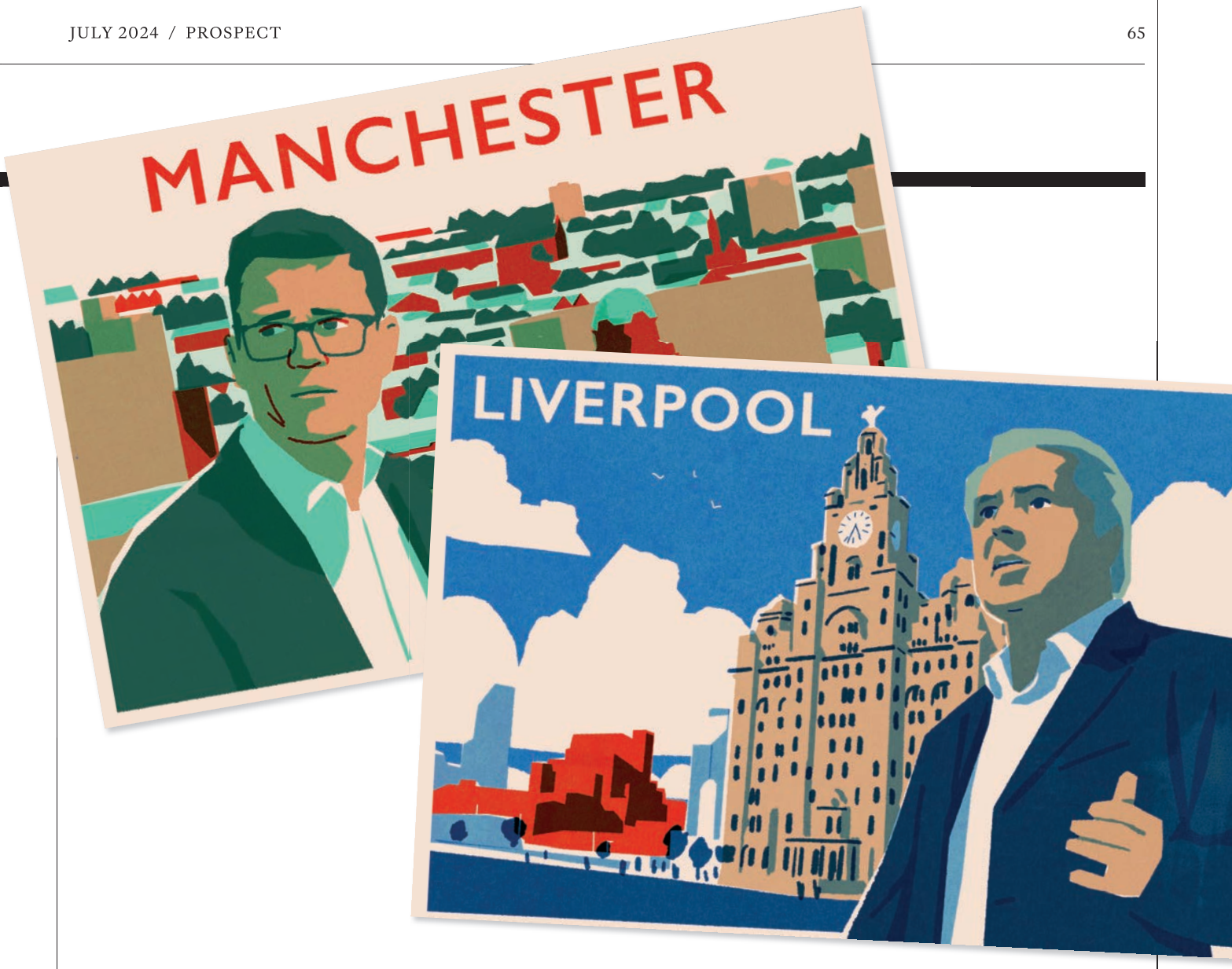
What they're aiming for isn't quite a redistribution of wealth, more a rebalancing catalysed by decentralising government and giving more autonomy to regional authorities. Full devolution is key: giving elected local leaders powers over all core domestic policy issues, along with the capabilities to raise their own funds, so that policies set by national leaders could be implemented locally in different ways according to need.

Hand in hand with this is a Basic Law, by which each devolved region must receive equal amounts of funding. For decades, the Treasury's Green Book—effectively its guidance on how to spend public money—has assessed potential investments with benefit-cost ratios (BCRs), which look at how quickly an investment will make a return. This means that underdeveloped or deprived areas are denied cash injections because returns would be slower, while thriving places remain perpetually attractive. Muck to t'midden, as they say round here.

Parliamentary reform is critical to Burnham and Rotheram's plans: the removal of the whip system would give



Head North: A Rallying Cry for a More Equal Britain
by Andy Burnham & Steve Rotheram (Orion, £22)



MPs the freedom to vote as they see fit, not as the party dictates, allowing space for nuance and consensus-building. Voting reform is key too: the book advocates for some form of proportional representation to ensure that outcomes such as 2019's general election—when the Conservatives gained a 7.4 percentage-point increase in seats with only a 1.3 percentage-point increase in their vote, and 14.5m people voted for unelected candidates—become a thing of the past. The Lords is recognised as an essential safeguard in principle, but is in no way representative of the people when about 55 per cent of its members live in London, the southeast and the east of England; an elected "Senate of the nations and regions" would replace it, but "there is clearly a lot more detail to be worked out."

Burnham and Rotheram also recommend opening up new possibilities to the 63 per cent of school leavers in England who don't enter higher education. Their model, here, appears to be the growing number of pathways open to 16-year-olds in Manchester to train in areas such as design and engineering as an alternative to the national system, in which non-academic children are written off early and class snobbery persists. "I genuinely believe that someone with a high level technical qualification, such as an NVQ level 7, would be looked down on by a prospective employer compared with a graduate with a third-class honours degree from Cambridge," says Rotheram—and he's right.

None of this, nor any of their other ideas, which include both "Hillsborough" and "Grenfell" laws, will be achievable without the first point: a full, written constitution to "protect the important role of local government... and codify Whitehall's responsibility to ensure that all councils have sufficient funding to carry out their statutory functions." The UK is one of only a handful of countries—Saudi Arabia and Israel being two other glaring examples—not to have such a document, a fact that clearly needs to change.

Burnham and Rotheram's ambitions are laudable—and, perhaps, achievable: they detail numerous successful initiatives where they have already put some of these ideas into practice. Crucially, though, they don't claim to have all the answers. Their aim is more to work towards "a cross-party and cross-geography consensus" for overhauling an archaic, antiquated and utterly broken system. That they're looking beyond the partisan binaries of party politics is probably the most radical thing of all. ◆

Stu Hennigan *is a writer based in Leeds*

THE CULTURE »

Books

Camera man

A new book sheds light on the civic filmmaker Sam Hanna, who himself shed light on everyday England

by
SUKHDEV SANDHU

Sam Hanna was one of the most prolific English filmmakers of the 20th century. His work spanned six decades. He made 270 documentary films. Have you heard of him?

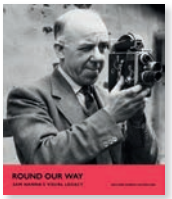
Born in Burnley in 1903, Hanna left school at the age of 12 to work in a cotton mill, turned to furniture design and cabinetmaking, and then became a woodwork teacher. His colleagues looked down on the subject—too manual, too vocational—and didn't let him share the staff room. But he was a hit with his pupils after he brought his Pathé 9.5mm camera into class. He filmed joining and filing techniques, which he played back to them, sometimes in slow motion. "This medium was far better than talk and chalk," he later recalled. The working-class boys knew that it was unusual for kids of their ilk to be able to see themselves on a screen.

Hanna thought his experiences might inspire other teachers. He wanted to show his films to those bigwigs at the local educational authority who assumed most pupils were factory fodder and destined to spend their working lives doing grunt labour. He himself was seen as an upstart. After all, he'd turned up in a car on his first day at the technical school. He had his own camera. (The classroom in which he taught didn't have electricity.) Looked at as more of an entertainer than a pedagogue, he was barred from showcasing his innovations in his home town.

Hanna was blessed with an outsider's persistence and passion. He spent his weekends and spare time, his sometimes reluctant family alongside him, travelling across northwest England and beyond—as far as Scotland, Holland, Switzerland—documenting the lives and traditions of the people he met. He chronicled carnival parades and agricultural shows, made time-lapse films about pond life, portrayed well-known sculptors, artists and communist priest Hewlett Johnson (whose support of Stalin won him the nickname "The Red Dean of Canterbury"). He recorded home movies, vignettes of daytrippers taking donkey rides by the seafront, and, at the invitation of Burnley Football Club, covered a fixture at Turf Moor against Manchester United that featured the pre-Munich air disaster Busby Babes.

Perhaps this all sounds rather minor, just everyday rites and rituals that do not merit much attention. Look closer, though—and you can see, in a scene that would delight the makers of *Freddie Flintoff's Field of Dreams*, city-dwelling children play cricket in car-free streets. In the silent short *Knocker-Up* (1946–49) a suit-and-tie-wearing older gent paces Burnley's cobbled streets, tapping the windows of terraced homes with a stick to wake up their inhabitants so they get to work on time. (The arrival of cheap alarm clocks rendered this job obsolete.)

A slightly later film records the opening of a self-service Co-op shop, a development that, in its way, anticipates the advent of self-checkouts. Hanna was attentive to the grain of ordinary life, to subtle shifts in how we engage with our surroundings, to the social glue that makes us more than atomised consumers. He was a civic journalist capturing a stratum of England that the collapse of local journalism has rendered invisible.



Round Our Way: Sam Hanna's Visual Legacy
by Heather Norris Nicholson (Pendle Press & Manchester UP, £25)

Hanna was especially drawn to craftspeople. His films are a window onto a mostly disappeared world of skills that had been handed down from generation to generation. They show coopers, saddlers, clog block makers, oak spelk basket makers, Welsh broth spoon carvers, dry stone wallers, clay pipe makers, haff net fishers (who, for the best part of a millennium, caught salmon and trout by standing in the sea and scooping them up with framed nets). Here they are, just. Proud but embattled. Like members of a dying tribe in a black-and-white print in an ethnographic study. Today, when so many of us do what David Graeber has called "bullshit" jobs, jabbing at digital devices, shunting around globs of information in soulless environments, such hands-on creativity is poignant to see.

Heather Norris Nicholson, author of the newly published *Round Our Way*, a study of Hanna's legacy, tells me that she was drawn to the steadiness of his gaze, his passion for "documenting rural industries and traditional crafts, lamenting the demise of products made from plastic rather than natural resources, capturing things for posterity that you now only find in museums". While he wasn't a party man, his sympathies were towards the left, his films imbued with some of the same spirit as EP Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), a book that the historian hoped might "rescue the poor stockinger... the 'obsolete' hand-loom weaver, the 'utopian' artisan... from the enormous condescension of posterity". (After the Second World War, Thompson taught adult students in West Riding.)

Hanna was an enterprising self-starter. He invented devices to help with film editing and screening, and set up a small com-

pany that sold slide projectors and filmstrip projectors. Yet he was also an English amateur, an enthusiast, in thrall to the lower case. Other countries, particularly those in eastern Europe, prized their amateur filmmakers as model cine-workers and for their contributions to the political project. They were even paid by the state.

Not so in England. Still, there's a too-little-known history of English cinema to be told through—literally—the lens of amateurism. In the 1920s and 1930s, hundreds of clubs sprang up (often in the north), the British Association of Amateur Cinematographers was formed, and journals such as *Amateur Cine World* flourished. This was indie film before indie film existed. A thriving regional network, mostly ignored by London, drew audiences at screenings held in libraries, factories and municipal halls. By the 1970s it had waned, as film gave way to video, and viewing increasingly took place in living rooms rather than community centres.

One club that has held out is the Bradford Movie Makers, founded in 1932 and meeting almost every Monday since then. (Kim Hopkins's delightful 2022 film *A Bunch of Amateurs* follows its members as they struggle on, through Covid and the deaths of loved ones, bickering over biscuits and tea, still passionate about making and watching films together.)

Dorothea Lang, the photojournalist best known for documenting the social impact of the Great Depression in the early 1930s, claimed, "The camera is an instrument that teaches people how to see without a camera." That's true for Sherif Dhaimish, whose independent Pendle Press, in partnership with Manchester University Press, has brought out Nicholson's book about Hanna. The son of Hasan "Alsatoor" Dhaimish, a Libyan artist who spent much of his life satirising the Gaddafi regime, he grew up in Burnley in the 1990s and early 2000s, a time when the city seemed long past its prime. "The landscape was post-industrial. I'm mixed race and the racism was heavy. It's still very heavy in the air," he says. "I knew when I was 15 that if I stayed, the place would get a grip of me. I had to get away from the close-mindedness."

Hanna's films, their peopling and decency, their liveliness and optimism, have soaked into him. "Sam's work made me more empathetic towards Burnley. It's had a huge impact: the way he celebrates and preserves part of its culture, how he highlights social issues and allows us to explore them." Now, online and for free, they can be seen at the North West Film Archive. They're a treasure trove of England well worth exploring. ◆

Sukhdev Sandhu *runs the Colloquium for Unpopular Culture at New York University*

THE CULTURE »

Books

Unmanaged decline

Two recent novels survey England's mental landscape. What is happening to the country's young men?

by
CHRISTIANA SPENS

Tower blocks. Post offices. Pubs. Football pitches. Schools. Online chat forums. The landscape of modern England is as much mental as it is physical. How do these places interact with one another and with the people who occupy them? What does the whole network of institutions, history, money, trends and expectations mean for any given individual?

In his 2009 book *Capitalist Realism*, the late critic and author Mark Fisher wrote with fierce clarity about his own depression and the mental health struggles of his students. His argument, broadly put, was that one person's mental health crisis rarely emerges in a vacuum—at its root are systemic causes, too. Though it's hard to disentangle environment from genetics, it's clear that upbringing and social status play their part. What's more, we are all so enmeshed in our communities that one person's breakdown can reverberate in profound yet unknowable ways.

What effects, what reverberations, are being felt in England today? Two new and impressive novels grapple with that question. One is *England Is Mine*, by debut author Nicolas Padamsee; the other, Keiran Goddard's *I See Buildings Fall Like Lighting*. Neither offers easy answers as they explore the terrain between mental illness, crime, identity and violence.

Padamsee's novel takes as its subject the lives of two east London teenagers, David and Hassan. They are both from immigrant families, both obsessed with football, gaming and, like so many of their age and backgrounds, finding ways to fit in. David's wrestling with his identity is more pronounced. His mother is Iranian, and often recounts the severity of life under the Islamic Republic; his father, a former officer in the British Army, is now confined to watching old TV shows and drinking, sometimes breaking off to sneer about his ex-wife.

Since the divorce, David has been shuttled between their homes. At school, he is bullied after some of the other boys find his makeup kit; though he was only trying to improve the appearance of his oily skin, he is hit with a barrage of homophobic slurs. David reacts to this humiliation by focusing his attention on a charismatic musician, Karl Williams, who resembles a fusion of Pete Doherty, Russell Brand and Morrissey. (The novel's title alludes to a 2017 film of the same name that traced the Manchester singer's life before he formed the Smiths.) In a sense, alongside Reddit forums, Twitter and *Call of Duty*, it is this vegan musician who really radicalises David, and this dark comedy underlines the escalating disaster of his teenage personality crisis.

And so he changes his appearance to match his hero, donning fedora hats, eyeliner and other symbols of the indie-sleaze era, in defiance of his bullies. But when Karl is cancelled over comments he makes against Islam and immigration, David faces a painful decision. He chooses the path of repression. "David wonders what Karl meant, then puts it out of his mind. 'Black Glass' is a favourite, an early solo one. 'You'll pay the price,' he sings."

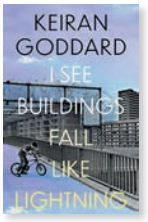
David's loyalty isolates him further. The provocative opinions of his hero, and then the racist ideas he encounters by going down online rabbit holes, seem to splinter his personality. He doesn't want the same identity as those who bully him, but he does want the (imagined) acceptance of Karl. And so he suppresses his heritage and internalises the racism; he becomes his father's son rather than his mother's; he joins in with the bigots on social media. For a time, in a superficial way, it pays off. "A notification flashes up on his phone. The first like for his tweet. Rory and Eleanor and the other wokies who unfollowed him could do one."

Confusion about identity is at the heart of David's plight: he rebrands himself as Aryan, but is considered an Islamist due to his skin colour. He becomes an embodiment of a disastrous, post-truth confusion: he thinks he can recreate himself and escape the violence and isolation he has endured, but, regardless of the lengths he goes to, he fails to convince anyone else.

Similar things could be said of the novel's other main character, Hassan. While he is part of the group that bullies David, Hassan also wants to change—by going to university—but is thwarted by how he is seen by others. There is a chilling sense of futility for both boys: they will always be reduced to their physical appearances and endure the consequences of being randomly hated by someone else.

Keiran Goddard's second novel, *I See Buildings Fall Like Lighting*, considers the lives of a group of childhood friends, this time from a city that resembles Birmingham. Rian has moved to London and

England is Mine
by Nicolas Padamsee
(Serpent's Tail, £16.99)



I See Buildings Fall Like Lighting
by Keiran Goddard
(Abacus, £16.99)

become rich almost by chance (playing the stock market online), but the others are all where they grew up, and Rian still visits them there, where they reconvene in a flat-roofed pub out of nostalgia and habit. Rian used to stay over with Patrick, a perpetually exhausted delivery driver, and his girlfriend Shiv, who stays home to raise their daughters—but recently he has chosen to stay in a hotel instead, which makes him feel slightly awkward. Joining them in the pub is Conor, who is developing a new housing project, and Oli, who treats his job on a local building site as a side hustle to his drug dealing.

Each person in this friendship group works hard in various ways, the assumption being that they must *always* work hard to somehow transcend their beginnings. Yet it is precisely this mindset that is so damaging. It's why Patrick's health becomes strained; Oli struggles to throw off his latent heroin addiction; and Conor drinks as hard as he labours, spinning out of control. "When we were kids, showing off in front of one another," Patrick reflects, "we used to say we were drinkers, not talkers. But we didn't mean it. Deep down we were hungry to talk but just embarrassed to do it. How many silent ways are there to tell your friends that you love them or that you're scared to lose them or that you're worried you might waste your life?... But now, that has changed. I think we actually *are* drinkers and not talkers. Eventually the mask becomes the face."

In both of these novels, the sense of claustrophobia builds. These people cannot be themselves because the world around them will not allow for it without first shaming or punishing them. As Shiv says, "Your life was probably fine, but it wasn't what it could have been. You were never quite yourself, but you never quite managed to escape yourself either."

Eventually, this build-up spills over in cataclysmic ways. Violent actions are shown to be desperate attempts to take control and channel endemic frustration into... well, *something*. But, even in extremis, the characters cannot and do not communicate either who they are or who they want to be. In *England Is Mine*, David's identity has been misunderstood and dismissed for such a long time that he takes solace in an invented, fantastical avatar of himself—blurring into a digital figure and dehumanising himself further. In *I See Buildings Fall Like Lightning*, the ambition to escape the constraints of the past inspires both a risky development project and various forms of addiction. All are compulsive, apt to fall in on themselves. "You can sense that the race is over. But there is no flag and no thunder. Or not that I can see from here."

These are not merely trauma plots, then, but explorations of how the political is deeply personal, how society—English society—inflects the expectations, desires and actions of the people within it. Both books also consider political violence, and what even counts as such. An act of terrorism may seem obviously political; an act of domestic abuse or suicide, less so. But each share a common origin in wider, structural inequalities. The worth that we give ourselves and to each other determines how violence escalates; only common humanity and mutual respect can prevent it.

Goddard and Padamsee elegantly pinpoint how people are dehumanised in modern England—first by other people and then by themselves. Their characters lose their words, they are damned unfairly, they are so overworked they can barely think straight; they lose real connection and imagine the simulations offered to them are genuine. And from this breakdown in care emerges violence—the first expression of pain that can only perpetuate more of it. ◆

Christiana Spens *is a writer and artist*

Books

Building backwards

The interwar period was a fascinating time to be an architect in England—provided you ignored what the masses wanted

by
DAVID MCALLISTER

If artists are in constant rebellion against their predecessors, then architects want to rewrite history. It is not enough to just build good buildings. We must also call out what is bad, erase what is bad until there is no evidence left of the bad, so that room can be made in this finite world for more of the good. Or at least this is my lasting impression of the dogma of architects between the world wars, after reading this fascinating new survey of the era by Gavin Stamp.

Perhaps more than any other period in history, the interwar period truly can be summarised by old historiographical chestnuts. Yes, it was indeed a time of great change and of great strides in technology; yes, it was a time of soul-searching and transition. It was also a time, judging by Stamp's meticulous research, when architects and architecture enthusiasts were unrelentingly cruel. "Lacks wit"; "dreariest disaster"; "an act of vandalism"; "too big for their boots"; "tiresome"; "a trifle pretentious"; "incongruous, ignorant"; "really dull"; "a wicked building"; "glorified gin-palace"; "villas like sewage farms"; "like an aeroplane falling through a garage"; "a fantasy created in an opium den by a retired colonel". And that's just for starters. Pity the English city dweller of the early 20th century, for surely they looked upon a landscape *leaden* with affronts to the eye! After the opening of the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre in Stratford, in 1932, the composer Edward Elgar puffed that it was "unspeakably ugly and wrong"; he refused to even go inside. Nowadays, the theatre is Grade II listed.

The intensity of this arch mudslinging was perhaps merely indicative of what was at stake. In the aftermath of the First World War, with British society bearing the brunt of an unprecedented loss of life and the collective trauma that this engendered, a new order simply *had* to emerge—but what shape that order might

take was still very much up for debate. The dividing lines were many, but chief among them was that between the young, who had gone to fight, and the old, who had sent them. In the architectural profession, there seemed few among the young surviving architects who looked on the good old days with much fondness, for it was precisely those days that had dropped them in the trenches. The old, for their part, were not quite prepared to pass the baton just yet, for that was tantamount to conceding that their days were now over.

In intellectual terms, this push and pull between young and old morphed into a clash between traditionalism and modernism, or what then was more commonly called the "Modern Movement". The traditionalists saw the role of architecture as one of historical deference, to perfect the standards and motifs first born in better times: "Greco, Roman, Renaissance, Byzantine". (To that list you could also add Neo-Georgian, a callback to a more specifically British jolly good time.) As a term, traditionalism might suggest a kind of stuck-in-the-mud conservatism, but it was more about insisting that architecture existed along a continuum, constantly made anew but fundamentally stretching back through the aeons. Erratic left turns didn't get us anywhere: learning from and building on the lessons of old was the thing. It was in this mentality that the traditionalists differed most sharply from the modernists, who wanted nothing if not a clean break with the past.

But, like the traditionalists, modernism was not *really* about "modernity" or "being modern". It was more about meeting rapid technological change with a new kind of mysticism: the machine will change humanity for good, and it will do so in ways beyond our imagination. It is little surprise that its application was most common in the two genres of building that had no direct historical antecedents: the mass-production factory and the cinema.

A survey of another European country might make a lot of fanfare about modernism's strides during this period, but in England the reality was that it remained a hard sell: an exhibition of English modernism, held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1937, struggled to cough up more than a meagre 49 exemplary buildings. In any case, modernism as an architectural "style" imbibed with artistic values akin to those found in classical antiquity was unfathomable to most English architects. "Nudity needs no excuse in France," the design writer John Gloag wrote in 1931, "but for the benefit of English decorum it is carefully explained that we are being presented to a scientific discovery, not an artistic one." A discovery of this sort might indeed be intriguing at first, but it certainly wasn't something to stir the emotions. Perhaps, to some ears, to say you had "fallen in love" with your modernist pile was a bit like saying you had fallen in love with your butler.

Yet as the MoMA's dilemma suggests, there was a wider disparity between architectural thought and application going on here—and one that implicated both traditionalists and modernists alike. The truth is that the arguments about the merits of Corinthian columns over reinforced concrete were, by and large, quite removed from ordinary people. At a time when the population increased by only 10 per cent but the number of houses being built by 30 per cent, the real character of English architecture—the character which most of its inhabitants experienced every day of their lives—was to be found in the suburbs. And in the suburbs, what the "Englishman and his wife" wanted had nothing to do with either modernism's self-righteous machinations or traditionalism's highfalutin snobbery. What they wanted was Henry VIII. Or, more specifically, a Tudor house.

We all know the type: a half-timber frame, the slats painted black and white, with a thatch roof. Perhaps sitting at a skewed angle, surrounded by oak trees and hedgerows. Lots of charming nooks and crannies. How quaint! Just about every architect despised it.

Traditionalists hated it because it was pure pastiche, with no actual grounding in history, not even the Tudor period. Modernists hated it because it was an overt rejection of the machine, a regression in favour of deluded agrarian ideals. It was to this genre of suburban development that both camps, together, reserved their most inventive scorn: "Stockbroker Tudor"; "By-pass variegated"; "Dunroamin" houses. "In ye olde villages and ye newe imitations of ye olde villages, struggling gentlefolk are busy travestying Morris," the architect writer Lionel Cuffe scoffed.

That is, of course, if they mentioned it at all, which was seldom. Stamp notes that, despite its runaway success, no comprehensive survey of this particular brand of suburban "semidetached Tudor" was made at the time. Most architect critics tried to silence it out of existence; even today, little has been written on it. And yet, built in their millions, often to the same handful of anonymously designed templates (perhaps not quite what Le Corbusier had in mind when he beseeched architects to embrace the "spirit of mass production"), they were and remain, argues Stamp, "all but emblematic of England between the wars."

Which brings us to a much more pertinent set of questions. At what point does aestheticism become plain-and-simple elitism? When do we give the people what they want as opposed to what we think they *ought* to want? Architecture still wrestles with these questions today, but perhaps the playwright JB Priestly had already distilled the argument to its bluntest essence back in 1927: "We should be content to make the whole country hideous if we know for certain that by doing so we could also make the people in it moderately happy." Is that a sacrifice any of our vaunted architects would be willing to make? The record speaks for itself. ♦

Interwar: British Architecture 1919-39
by Gavin Stamp
(Profile, £40)

David McAllister *is production & associate editor at Prospect*

THE CULTURE »

Our critics

WILSON LOAN / © THE LUCIAN FREUD ARCHIVE. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED 2024 / BRIDGEMAN IMAGES

Art

Still going

A new exhibition demonstrates that still-life painting has always had much to offer—in the past and for the future

by FRANCESCA PEACOCK

In 1946, Lucian Freud devoted his attentions to a tangerine. Barely nine centimetres square—and now dwarfed by its red velvet and gilt frame—the resulting painting is a testament to the possibilities of still life. The fruit is green, unripe and dimpled with pockmarks. Three leaves are attached, two on the same stem and one unfurling from beneath. It sits on a blue-white surface that slopes to the right and is against a darker grey-blue background. Everything seems to have both a halo—a meniscus of bright white against the dark—and a corresponding shadow: blue-black fingerprints beneath the stretches of the leaves, the dome of the sphere.

Unripe Tangerine is, truly, wonderful. Its size doesn't stop it from shining in "The Shape of Things", a new exhibition of 100 still lives at Pallant House Gallery in Chichester. Freud's attention to detail—his unflinching ability to record the texture of the fruit's skin, its unready-roughness—almost constitutes a manifesto for the still-life genre: exploration, vehicle for figurative experimentation, representation that slips away from mimesis. Despite its tangible texture, there's a sense that the fruit doesn't quite exist: it's more colour than form, more abstraction than realism. Though placed on a slope, it wouldn't roll if pushed but, instead, disintegrate.

Freud painted his tangerine just after the end of the Second World War. As soon as travel restrictions were lifted, he and his fellow artist John Craxton travelled to Greece in search of bright, Mediterranean light. But the light that Freud found was decidedly more northerly. The quiet blues of his painting pay homage to Dutch still lives: Adriaen Coorte's study of a handful of asparagus, say, or any of Willem Claesz's decaying scenes. (Amusingly, Freud reverses the tradition of paintings of rotting fruit as memento mori. The disquiet in his depiction stems from its pallid, anaemic qualities, rather than over-ripeness.)

The exhibition's subtitle, "Still Life in Britain", seems, initially, to be an odd grouping. From its Dutch origins in symbolic flower paintings and *vanitas* arrangements complete with pale skulls to its French apotheosis in works by Cézanne and the other post-impressionists, still life as a genre has never seemed particularly *British*. Nor is it, historically, a genre that has received much acclaim in this country. From the 16th century onwards, the French Academy's formal hierarchy of genres—also adopted in Britain—ranked history painting first and still life last.

The genre's unassuming status wasn't helped by the fact that it had distinctly feminine associations. Given that women couldn't paint history scenes—they were prohibited from studying the nude—they turned to still lives and flower paintings. It is no accident that one of the two founding members of the Royal Academy, Mary Moser, painted highly studied floral arrangements.

In recent years, however, something has changed. If you visited the Royal Academy's Summer Exhibition last year, you might have walked into a room of 200 still lives, curated by the artist Clare Woods. Woods also has a work in the Pallant House show, a study of a 19th-century mocha-ware jug that was owned—and painted—by both William and Ben Nicholson. Woods joins a number of British contemporary artists who are building their careers on still lives: see, for instance, Poppy Jones's ghostly quiet scenes painted on suede or Lotta Teale's jewel-like snapshots of domestic life.

This contemporary profusion raises a deceptively simple question. What exactly *is* a still life? Is it as straightforward as a collection of fruit, a grouping of pottery, or a domestic scene? The Liverpool-born painter Christopher Wood didn't think so. In a 1922 letter to his mother that is quoted at the beginning of the Pallant House catalogue, the artist dwelled on the psychology of the genre: the "ruffled, wrinkled" tablecloth "troubled with dark shadows" that suggests the "world that these lemons live in". Even broader definitions falter. The original Dutch term *stillleven*, meaning "motionless life", is troubled by *Severed Breast*, Lee

Miller's 1929 still-life photograph of her friend's amputated breasts placed on white crockery, still bleeding after a mastectomy.

The still lives in the Pallant House exhibition—and those of other modern and contemporary artists—show something else that seems to mark the genre. It's an art that takes unassuming, everyday objects as its subject, but refuses to be confined or limited by expectations of domesticity. As Lotta Teale told me, women were initially "embracing the very restrictions which stopped them from being artists" by painting the domestic. Now, the rise in the status of still life is, she thinks, "very connected with the change of women in society".

Lee Miller's photo provocatively plays with domestic expectations: the two breasts are presented as a pair of steaks, a perverted dinner for a husband and wife. What about elsewhere? The surrealist Eileen Agar used domestic detritus in her *The Object Lesson:* a doll sits in front of a wicker rack that could have recently been snatched from a kitchen. Winifred Nicholson's still lives—flowers in vases, orchids in pots—are often placed in front of windows, a mix of still life and landscape, that seems to hint at a world beyond the jug and the coffee pot, outside the cloistered world of a kitchen.

There's a knowing artificiality to a still life: it has to be set up and painted before real life requires the kettle to be used, the oranges to be eaten. Eric Ravilious understood this. His *Ironbridge Interior* (1941)—painted while he was working as a war artist and just a year before his untimely death—is completed by his addition of a painting of the very same scene hanging on the wall. His mise-en-scène is not just clever play: it highlights how false the still life is, how it is only ever an artistic representation, rather than real life.

COURTESTY LOTTA TEALE

The domestic disquiet: a still life by Lotta Teale

There's another realisation in Ravilious's painting, too. From flower paintings to Freud's tangerine, the genre is an exploration of paint, of shapes, of materiality and abstraction. But it's also, in a meaningful sense, a political genre. Its canvases ask: what does it mean for women to be confined to painting domesticity? To continue to paint still lives, even when other genres have opened up? What does it mean to paint interior scenes in a time of war—when houses are being bombed, or soldiers are away from home?

These questions reverberate around the Pallant House exhibition, from Claude Cahun's dissections of the female form to Ben Nicholson's decision to add a Union Flag to a scene of white crockery in his painting *1943-45 (St Ives, Cornwall)*. They're also questions I discussed with Teale, who lives and paints in Jerusalem. Earlier this year, it became impossible for her to paint her still lives—asparagus on white dishcloths, oranges against blue pottery—against the threat of missile attacks.

Reflecting on the genre, Teale sees still life as paintings that can connect with their viewers, even those who may not know the circumstances in which they were produced, works that "leave the viewer space to imagine themselves in the painting, in a different world." A world, in some cases, of pallid tangerines, yet to ripen. ◆

THE CULTURE »

TV

Cummings shots

Can Dominic Cummings, video star, manage to capture people's hearts and minds?

by **IMOGEN WEST-KNIGHTS**

We've seen a lot less of Dominic Cummings since that infamous 2020 press conference from the rose garden of Number 10, where he attempted to justify breaking quarantine rules and visiting Barnard Castle. But he hasn't disappeared. He moved to Substack, the newsletter-cum-blogging platform that's popular with journalists who want a more direct line to their readers—and to earn subscription fees from that relationship. Cummings started his Substack in June 2021, charging £10 a month to his subscribers, who apparently number in the tens of thousands. Before this, he blogged on his personal website, clocking up more than a million words railing against Boris Johnson and more or less every other member of the Tory party; detailing his experiences giving evidence at the Covid Inquiry; as well as delivering his various thoughts on AI, democracy, education, the evils of social science and whatever else caught his eye.

At the end of April, Cummings announced a new venture on his Substack, called "Breaking Kayfabe". Kayfabe, for those uninitiated in WWE, is the wrestling world's convention of maintaining the illusion that the sport is not staged. The conceit with Breaking Kayfabe, then, is that Cummings is going to cut through and reveal the fakery he sees in the mainstream news media and in government communications to the public. The odd thing about Breaking Kayfabe is that, for the first time, Cummings is making a foray into video, rather than written, content. The videos will be short, around 60 seconds in length, and offer nuggets of Cummings's personal brand of no-bullshit, anti-establishment opinion to the world.

Why? Cummings doesn't leave it to us to guess: "SEND THIS VIDEO TO YOUR FRIENDS ON WHATSAPP ETC!" it says in slightly threatening capitals directly beneath the video. In an accompanying blog post, Cummings laments that "it's impossible to live a normal life and spend hours combing the internet to figure out which randoms are actually accurate" on current affairs. So, he writes, "I'm going to experiment with super short and simple video that focuses on what's important. I'm also interested to see how people share these, given short videos are taking over from text."

Indeed they are. It remains unimaginable, however, that Cummings would do anything so gauche as launching a TikTok account. So this is a way for him to experiment with other methods for breaking out of Substack and into a position of greater influence. He wants to be in your family group chat, shareable, digestible. He says fewer than 200 words. This is not the Cummings who routinely writes rambling screeds on Tolstoy, Bismarck and the sorry state of the contemporary Tory party.

So what have we got with this first instalment of Breaking Kayfabe? It is titled, "How to summarise as much as possible about how politics really works in 60 seconds?" In it, Cummings delineates what he calls his "five Golden Rules" for understanding politics and government. These include: how we must remember that there are virtually no people in the civil service with a talent for "building things", and that MPs are mostly seeking promotion, rather than working to win elections or do a good job for their constituents. So far, so Cummings.

But it's the content of the episode, besides the words themselves, that interests me. Breaking Kayfabe has the look of a video that a backpacker might send home to his family to update them on his long recovery from malaria. Cummings, wan and flatly lit, sits artlessly framed by an anonymous wooden doorway on one side and a light switch on the other, wearing a cap and with his polo shirt collar folded up on itself. He's shot himself from below and at a slight angle, as though recording ad hoc on a laptop. It is no doubt a laptop, because you can see his eyes flitting back and forth to a point just below the camera, where his notes are presumably written. He speaks in a characterless drone as he reels off his rules. He does blink, but I had to rewatch it to be sure.

It is some of the most uncharismatic footage I have ever seen. It is anti-aesthetic, low-rent, no set dressing and, of course, very short. And this is surely intentional: Cummings wants viewers to see him as real, where other news sources and pundits are not.

It may prove to be a smart move. As Cummings himself notes, this is the way people consume their news more and more: via a talking-head video on their phone, not by reading, well, anything. But if he's going to be filming them like this, with all the charm and élan of car park CCTV footage, I'm not sure he's going to be able to get enough attention. It's a world where people watch a lot of videos, yes, but they are accustomed to watching videos that look a lot better than this. ♦

Film

Class act

The French filmmaker Laurent Cantet, who died in April, was a master at diagnosing modern anxieties

by **SUKHDEV SANDHU**

Summer 2024 and many eyes are on France. Paris, spruced up with new Metro stations and bike paths ahead of the Olympics, is looking glorious, a poster child for a forward-thinking nation. But outside the capital, across the countryside and in small towns, the picture is less rosy. What's ailing the French? The cost of living, for sure, but most of all, both keenly and abstractly, a sense of insecurity that is cultural and social as much as economic. No filmmaker humanised these anxieties more thoughtfully or enthrallingly than Laurent Cantet, who died—from cancer, at the dismayingly young age of 63—in April.

Cantet started out in television: *Un été a Beyrouth* (1990) explores the Lebanese civil war as seen through the eyes of a child. Later, he worked with the great Marcel Ophuls on *Veilées d'armes* (1994) about the 1992 siege of Sarajevo. *Human Resources* (1999), his first theatrical feature, anticipated many of the debates around the *gilets jaunes* (yellow jackets) protests that broke out across France in 2018. Franck (played by Jalil Lespert) is a young man on the move, a university-educated idealist who returns to his hometown in Normandy to take up a summer internship at the same factory where his father has worked for 30 years. His task is to help implement a 35-hour working week that, he believes, will give the employees (all of them non-professional actors) more flexibility, but which their union reps, always distrustful of management, believe is a ruse.

Franck could be out of a 1950s Angry Young Man drama. He comes from blue-collar stock, but is now suspected of belonging to the boss class. He's accused of being a snooty Parisian who looks down on the local yokels. He protests, but we sense his estrangement. How can his former schoolfriends put up with such dulling toil? Is the solidarity of which they speak that of prisoners? Why is his father so reluctant to shake things up? It takes a while for him to realise he's being used by his own managers, and that, if there's one thing human resource departments tend not to care about, it's humans. Cold enlightenment indeed. The film ends with him asking a question to which Cantet returned throughout his career: "Where is your place?"

Time Out (2001) is a contemporary ghost story about Vincent (Aurélien Recoing), a middle-aged consultant who can't face telling his wife and children that he's been fired from his job. He dresses as normal, pretends to go to work each day, sleeps in a car, gets involved in a crooked scheme. He's bluff, brazen, full of plausible bullshit. Is that a reflection of him—or of the managerial elites among whom he has always worked? International commerce—especially in Africa—is meant to be Vincent's area of expertise. Is that sphere as bloodlessly banal as it's made out here? Through fog and snow he drives, across France and Switzerland, dissolving geographies. Within a few years, there was a global financial crisis. Millions of people grappled with life after work. Many are still doing so.

What's ailing the French? An insecurity that is cultural and social as much as economic

The French name for *The Class*, Cantet's best known film and a Palme d'Or winner at Cannes in 2008, is *Entre les murs*—"Between the Walls". Any carceral connotations are entirely intentional. It follows young teacher François (François Marin) as he begins a new job at a Parisian school most of whose students are the adolescent sons and daughters of working-class immigrants. They're a handful: slumped, lippy, quick to mock him for being too old and too bourgie. He thinks of himself as being on their side, but their insolence is trying. One morning, a fresh-faced colleague storms into the staff room: "They're nothing. They know nothing. They look through you when you try to teach them... They can stay in their shit. I'm not going to help them."

The classroom is a microcosm of Paris, France and many major European cities. Some viewers may be alarmed by that notion. They may see what goes on there as dystopic—education where discipline and deference are almost impossible to sustain, where a national culture is on the wane. Cantet uses lots of close-ups and mid-shots to create a mood of intimacy that also veers towards clamminess: we could hug these pupils or, just as often, shake them. School films can often be sentimental. Behold! A charismatic eccentric connecting with troubled teenagers! There's no such schmaltz here. It shows, with bracing clarity, François's struggle to work out what his—and his students'—place is. ◆

THE CULTURE »

© MARC BRENNER

Stage

Wherefore art thou?

A Tom Holland-starring production of 'Romeo and Juliet' has gone global—with terrible results

by **KATE MALTBY**

This April, Francesca Amewudah-Rivers was cast as Juliet in a new West End adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*, built around Hollywood star Tom Holland. Within days, the company felt obliged to publicly condemn "a barrage of deplorable racist abuse" targeting Amewudah-Rivers, who is black.

My initial reaction was surprise. Not, I hope, because I'm naive about the levels of racism still experienced by black people in the UK. But because, as someone who lives and breathes British theatre, I thought this battle had been won. It is more than 20 years since David Oyelowo became the first black actor to play one of Shakespeare's English kings, Henry VI, at the Royal Shakespeare Company.

My mistake, of course, was to underestimate the gulf in global reaction to your average piece of London theatre versus a production starring cinematic juggernaut Holland, better known as Spider-Man from the Marvel Cinematic Universe, object of desire to millions and boyfriend of the even more famous Zendaya.

I should have remembered the last time British theatre was the subject of international frenzy. When casting was announced in 2015 for the first production of *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*, the world went crazy to learn that Hermione Granger would be played by the black actress Noma Dumezweni.

The Harry Potter fans who trolled Dumezweni in 2015 made the same mistake—beyond the racism—as those who went after Amewudah-Rivers this year. Both groups were unable to distinguish between a piece of storytelling in London, responsive to the immediate environment of British theatre, and the pre-existing norms of a major intellectual property franchise.

Hermione must be white, insisted the trolls, because Emma Watson, who played her in the movies, is white. Juliet must be white because she was played, in Baz Luhrmann's 1996 movie, by Clare Danes. Yes, really. It didn't help that director Jamie Lloyd had knowingly pitched his production as a response to the movie, titling his adaptation *Romeo + Juliet*, with a plus-sign instead of an "and", as did Luhrmann.

Unlike Luhrmann, his version of Shakespeare is short on spectacle, with barely any sets. But both share a fascination with street culture, and Lloyd's show is littered with references to Luhrmann's film.

Joshua-Alexander Williams's Mercutio delivers the Queen Mab speech with a wide-eyed terror reminiscent of Harold Perrineau in the role, even if the references to the dark power of drugs are less explicit. The prince of Verona, incensed by the city's brawling youths, arrives like Luhrmann's "governor" to break up fights under the whirr of helicopter blades.

Meanwhile, Holland's performance is pure Spider-Man. His Romeo is the same goofy, teenage everyman that fans of the Marvel universe will know and love, breaking into heroism when the going gets tough.

This sets up Holland for a one-note performance. There is no variety between his breathy, slo-mo speeches of infatuation for his first love, Rosaline, and his reverence for "true" love Juliet 30 minutes later. By contrast, Amewudah-Rivers shines. Unlike Holland, she earned her role in the audition room, and it shows.

Lloyd's production is critic-proof at the box office. In his influential weekly newsletter, the theatre writer Fergus Morgan mocked the struggle for relevance felt by my own colleagues when he summed up the opening night: "Isn't it funny to think of London's theatre critics all sitting in the same room as Zendaya? Isn't it nice when theatre is culturally relevant for a week?"

But most of the people engaged with this production will never see it in situ. While we took our seats inside the theatre, 200 fans lined the barriers outside the stage door to snap the best photo of Holland when he left two hours later. Video from inside the auditorium is forbidden, but video of Holland walking to his car is shared thousands of times online. How else can a Marvel fan in Indiana feel like she is with him in London? The shared space for the community built by this production is not in the theatre, but online.

Celebrity casting is not new to London theatre and Holland, a former Billy Elliot, is no newcomer to the stage. There is a risk to theatre, however, when the experience between audience and actor is relegated to a minor role within a global social media show. For much of Holland's performance, he and Lloyd seemed to be gesturing to something far outside the auditorium—at one point, even cutting to footage from the theatre roof, as though we're watching a Spider-Man movie.

Like politics, all theatre is local. British theatre loses out when it becomes a footnote to a global culture war. ◆

Pop

Bigtime resonance

Eighties hit 'Smalltown Boy' is reaching across the decades to grip the hearts of young people today

by **LAURA BARTON**

There is a certain sweetness to the latest TikTok trend: off-camera, youngsters play a song for their parents and ask them to dance however they would've danced to it in the 1980s. On screen, hips coil, arms swing, faces lift; the delight of bodies finding themselves again.

The song is Bronski Beat's "Smalltown Boy", which turns 40 this year. The story of a young gay man leaving home for the big city, it reached number three in the UK, and topped the US Dance Club chart, launching the career of vocalist Jimmy Somerville.

To be a boy in a small British town in 1984 was a complicated matter. While the decade broadly embraced a form of heteronormativity and hypermasculinity, there was a musical counterbalance in the form of acts such as the Smiths, Wham!, Culture Club and the lingering flickers of New Romanticism. With it, there came a fluidity in gender, sexuality and dress that was challenging to many, particularly outside the major conurbations.

"Smalltown Boy" spoke directly to this tension. Its success came alongside that of "Relax" by Frankie Goes to Hollywood, which reached number one and spent 42 weeks in the Top 40, despite being banned by the BBC for its overtly sexual lyrics.

Something was changing, but progress was slow. In April that year, Customs and Excise raided gay and lesbian bookshop Gay's the Word, seizing hundreds of books deemed obscene. As awareness of HIV/Aids spread, stigma and suspicion towards the gay community grew. Other inequalities stood fast: in the autumn, Bronski Beat released their debut album, *The Age of Consent*—its title a reference to the fact that, in the UK, the age of consent for gay sex stood at 21.

But the song found a broader appeal, too. The idea of restrictive smalltown life—that a young person has to leave home to form an independent identity—was a universal one, and familiar in rock and pop—it's there in The Beatles' "She's Leaving Home" and Springsteen's "Born to Run" and Dylan's "I Was Young When I Left Home".

That idea had also propelled much of the punk and New Wave movements, the rejection of suburbia and conformity, the bucking of social norms and niceties. In writing "Smalltown Boy", the three members of Bronski Beat had reached back a few years to this time—the band's Larry Steinbachek once said the song had arisen out of an attempt to play a cover of the Sex Pistols's "Pretty Vacant".

According to the Pistols's Glen Matlock, "Pretty Vacant" was itself a rough grasp in the direction of "SOS" by ABBA, released a few years earlier. Although its context was more personal, "SOS" was similarly a song of absence and rejection. Matlock took both its melancholy and its melodic charm and infused it with the energy of 1977, with Richard Hell's *Blank Generation*, the three-day week, IRA bombings. It was, he said, "a primal scream kind of thing: we don't know what we're gonna do, but we're gonna do it anyway."

To be a boy in a small British town in 1984 was a complicated matter

"Smalltown Boy" begins in a similar emotional space: "To your soul, cry, cry cry," Somerville sings. And though his voice is more countertenor than scream, the impulse is much the same. In its opening scene, our hero stands alone on a railway platform with everything he owns in a small black case, his departure spurred by the knowledge that "the answers you seek will never be found at home". He doesn't know where he's going, but he's going anyway.

It's interesting to think of where the UK was at that moment—miners' strikes, Thatcherism, unemployment at a record high. The sense that the country itself was beginning to fracture; its small communities and the industries that had bound them in peril. The rejection expressed in the plaintive call and discordant notes of Bronski Beat's song chimed not only with those who identified with its specific story, but with a feeling of exclusion and impotence felt more widely across society.

How strange to hear it again today, to consider the things that have changed and those that have not over the course of 40 years. In these days of rising unemployment, rising LGBTQ+ hate crime, the young fleeing small towns for cities, in a new era of exclusion and impotence... to wonder just how different it is to be a smalltown boy. ◆

THE CULTURE »

Classical notes

Dial O for obsession

by IAN BOSTRIDGE

I think I must sometimes give the impression of a slight obsession with some pieces. I've performed Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem* 96 times so far, and I'm writing a book about and around it, so that's one obsession for sure. And some years ago I wrote a book about Schubert's *Winterreise* song cycle, with the Robert Burton-aping subtitle *Anatomy of an Obsession*. It's a piece I return to again and again: not just in straightforward recitals for voice and piano, but also in a TV film (1997) and two theatre pieces, one of the piano cycle staged at Florence's Maggio Musicale by the film director Roberto Andò, and one a zany Hans Zender orchestration directed by Netia Jones, which we took from London to California to Shanghai. I spent parts of last month in detailed rehearsals with two old friends and colleagues, Deborah Warner and Julius Drake, staging the unadulterated song cycle again for Bath's Ustinov Studio. It's surely a sign of a peerless masterpiece that it can bear so many reinterpretations, and extraordinary that so much dramatic intent and dramatic structure can be drawn out of a set of songs originally written to be sung around the piano at home. We open this June.

You may have noticed a more general obsession with Britten, beyond the *War Requiem*. I've already written here about his song cycle for voice and strings *Les Illuminations*, with words by the enfant terrible of French poetry, Arthur Rimbaud. A couple of weeks ago I was singing it yet again, with the City of Birmigham Symphony Orchestra (CBSO), in the city's Symphony Hall. This is an orchestra—and, for that matter, a hall—with which I've had a long association. I'll never forget a *Spring Symphony* (copyright: B Britten) with Simon Rattle on the night of the 1997 election. Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, singing a piece about renewal and rejuvenation, and returning home in the car listening to the first results come in. And here I was, back in Birmingham to sing one of my favourite pieces: great orchestra, great conductor (Gergely Madaras), great venue.

It's difficult to draw people into a piece of music when someone is so clearly not paying attention

◆◆◆

The opening of *Les Illuminations*, with its string fanfares oscillating between two starkly opposing keys, is always thrilling and charges me up for the helter-skelter, expressionist-cum-cabaret spirit of the piece, with its mixture of humour, eroticism, chaos and wartime foreboding (it was finished in October 1939). But as we set out on the second number—"Villes", with its conjuration of the urban melee which Rimbaud and his lover, Paul Verlaine, experienced in London in the 1870s—I noticed an elderly man, stage right, holding up his mobile phone.

This happens occasionally in concerts. In smaller venues, I've been known to strike out into the audience and ask the offender to stop. Other times, I try to glare them out as part of the performance. This time, that wasn't working; and the opportunity to suck up fuel for the aggression sometimes required by Rimbaud and Britten was overwhelmed by simple distraction. It's difficult to draw people into a piece that, at its best, takes you and your audience into another world, a world created by sounds and words, when someone is so clearly indicating that they are not really paying attention. I tried to carry on, but the spell had been broken. When another member of the audience on the other side started up with her phone, I paused after the third song and testily asked them to stop. Cue a burst of applause from the audience at large.

I thought not much more about it after the concert, but the following day a storm started brewing. It turned out that the CBSO had introduced a policy to allow audience members to film during concerts, and my action has been interpreted by some as a "protest" against said policy. The story travelled far and wide. I went on to Radio 4's *Front Row* arts magazine to explain why I thought phones in concert halls were a bad idea. Then, a couple of days later, I was on the *Today* programme and the 8am news. All in all, the commentary continued for at least two weeks, almost all of it, from journalists and practitioners and audience members, supporting my stance. Birmingham now recommends that people save their filming for the applause, a small victory.

Why did such a trivial event provoke so much comment? I can offer all sorts of reasons for my stance on phones in classical concerts, though I don't really want to go into them again. I could quote Britten's—yes, him again—Aspen Award lecture in which he talks of the holy triangle between composer, performer and listener and asks for it not to be disrupted. You might find that precious or pretentious. But, in an age in which mobile phones are ubiquitous, and in which so many of us, young and old, are complaining about the way in which they have colonised our brains and come to dominate our lives, surely a space without phones might be a blessed relief. ◆

Lives »

Farming life

A tragic choice

by Tom Martin

It was a Monday evening in lambing season, and we had a handful of sheep still waiting to give birth. In the preceding weeks the ewes had been kept in a small field without too much grass, to prevent their lambs growing too big, which can create problems in labour. We checked them almost hourly, and noted changes in their mood, activity and location in the field and within the flock. One sheep had been named the busybody, as she wanted to get involved whenever another ewe had its lambs. The busybody had been nosing around for days, and generally got in our way throughout the lambing.

That Monday evening, the busybody displayed all the classic signs of a ewe going into labour. She scratched the soil, almost like she was making a nest. She ground her teeth and stretched, walking around in small circles as though she was mightily uncomfortable. She lay on the floor and strained, going through the motions of giving birth, but when I carefully inspected her, there was still no sign of a lamb.

When an animal is in this level of pain, the good shepherd intervenes. Speaking gently and slowly, as I always do with the sheep—they know my voice—I carefully put my hand inside the ewe's birthing canal to check whether she was dilated and if I could feel the lamb.

Immediately there was a gas release, and I knew all was not well. This is the classic sign of a lamb having died inside the mother. I tried to coax the large, single lamb out, working with the ewe as she strained in her contractions. On my knees, I toiled for some time. It was already dark, and at midnight, having given her a few breaks to catch her breath, I called it off for the evening. The ewe got up and walked around, and I thought it best not to stress her further.

I returned at first light—4.45am—to find her once again on the floor in the throes of her contractions. For another half an hour, this time in the pouring rain, I tried to help her give birth. I think I knew even before I got to her that morning that my efforts would be futile. But I had to try, for her sake, and for my own, to avoid the haunting thought: "Could I have done more?"

At 5.30am, I made my decision. After whispering gentle reassurances to the ewe, I trudged to my house to collect my gun. I wish my wife or my parents had been there, but with everyone asleep I had to make the decision alone. It would be hours before the vet would be at the surgery, so it was down to me, and it was my responsibility to do the best thing for her. I had to put an end to her suffering.

I've been forced to make this decision in the past for different animals, but never before with a sheep. It is not something I want to repeat. I returned to the field with my shotgun, the heaviest shot cartridge selected, and extra rounds in my pocket in case it wasn't an instant kill. I once again spoke gently, and took aim, her eyes looking back at me. I squeezed the trigger. I heard the report of the gun: I had struck the back of the skull, the base of the spine, and it was over. Blood poured from her head, and she stiffened and kicked, but she was gone. No more pain. While this is standard, recommended practice in this situation, it didn't feel normal to me.

I moped back to the house, the rain now pouring, and I met my wife at the door. She looked at me, looked at the gun, and looked back at me.

"It was no good," I said, "I couldn't do any more for her." I saw my own sadness reflected in my wife's eyes, in the slump of her shoulders. We had both known this sheep since she was a lamb and had birthed her two years previously from another favourite ewe.

As the days passed, I reassured myself, and was reassured by others that I had done the right thing. I know I gave the ewe everything, as a good shepherd should. But I will remember this always. We ensure on our farm that every day is the best day possible for our livestock, including their last day, whatever the circumstances. Our responsibility continues in sickness and in health, at any time of the day or night, every day of the year. ♦

Long life

For shame!

by Sheila Hancock

I have visited and performed in many prisons since the 1980s. That was when I went to HMP Long Lartin, one of the toughest

jails in the country, to do a poetry reading with a team of actors from the Royal Shakespeare Company. I confess to being unconvinced that an audience of mainly lifers would appreciate our choices, especially a poem by TS Eliot that I didn't understand myself. But they did and were spellbound. Since then, I have feebly campaigned for reform of our prisons. There is a little of "there but for the grace of God" in my interest.

As an eight-year-old child, when I was evacuated during the war, I was a member of a gang of mostly older kids called the Vaccies. We fought with the locals. When cornered I was a vicious fighter, and if knives had been the modus operandi, then—with my childish rage against the frightening wartime world—I can't swear I wouldn't have carried one. I was also a prolific shoplifter. I was blessed by having teachers and parents who eventually led me down a better path.

The political parties fight over who is toughest on crime. Yet a punitive approach isn't succeeding. Almost 50 per cent of prisoners reoffend within a year of leaving prison and over 50 per cent come out barely literate, ill-equipped to make an honest living. Punishment is considered preferable to seizing an opportunity to educate and turn around chaotic lives. It costs nearly £50,000 a year to imprison someone—all that money to teach an offender an encyclopaedic knowledge of drugs and additional criminal expertise.

In April, I went to a meeting organised by a remarkable Wandsworth Quaker, Liz Bridge. She'd been sacked from her voluntary job of chaplain in the local prison for giving a few quid to an inmate who was about to be dumped onto the street outside with nothing but his leaving grant of £89.52.

Liz, who is one of those wonderful middle-aged, middle-class women who gets things done, decided that if she could no longer help the men that she had learned to love during her seven years of volunteering, she would reveal the truth about what was going on inside jails.

She and her fellow Quakers set up a meeting in a church in the area, with several ex-offenders and families of inmates. The church was packed with locals and people like me, many of whom were reduced to tears of shame at the stories that unfolded. I have visited many prisons but have seldom been allowed onto the worst wings, so I have a sanitised view of what prison is like. And God knows what I've seen is bad enough.

Imagine what it would be like to be locked up for 23 hours a day, in a cell built in 1851 for one person, but which you must share with a stranger. Perhaps the stranger has a mental or physical illness that is out of control because of the frequent non-delivery of medication.

The cell has two bunkbeds, a ledge for a table and, in full view, a frequently out-of-order toilet. There is only room for one chair, so you have to eat the appalling food crouched on the lower bunk or sitting on the lavatory. There is no work or study to occupy your mind, apart from in the kitchen, where the rats and cockroaches are better fed than the prisoners. (Pentonville prison kitchen has at long last been closed down to deal with the vermin, so God knows what my friends there are eating.)

At the meeting, the ex-offenders tell us that Wandsworth is lawless. Assaults on the young and inexperienced screws are frequent. Being a guard is a dangerous and depressing job, so it's no wonder that there is half the required number in Wandsworth. Drugs are uncontrolled. I personally would grab anything to deaden the pain of facing this existence for an indefinite period. One man told us he came out of Wandsworth mentally dead. Having shared a cell with self-harming, suicidal men, he had learned to squash any fruitless sympathy. One of the best ways to help a miscreant is to use mediation to teach them empathy for the victim. Prison causes the opposite—a hardening of the spirit.

There will always be people who need to be kept in prison for their own and society's safety, but surely we cannot consider ourselves civilised if we treat any of our fellow human beings in this way.

Since I finished my first draft of this article, the news has broken of the results of chief prison inspector Charlie Taylor's report. On 9th May, he issued a notification to the Ministry of Justice, asking for Wandsworth to be placed into emergency measures to deal with the "cramped and squalid conditions". The Quakers' campaigning had borne fruit. The beleaguered governor has also resigned. Now the pressure must be applied, to make sure the prisoners really do have better conditions, so that they, and consequentially we, are kept safe. ◆

ILLUSTRATIONS BY CLARA NICOLL

Mindful life

Locked out

by Sarah Collins

One morning a few weeks ago, I woke up around 4am unable to breathe. Confused, I gasped for air as the room spun into view. I know what you're thinking: "Mental health columnist—she must've been having a panic attack." But while I am prone to dramatic hyperventilation, on this occasion my chest tightness had a biological cause: asthma.

Lives »

I sat up and took puff after puff of my blue inhaler, trying not to panic, and when that didn't work I took an antihistamine to deal with the pollen that triggers my asthma. When my breathing finally returned to normal, a familiar annual worry came back: the advent of pollen season means that asthma symptoms are soon to become my constant companion.

I didn't know, however, on that particular morning, just how big an impact this year's pollen season would have on my mental health. The cause of this outsized effect was an NHS admin error which meant that, just as I needed urgent healthcare, I was deregistered from my GP practice. I couldn't access my prescription for inhalers and other medications, nor could I see a doctor. I was locked out of the system, a situation that took me hours to fully resolve over a timeframe of weeks.

The experience—during which I behaved in an erratic and overwhelmed manner befitting of my various mental health diagnoses—led me to reflect on the relationship between chronic physical illness and the mental variety.

More than 15m people in England have one or more long-term physical conditions, and while this is most common in people over 60 (58 per cent are affected), 14 per cent of those of us under 40 also suffer from a chronic condition. I have several, including an unusual form of eczema which is exacerbated by sunlight, moderate asthma and a coterie of allergies, including to nuts. I require a combination of medications to control these conditions and many interactions with doctors and nurses to resolve flare-ups.

The link between these kinds of conditions and common mental illnesses such as anxiety and depression are well documented—research from the Mental Health Foundation suggests that people with chronic physical conditions are twice as likely to develop mental ill health. The crossover is so marked that some scientists have hypothesised that common chronic physical and mental illnesses might have a shared biological cause: a malfunction in the immune system.

Just as I needed urgent healthcare, I was deregistered from my GP practice

Anecdotally, this is a theory I can get behind. When I was prescribed an immunosuppressant steroid called prednisolone for my asthma, I felt almost manic with joy, confidence and wellbeing. During the week I took the drug, my usual negative thoughts about myself were replaced with positive ones about my appearance, my social skills and my creativity.

Sadly, you can't take prednisolone full-time (I begged!). And even if there is no biological link, the stress alone of having to manage a long-term physical condition in a society geared towards the pathologically well, is enough to trigger anxieties. It is not so much the pain, itching or breathing problems themselves that bug me, but the administrative and financial burden.

That NHS mix-up made me think about all the other admin headaches that come with the territory. For example: I have to buy the only suncream that works for my eczema from overseas, at significant personal expense. If I go abroad, I need to arrive at the airport early and armed with paperwork or I risk not being allowed to take my oversized eczema creams on the plane. I must keep applying for a prepayment certificate to make my repeat prescriptions even close to affordable.

Every morning, I have to remember to take all the right pills, and it is hard to relax when you have to be eternally vigilant about the whereabouts of your blue inhaler and EpiPen. In my 10 years of adult life, weeks have been spent on hold to NHS 111, to my GP or standing in pharmacy queues waiting to find the right cream.

Each little administrative problem or niggling symptom may seem minor on its own. But collectively these issues create a continuous low-level stress, such that chronic physical illness becomes a tax, not only on my finances but on my wellbeing. I guess the moral of the story is: pollen is the devil! ◆

Sex life

Age gaps

by Tilly Lawless

Throughout my life I've always dated "up", from the girlfriend who was a year older than me in my teens (seemingly a huge gap at that age) to the one who was 12 years older than me when I was in my early twenties. I'm accustomed to and comfortable with being the younger, less experienced partner in the relationship. If anything, I have enjoyed hearing them reminisce about decades in which I didn't even exist. I find it a turn on; I'm always hungry for history, and dating older people has felt like a link to the past.

Sydney's queer community is remarkably intergenerational, partly because it has a long history as a queer hub but also because it wasn't devastated by AIDS to the same degree as many other cities around the world. Unusually, the government implemented an incredible public health response to the AIDS pandemic, sought advice from the communities most affected by the virus (gay men, sex workers and intravenous drug users) and introduced harm-reduction measures such as condom vending machines and needle and syringe exchange programmes. As a result, I am often partying and socialising with people between 18 and 78 .

Age gap relationships are common and are generally not viewed as scathingly within the community as heterosexual relationships with similar gaps are by the world at large. I think this is partly because gendered and financial power dynamics,

which we see replicated again and again with relationships between older rich men and younger women, don't transfer in the same way. If you are earning the same amount and living the same lifestyle as someone in their forties when you are in your twenties, the age and power gap is not so glaring.

It was perhaps inevitable, then, that I would eventually date someone younger than me. I'm not surprised that it's happened, but I am surprised by my own reaction to being on the other side of the age gap. At 30, I am seeing someone seven years younger than me and, though I have no ethical issues with that (at her age I was in a committed relationship with a woman over a decade older than me) and it doesn't make me feel old, I do find myself filtering my relationship with her through my own memories of being a woman her age.

I recently read Annie Ernaux's *The Young Man*, in which she writes about having a romantic relationship with a man in his twenties when she was in her fifties. She says that dating him was an act of reliving and remembering all her past relationships. Moments that feel unique and fresh to him are layered for her with every intimate moment that has come before. My experience is slightly different to Ernaux's—instead of returning to recollections of previous relationships, I find myself reliving and remembering how I felt within myself at my partner's age. Annie Ernaux saw her lover as a mirror of all the boyfriends she'd had before; in dating someone of the same gender who is passing through an age I have already traversed, I am finding a mirror of myself.

In spite of the fact that we are very different, and that perhaps she feels nothing like I did then, I can't help but be acutely aware of how it feels to be the age she is. I imagine myself then, poised on the edge of a life-changing relationship, simultaneously naive and courageous. The older sister desire in me to protect women who are younger than me—and probably to retroactively protect my past self—clashes at times with my own desire to be with her; because doesn't being with someone inevitably expose them to potential hurt and heartache? How could I lead her down that path?

Intellectually I know that being the older partner does not necessarily mean that I am the one leading, but it is hard to shake the sense of carefulness that I feel, a reluctance and responsibility that I have never felt when dating people older than me. Maybe this is how all romantic relationships should be entered into: with conscious choice and consideration. ◆

Clerical life

The world's a stage

by Alice Goodman

Because I was a librettist before I was a priest, I find myself occasionally on stage taking a bow. The performers will have bowed first: the singers and dancers, then the principals in front by themselves. Then they'll go offstage into the wings, and return for a second bow. That's when the director, choreographer and conductor join the curtain call, and then the composer and I run onstage. Look right and left. Bow from the waist. Applaud the orchestra. Bow again.

I spent a lot of time thinking about theatre. My old colleague Peter Sellars has always been a little unusual among directors in his attention to ritual gestures. Why do you notice that man putting his hand on that other man's shoulder at a certain point in the performance? Something in the unfolding of all that has happened onstage up to this point has focused your mind on this moment.

In church there are similar rituals. How do you hold your hands when you pray? Pointy fingers with thumbs crossed, or the more relaxed Cuddesdon clasp? When and how do you bow? What do you wear? The vestments I wear do the same work as a Commedia dell'arte costume: in them I become "the priest at mass". You'd be mistaken if you thought that ritual only features in High Church shacks. All churches have ritual. When do you raise your hands? How does a Quaker meeting end? How do you stage an altar call? When do you speak in tongues?

Listen and watch. On 25th April, I got up at an ungodly hour to catch a train to London and another to Canterbury. By the time we left St Pancras we were something of a party, all going to the consecration of the new bishop of Edmonton, the suffragan or assistant bishop for north-west London. The main thing I knew about the ceremony was the old joke about the moment when all the bishops cluster round the new bishop, reach out their hands in an important ritual gesture and remove the new bishop's spine.

The new bishop, Anderson Harris Mithra Jeremiah, is someone with whom I've laughed and at whose table I've been fed. His wife is a friend. His children's pictures are on my windowsill. Anderson was ordained in the Church of South India. Never before has a priest ordained in that church been consecrated as a bishop in the Church of England. It goes deeper than that, though. Anderson is a Dalit Christian, who experienced from earliest childhood what it means to be untouchable, a pariah. His theology is grounded in the experience of being an outcast. His spine is not removable.

Here are some of the things I noticed.

The archbishop of Canterbury had a cough and seemed tired, but that didn't matter—the focus was elsewhere. The first lesson was read by one of Anderson's daughters. One of his sisters read the second lesson in Tamil. Then the drumming began, sharp and loud. Four Dalit drums announced the gospel reading. The hair on the back of my neck stood up. Dalit drums, *parai*, com-

ILLUSTRATIONS BY CLARA NICOLL

Lives »

ing down from the top of the quire, the heart of Canterbury Cathedral. That was a moment. The canon theologian of Washington National Cathedral, Kelly Brown Douglas, preached an acrostic sermon in which the "O" in LOVE stood for being "outcast-oriented". You couldn't help but notice the many, many voices and accents, all speaking clearly, the gorgeous saris that Anderson's sisters were wearing, and the scarlet rochets of the bishops as they went up to the altar while Anderson knelt before the archbishop for the act of consecration.

The archbishop laid his hands on Anderson's head. The bishops who could reach him laid their hands on his shoulders and his back; the ones on the outside of the group laid their hands on the shoulders of the ones in front. Three bishops stood aside to make clear that this was one step too far for them. That was a moment, too. I wondered how much it weighed upon them that they were characters in a drama about outcasts being brought in and those who have been considered untouchable receiving the Holy Spirit through the laying on of hands.

But the moment passed. The Dalit drums got the last word. ♦

Young life

Chasing highs

by Alice Garnett

"I think I'm addicted to being awake," says Maggie, a character in the TV adaptation of Dolly Alderton's memoir *Everything I Know About Love*. I read the book in my final year of university and loved it. I've rewatched the show several times because I've never seen my own debauched, impulsive behaviour reflected so accurately. Maggie never knows when to call it quits. She'll get a taxi from London to Liverpool if that means there's a chance of keeping the night going. Lo and behold, the party is emphatically over when she arrives.

While I've never gone as far as travelling from one city to another, I am guilty of chasing a night that has already ended. I'm *never* ready for the fun to be over.

Having had a fair few (mis)adventures in my time, I know there's always the possibility of something exciting around the corner: a handsome stranger, a hot waiter, the love of my life. And I never want to miss it.

A few weekends ago, at 3am, I pulled out my usual "Where next?" to my friends, who—honestly—were ready for cheesy chips and the comfort of their own beds. We'd been drinking since 6pm and had just piled out of Clapham Grand following "Femmes on Top", an iconic queer night hosted by Butch Please. Of course, we stayed until closing; who could resist the pull of tunes by the likes of Azealia Banks, Kim Petras, Icona Pop and Britney Spears?

I wasn't ready for the night out to end. I was on a high and couldn't possibly imagine easing myself down from the dizzying heights of snogging women against a backdrop of hyperpop and Drag King performances.

I rallied a couple of members from the group and we darted across the road, chanting "HEAV-EN, HEAV-EN, HEAV-EN", towards a bus that would take us all the way from south London to central. Closing time for Heaven, the club, was 5am. We were taking a 40-minute bus journey for what would be roughly 45 minutes of fun. You do the maths.

As soon as we got off the bus, we broke into a sprint. Still riding the high of minesweeping bottles of Prosecco from nearby tables and scream-singing "I don't care, I love it," I ended up well ahead of the other two. Having not an ounce of navigational skill, I got a bit lost. By the time I arrived at Heaven, I was alone, out of breath, with a phone on the verge of dying. Worst of all, the body-tape I had been using to delicately attach my (extremely) plunge dress to my chest had started to peel off. Oh, and entry was closed.

Like a trashy Cinderella, as the clock struck four, everything fell apart

Like a trashy Cinderella, as the clock struck four, everything fell apart (and my tits out of place).

Sobering up after the bus journey and vigorous exercise that followed, I leant against a wall to figure out my next move. I texted my friends—who, unlike me, have a decent sense of direction, took a more direct route and had already entered the club. They assumed I'd already gone in, given the lead I took.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck," I muttered to myself as I opened Citymapper on my phone (I could not afford an Uber home). A man hovered into view. And another one. And another. God, aren't they opportunistic? Men loitering outside queer clubs after closing.

"I'm gay." I mean, I'm bi, but on this occasion, I wasn't bothered about semantics. They didn't take the hint, anyway.

"Why don't you come back with us? We've got a room in Holborn. We can keep the party going."

A younger, more naive version of Alice would have probably entertained this idea—entranced as I would have been by the notion of "keeping the party going". I know now that that would have been a terrible idea.

"No." I didn't bother trying to be polite. I glowered at them as best I could.

Eventually, a couple of the bouncers at Heaven cottoned on to my situation. Two of them approached to ask if I was alright, if the men were bothering me. "Yes," I said, "they are."

I explained that my two friends were already inside the club, that I knew I'd missed closing, but would really appre-

ciate being let inside. Given the options were to allow me entry or feed me to the literal sharks (who hadn't moved from their station outside the club), they welcomed me inside.

All in all, not a dreadful tale. I made it into heaven and danced the night away.

But was it worth the hangover? The three hours of sleep I got that night? No, not really. I know I should have called it, ended the night on a high in south London, where I could have got a direct bus home in 20 minutes.

Truth is, I never know how to walk away from a night out. I'll keep chasing, with no real objective other than to stumble upon a great story—a moment—a comedic bit that will last a lifetime.

With time, hangovers and a regrettable sleep debt, I hope I do learn how to rein myself in sometimes. All good things must come to an end. ◆

Sporting life

Across the pond

by Emma John

I'm just back from a month-long trip to the US, a stop-starting journey through the Deep South states of Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama. Arriving in New Orleans at the start of May, I found it humming with activity. The streets were full of folk enjoying the annual JazzFest, wearing fancy dresses for the Kentucky Derby and celebrating Cinco de Mayo.

"New Orleanians don't let a week go by without a party," my taxi driver, Solomon, told me. With their Mardi Gras parades and packed schedule of music events, and it's a wonder that anyone has time to keep up with the sporting calendar. But the city's NFL and NBA teams still enjoy a mammoth following, as evidenced by the city's massive stadiums—the "Smoothie King Center", which hosts the basketball players, and the famous Superdome, home to its footballing Saints.

With his Senegalese background, Solomon had been far less absorbed by basketball's March Madness than the climax of the English Premier League. We chatted about Liverpool's upended hopes for the title before I admitted that I actually preferred cricket. "I'm sorry?" said Solomon. "I never heard of that before." I told him it was baseball where you pitch the ball into the ground with a straight arm, hit it on the bounce, and run up and down a strip instead of around the bases. It is my ready-prepared explanation for Americans, and he seemed perfectly satisfied with it.

After that, I asked almost everyone I met whether they knew of cricket. A few identified it as "that English game", but most thought I was talking about the insect, or a mobile phone brand that sells cheap tariffs. Clearly the launch last year of Major League Cricket—the three-week-long T20 tournament whose franchise teams mimic those of the Indian Premier League—has not yet made an impact on the American sporting consciousness.

The International Cricket Council, which runs the international game, has been trying to break into the American market for decades, in search of the dollars that have begun to rain down on its soccer counterpart. This year, as part of its attempt to raise the sport's profile, it is hosting a showpiece tournament, the T20 World Cup, in Texas, New York and Florida, and have purpose-built new stadiums for the event.

You can understand why the US market is so appealing to cricket administrators

In June, reigning champions England will travel to the US under the captaincy of Jos Buttler, hoping to do better at retaining this trophy than they did at defending their one-day title a few months ago. (The supposed best white-ball cricket side in the world crashed out of the World Cup in India before the knockout stages. It was a difficult time, let's not talk about it.)

For the tournament organisers, the most important outcome isn't who wins but who watches. Cricket's leaders have made no secret of the fact that a US audience for the game is a key pillar of their growth strategy. There was great rejoicing when the sport was included in the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics.

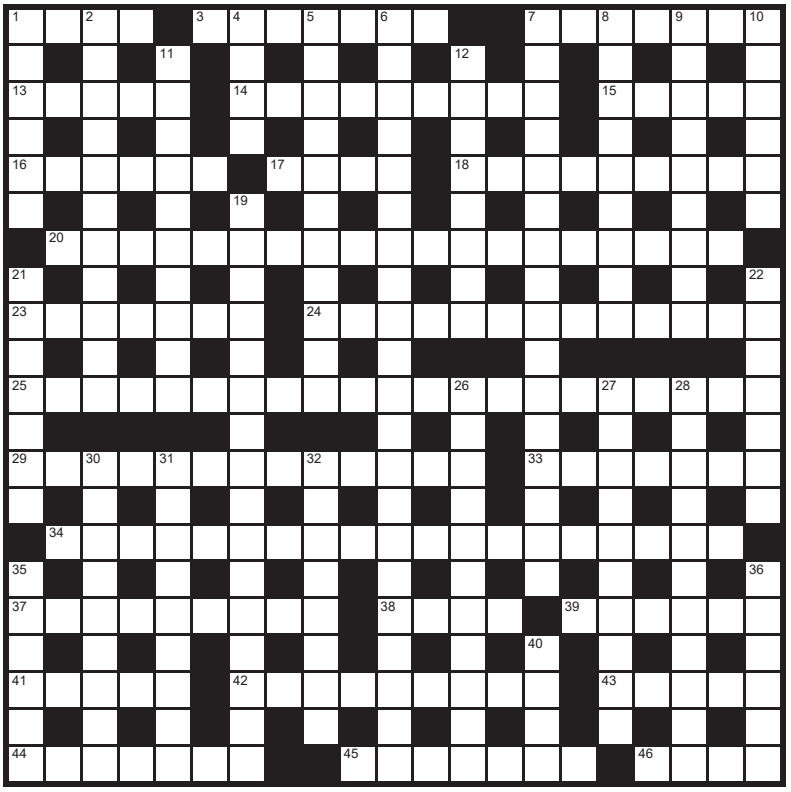
You can understand why the US market is so appealing to cricket administrators. A growing South Asian diaspora is already bringing the game to the nation's towns and cities—playing on plastic pitches in scrubby parkland, following live feeds from India on VPNs. Only a tiny percentage of America's residents need engage with the game for cricket to secure a considerable new market.

Given that I spend most of my time outside the UK in the US, I have a vested interest in it adopting the game. And yet I struggle to get on board with the proselytising agenda. Baseball relates easily to cricket; it is also so utterly different that I have never comprehended it. Just like cricket, it is in decline as a mainstream sport. Is it empathy that makes me wish for the US to find a renewed love for its own homegrown bat-and-ball game before it embraces a new one?

Maybe it's because the American sporting universe is already so crammed with hype and "content" that I feel ambivalent about my own great love competing so cravenly for attention. Then I think back to my arrival in the US, and the New Orleanians' ability to accommodate so many kinds of celebration. Perhaps I just need to be a bit more, well, American about it. ◆

ILLUSTRATIONS BY CLARA NICOLL

The Generalist by Didymus



Across

1 Soft French cheese made from cow's milk (4)
3 Capital city lying on the northern shores of Lake Victoria (7)
7 A blockhead or fool; when laughing, it is a kookaburra (7)
13 Pembroke or Cardigan breed of dog (5)
14 French term for a holy-water sprinkler (9)
15 Central American cactus used for rearing cochineal insects (5)
16 Islay distillery whose name means "small promontory" (6)
17 Barry can't do this, according to a Scottish DJ (4)
18 Large board used as an autocue (5,4)
20/23 Scottish football team whose ground lies in the shadow of the Kessock Bridge beside the Moray Firth (9,10,7)
24 Monthly US general-interest family magazine, the UK edition of which ceased publication in April after 86 years (7,6)
25 Along with Wordsworth, the founder of the Romantic Movement in England, who wrote the poem *Kubla Khan* (6,6,9)
29 *The* ..., a 1930 detective novel by Dashiell Hammett with Sam Spade as the main character (7,6)
33 The ancient capital of Assyria, destroyed in 612 BC by the Medes and Babylonians (7)
34 1997 film based on the story of two young girls who apparently had the ability to take pictures of magical winged beings (9:1,4,5)
37 "... Superbrain", the nickname of Annie Jones's character in *Neighbours* in the 1980s (5-4)
38 A principal ethnic group of Rwanda and Burundi (4)
39 Wagner's first success as an operatic composer, about "The Last of the Tribunes" (6)
41 Variety of lavender which yields an oil used in perfumery (5)
42 Low-growing Mediterranean shrub on which female coccus insects feed, producing a red dyestuff (6,3)
43 As a friend, in France (2,3)
44 Clergyman and don who admitted saying from the pulpit "Kinkering congs their titles take" (7)
45 The one-chamber parliament of Israel (7)
46 One of the hours of the Divine Office, at midday (4)

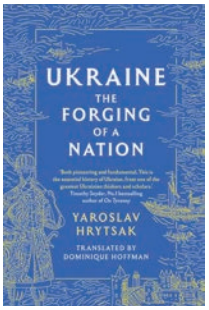
Down

1 Lowland region called the "Cold Shoulder of Scotland" (6)
2 One state's desire to annex the territory of another state, often for ethnic reasons (11)
4 Greek hero in the Trojan War, or an Amsterdam football team (4)
5 Orcadian island location of the Knap of Howar (4,7)
6 Title of the now retired Scottish advocate who was lord chancellor for 10 years from 1987 (4,6,2,9)
7 The oldest botanical garden in Paris, originally created in 1635 by Louis XIII's physicians to house the royal medicinal herb garden (6,3,7)
8 Roman emperor from 337 to 350, the last one to visit Britain (8,1)
9 Strong, powerful, successful fellow who likes to be in charge of others (5,4)
10 /// (6)
11 A1 condition, physically (4,6)
12 Cockney rhyming slang for "tea" (5,3)
19 Financial expert and advisor to corporations and governments on how to raise capital and arrange mergers and pension funds (10,6)
21 In Greek tragedy, odes sung without interruption by dialogue (7)
22 Dutch city where a series of peace treaties were signed between 1713 and 1715 ending the War of the Spanish Succession (7)
26 Ashy-grey (11)
27 Like lemurs or opossums (4-6)
28 Highland League football team which plays its home matches at the Princess Royal Park in Banff (11)
30 Small, long-haired Tibetan dog (5,4)
31 Proposition or scheme for peace (9)
32 Sobbing uncontrollably (3,5)
35 Hebrew measures for dry goods (6)
36 The wool of the undercoat of the Arctic musk ox (6)
40 Island location of Glasnakille, Staffin and Tarskavaig (4)

How to enter

Send your solution to answer@prospect-magazine.co.uk or Crossword Prospect, 2 Queen Anne's Gate, SW1H 9AA

Include your email and postal address. Entries must be received by 3rd July. Winners announced in our August/ September 2024 issue



The winner receives a copy of "Ukraine: The Forging of a Nation" by Yaroslav Hrytsak (Sphere)

Download a PDF of these pages at prospectmagazine.co.uk

Last month's crossword solutions

Across: 10 Aberdaron, 11 Billionaire, 12 Chamberer, 13 de Havilland, 15 Espoo, 16 Faversham, 17 Gopak, 20 Hans Arp, 22 Intel, 23 Jim Moir, 27 Kiev, 28 Lucan, 30 Mignonne, 32 Nasrudin, 33 *Olwen*, 37 Quetzal, 38 Reade, 39 Senegal, 42 Taupe, 44 Underwood, 45 Venal, 49 Winterbloom, 50 Xipe Totec, 51 Yellow River, 52 Zucchetto.

Down: 1 *Abu Hassan*, 2 Brymbo, 3 Carey, 4 Donegal, 5 Eisenstein, 6 *Fleabag*, 7 Godin, 8 Halloo, 9 Iron rations, 14 Fennec, 18 Gravadlax, 19 Singspiel, 21 Skirret, 24 Moorage, 25 Blini, 26 Omani, 29 Ail, 31 Naturalised, 33 Okefenokee, 34/35A Widow's peak, 36 Lazaretto, 40 En clair, 41 Solidus, 43 Potale, 46 Exocet, 47/48 Crown vetch.

The Across solutions begin with A to Z in alphabetical order, and the solutions from 1 to 9 Down begin with A to I

Last month's winner

WE Green, Sheffield

Bobby Seagull's Brain Teaser

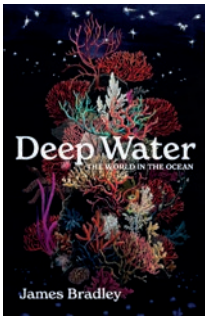
Ahead of the general election, a politician takes part in events at Buckingham Palace as part of campaigning. Playing tennis with Emma Raducanu, the politician panics. Making double faults all the way through and not even managing to touch the ball in Raducanu's service games, they are blown away 6-0 6-0. Then heading off to golf on the palace grounds in a demoralised state, they forget all their equipment. Luckily, Rory McIlroy lends them an assortment of drivers, irons, wedges and putters. This too is an embarrassment, and a special adviser steps in to help the politician dig out of this PR hole. Charles, Camilla and William had planned a TikTok video where they were going to let the politician wear the crown of Queen Elizabeth The Queen Mother with the Koh-i-Noor. But after the stress of the day, the beleaguered politician thinks they need a coronary artery bypass procedure instead. But actually, all they really need is for you to work out what links their day.

Last month's solution

1. They are numbers 19, 21, 25, 30 in the periodic table. All Adele albums
2. Ferdinand Magellan
3. Macaroni
4. Emperor
Answers hint at penguin species (Adelie, Magellanic, Macaroni, Emperor)

How to enter

Email your answer to answer@prospectmagazine.co.uk using the subject heading "Brain Teaser"



The winner receives a copy of "Deep Water: The World in the Ocean" by James Bradley (Scribe)

Last month's winner

David Watkins, Bournemouth

Brief encounter
Kara Swisher, *tech journalist*

What is the first news event you can recall?
I vaguely remember the moon landing—I was quite small at the time, but I was staying at a friend's house and everyone was watching it. The first news event I properly recall was Nixon's resignation in 1974: how he left the White House with his family in a helicopter and did that weird V-sign thing with his hands.

If you could spend a day in one city or place at one moment in history, what would that be?
If it can be the future, I'd have to say the day the aliens land. If it's the past... it's my son's birthday today, and I'd love to go back to the day when he was born in San Francisco. I remember it, but I also don't remember it; I'd like to re-experience it.

What is your favourite quote?
It's the first line of a poem by Louise Glück, my favourite poet of all time: "I never turned anyone into a pig / Some people are pigs; I make them / Look like pigs." That's my job. I make them look like pigs because that's what they are.

What have you changed your mind about?
Probably the idea that everybody is—or at least most people are—persuadable. I have realised that some people just aren't persuadable, but I used to think that if only I gave them more facts or information, then they would change their minds. If you look at lots of Trumpers in America, it's not that they don't understand—it's that they do but just don't care. So now I no longer waste my energy trying to convince these sorts of people.

In your time covering tech, which person or company has most changed the world?
Steve Jobs. He brought ease-of-use to technology to the masses—especially with the iPhone, which was a critical device.

Social media: force for good or force for bad? You can only pick one!
Bad. I thought social media might bring people together and show their commonality. In fact, it shows their differences and allows people to dunk on each other without repercussions—in a way that doesn't happen in real life. I call it *un*social media now. People are much better in person.

Is there a technological trend we should be paying attention to, but aren't?
I don't think we're paying enough attention to climate change tech. There's really interesting stuff being tested: hydrogen fuels, small nuclear devices, all kinds of things. It's not the only thing that will solve the climate crisis. We'll need global cooperation to reduce our dependency on fossil fuels. We'll even have to figure out a Plan B, in the form of another planet—it's one of the few things I agree with Elon [Musk] about these days. But tech will be an important part of the solution.

Who will own the future?
It ought to be the people, but—right now—it's looking like the big tech companies. Apple, Microsoft, Amazon and, to a lesser extent, Meta. They're mostly all based in America, but are their own nation states. And then there are big Chinese tech companies too, of course, but they're basically the Chinese government, so they're literally a nation state.

What is the last piece of music, play, novel or film that brought you to tears?
I don't cry at movies, but commercials always get me. If you play an old Kodak commercial, then I'll well right up. Maybe it's nostalgia, but maybe not. There was one recently about an old lady with Alzheimer's, who somehow got revived, and that got me. Commercials just work really well on me.

What do you most regret?
Not having more kids! I wish I had six, which is two more than the four I do have. I adopted the ones that I didn't have genetically, but I wish—when there was an opportunity—that I'd got pregnant again. I loved being pregnant. You create something that's actually moving inside you, and you really understand your body. It's so fucking cool. ♦

Kara Swisher's new memoir, "Burn Book" (Piatkus, £25), is out now. Prospect spoke to her at Truth Tellers: The Sir Harry Evans Investigative Journalism Summit 2024

ILLUSTRATION BY MICHAEL REA

green pastures

Got savings or investments?

CELEBRATING 1999 25 2024 YEARS

Earn up to 5% p.a. and help someone facing homelessness

With Green Pastures, you can be an everyday hero, using your money to provide a home and support to those most in need and still earn a return.

In doing so, you will join us in responding to the growing need to house and care for the homeless, and help make a transformational difference in someone's life.

1. Lend

Invest anything from £1,000 for one or more years

2. Help

Your money helps provide a home for someone in need

3. Earn

Choose to earn up to 5% and your money is repayable

Registered with the Financial Conduct Authority

greenpastures.co.uk

0300 365 4500

Investing doesn't have to be stressful, it can feel like a walk in the park.

If you're eager for the kind of returns that active management generates but don't want the nightmare of stomach-churning volatility, Alliance Trust is for you. Our unique investment process is designed to quietly deliver attractive returns on shares from around the world without you needing to leave your comfort zone. We've increased our dividend every year for an impressive 57 years, making Alliance Trust an ideal centrepiece for your portfolio. Relax. Investing doesn't have to be nerve-wracking, it can feel like a bit of a stroll.

To find out more visit: alliancetrust.co.uk

Alliance Trust
Find your comfort zone®