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BBC'S HUW EDWARDS CHARGED WITH MAKING INDECENT IMAGES OF CHILDREN

Two children killed, nine injured in horrific knife attack at Southport school holiday dance







Eventers win GB's first Olympic gold as diver Tom Daley takes fifth medal

Laura Collett rides to victory, followed by a gold for Tom Pidcock in biking as Daley celebrates with Noah Williams

Pensioners hit by Reeves plan to fill £22bn black hole

Chancellor cancels winter fuel payments for 7m households but finds cash to offer striking junior doctors a 22% pay rise – as she warns more tax and spend pain to come in Budget

DAVID MADDOX
POLITICAL EDITOR

Pensioners will take the brunt of a raft of cuts announced yesterday by the chancellor Rachel Reeves to deal with a £22bn black hole in the country's finances. Ms Reeves announced that she would be removing winter fuel allowance payments for pensioners from almost 7 million households. The bold move did not feature in Labour's election manifesto and came as a visible shock to MPs in the Commons. But even with £5.5bn of cuts announced for 2024-5, and another £8.1bn for the following year, Ms Reeves warned there will be worse to come in her autumn Budget.

Editorials

Chancellor offers hard truths with pain to come

Rachel Reeves has been in office for not quite one month and in that short time she has ripped up planning regulations, discovered a £22bn "black hole" in the public finances, and coined a new chancellorial mantra: "If we cannot afford it, we cannot do it."

It is a statement of intent, if not a threat, that the next few months will be fairly bleak. In a sober statement on "the public spending inheritance" (or "mess" for short), she made it plain that tough times lie ahead. There is a lively argument about what was already publicly known about the public finances and what has come to light since she came to power. The shadow chancellor, Jeremy Hunt, put up a surprisingly robust defence of the last government's (ie his) record, and on the detail; but there is no doubt that the pressures are acute, and action must be taken.

The single most politically explosive decision prefigured by the chancellor is undoubtedly the reform of the winter fuel allowance, drastically limiting eligibility to only those on pensions credit (that is: only the very poorest). Those elderly people close to the poverty line and already struggling with near record-high energy bills will be badly hit by this change. The chancellor would be well advised at this relatively early stage to consider alternatives to this particular measure.

It is her choice, and in this case, not one that can be reasonably laid-off onto the Conservative administration. At a time when the government faces opposition within her own party on child poverty, she may regret opening up old arguments about pension poverty.

That said, the tenor of Ms Reeves's statement comes as no surprise. And for good reason: Covid-19, the energy crisis and political incompetence mean the public finances are in a bad way.

After several years during which the Labour Party veered into the economic avant garde, the present leadership has rightly made fiscal responsibility its central theme. In the general election, Keir Starmer and Ms Reeves were rewarded for their efforts by the electorate.

Sir Keir and Ms Reeves argued throughout that the stability of Britain's public finances is the essential pre-condition for the success of the first Labour administration since 2010. Without such a foundation, all their ambitions for expanding the economy, improving public services and improving the living standards of the people simply cannot be met.

As Ms Reeves points out, the short-lived Truss government was a sharp and painful reminder of what happens when such prudence is abandoned, though it is fair to add that the 2022 mini-Budget was only the most recent example of when a prime minister and chancellor embarked on a reckless dash for growth, only to for it to end, inevitably, in crisis and political tears.

Indeed, the widespread scepticism about the spending plans set out by the then chancellor, Mr Hunt, eroded the trust that he and Rishi Sunak had clawed back after the Truss experiment.

Ms Reeves, one of the most economically literate chancellors since the war, understands these lessons of history full well. She is right to want to place the public finances on a secure footing – and, as she promised, "to level with the public and tell them the truth".

Some of the more heroic assumptions about future public spending made by Mr Sunak and Mr Hunt were being questioned before and during the election campaign, so it is not quite fair for Ms Reeves to suggest that everything that she and her colleagues discovered when they took over has come as a terrible shock to them. However, it is obviously the case that an opposition, like the think tanks, can only discern so much about the public finances from the outside.

Now, with full access to the civil service and a comprehensive "audit" of current and potential expensive calls on the Exchequer, Ms Reeves can present a sobering assessment of what needs to be done to prevent the public finances spinning out of control. In short, she proposes a "kitchen sink" combination of public spending cuts and tax increases to deal with these looming contingencies. None are cheap.

A final settlement of the junior doctors pay dispute will require a 22 per cent increase in salaries; billions more will be required to deal with immediate crises in the public services, as well as the potential bankruptcy of Thames Water, some universities and local authorities – all going way beyond the in-year overspends outlined by Ms Reeves.

Reforms to capital gains tax and recasting tax relief on pensions contributions won't break manifesto pledges and should help provide the funds to deal with these challenges; but painful decisions on pausing public investment programmes have become inevitable. It's not going to be popular, and Ms Reeves is wise to want to get these moves out of the way early.

The framework for improved fiscal credibility the chancellor proposes will also bolster her drive to make Labour once again the party of economic competence – a stronger Office for Budget Responsibility and the new Office of Value for Money are highly welcome "guard rails".

Looking to the course of this parliament, Ms Reeves will face one of her biggest challenges in trying to strengthen the public

finances at the same time as meeting her party's "mission" to grow the economy, including the brave manifesto promise "to secure the highest sustained growth in the G7 – with good jobs and productivity growth in every part of the country making everyone, not just a few, better off".

Every major road, rail and other infrastructure project postponed or cancelled will reduce the future productive capacity of the UK economy – and with it the prospect of higher wages, better public services and generally rising living standards.

Post-Brexit Britain needs all the investment – public and private, from home and abroad – that it can possibly pump into raising productivity and securing its industrial future. Ms Reeves said nothing about the principle, embraced by many of her predecessors of all parties, of borrowing to invest.

If Ms Reeves judges that the overall level and trajectory of public debt makes funding such projects impossible, then she may have to – to borrow her own words – level with the public about her growth targets. Better still, she should look again at raising the right kind of taxes (such as on the polluters) and making her borrowing rules more investment-friendly.

She surely cannot look forward to delivering the "decade of renewal" she promises without applying even more of her formidable intelligence and creativity to focusing her Treasury on "our number one mission: to grow our economy".

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News

Reeves to fill ‘black hole’ by axing help for pensioners

Chancellor draws gasps from MPs by restricting winter fuel payments as she announces series of early spending cuts



Chancellor Rachel Reeves delivers a brutal assessment of the nation’s finances (PRU/AFP/Getty)

DAVID MADDOX
POLITICAL EDITOR

Pensioners will take the brunt of a raft of brutal cuts announced by the new chancellor Rachel Reeves to deal with a £22bn black hole in the country’s finances. To gasps in the Commons chamber, Ms Reeves announced that she would be removing

winter fuel payments from almost 7 million households and restricting the allowance to poorer pensioners.

The bold move on the winter fuel allowance – a benefit that was first introduced by Labour's Tony Blair in 1997 – is similar to a policy proposed by Theresa May in 2017, when the outcry over the proposal almost sank the Tory election campaign. The plan did not feature in the Labour election manifesto this year, and visibly came as a complete shock to MPs.

Ms Reeves also cancelled the plan to introduce the Dilnot Commission recommendations on social care for the elderly next year, meaning that people will still have to sell their homes to pay for residential care.

Announcing a series of cuts, a sombre-looking Ms Reeves repeated: "If we cannot afford it, we cannot do it." She accused the previous government of a "cover-up" of the state of the nation's finances, and also took the axe to Rishi Sunak's legacy, scrapping his Advanced British Standard qualification – saving £260m in the process – and his plans to reopen railways, to be paid for out of High Speed 2 savings.

But even with £5.5bn of cuts announced for 2024-25, and another £8.1bn for the following year, Ms Reeves warned that there would be worse to come in her Budget on 30 October. She said: "I have to tell the House that the Budget will involve taking difficult decisions to meet our fiscal rules across spending, welfare and tax." The chancellor also ordered an immediate multi-year spending review, the first since 2021.



Reeves announces the results of her review in the House of Commons yesterday (House of Commons/UK Parliament/PA)

However, the Tories accused her of creating "a fictitious black hole" as a means of laying the ground for tax rises. There is now a widespread belief that Ms Reeves will increase inheritance tax and capital gains tax in her Budget, although she repeated her commitment not to increase the three big taxes – income tax, national insurance and VAT.

An anguished-looking former chancellor, now Tory shadow chancellor, Jeremy Hunt described Ms Reeves's claims as "shameless". He claimed that around half of the "fictitious black hole" comes from discretionary public sector pay awards, claiming that she had "caved in to the unions".

The figures revealed that Ms Reeves's decision to agree to the inflation-busting recommendations of the pay-review bodies on public sector pay – including 5.5 per cent for teachers and NHS staff, 6 per cent for the armed forces, and 5 per cent for prison officers – will cost the public £9.4bn beyond what had been budgeted for, out of the £22bn she identified as the financial black hole.

The figures did not include the huge 22 per cent settlement to bring the junior doctors' strike to an end, which is set to cost another £9bn.

Mr Hunt said: "Today's exercise is not economic, it is political. She wants to blame the last Conservative government for tax rises and project cancellations she's been planning all along." But Ms Reeves insisted that she had "been left with no choice" on public sector pay, because the previous Tory government, unusually, had not made a submission to the pay-review bodies on affordability.

She also made it clear that there was a need to break the cycle of strikes that had brought the rail network, NHS and schools to a halt over the last two years. The direct cost of the strikes to the NHS alone was £1.5bn, the Treasury claimed.

Among the other savings announced were ending the Rwanda migration scheme, saving £800m this year; cancelling the

Stonehenge tunnel, A27 schemes, and plans to restore some previously closed railway lines, saving £785m next year; and ending non-essential spending by departments on consultancy services and communications, saving £600m this year.

The scrapping of the Dilnot reforms to social care, which would have introduced a more generous means test and raised capital limits for individuals' contributions to their own care, saves £1.1bn over the next two years. Means-testing the winter fuel allowance for pensioners saves almost £3bn in the next two years.

During the election, respected think tank the Institute for Fiscal Studies warned of a £20bn black hole in public finances and accused the major parties of creating "a conspiracy of silence". Ms Reeves, though, insisted that there was no way she could have seen how bad things were, despite the Tories claiming that the books were open during the election.



Shadow chancellor Jeremy Hunt looked anguished (BBC)

Among the significant pressures identified by the audit included £6.4bn for hotel accommodation for asylum seekers, £2.6bn for unfunded policy announcements since 2021, including the Advanced British Standard and the Network North scheme, and £2.2bn needed to cover pay awards from previous years.

Ms Reeves said these pressures had not been revealed to the public by the previous government. She told MPs: "Before the

election, I said that we would face the worst inheritance since the Second World War. Taxes at a 70-year high, debt through the roof, an economy only just coming out of recession. I knew all of these things. I was honest about them during the campaign." But, she added there were things the Tories had "covered up from the country".

Richard Hughes, Chair of the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR), said he only became aware of the pressures "at a meeting with the Treasury last week". Announcing a review of the preparation of the OBR's forecasts in March 2024, he said the findings from the Treasury audit would represent "one of the largest year-ahead overspends" outside of the pandemic.

Health experts warned about the consequences of Ms Reeves shelving social care reforms. Nuffield Trust chief executive Thea Stein said: "Problems facing the public finances continue to mean that switching from fighting fires today to preventing them burning in the future seems to be all but impossible.

"Perhaps the starkest illustration of our failure to grapple with long-term issues is social care. Here, reforms have once again been shelved. While the specific reforms scrapped today were only a partial solution, they were at least something – and the danger now is that social care remains in the long grass."

There were also questions over the chancellor's commitment to growth. Sam Richards, chief executive of pro-growth campaign group Britain Remade, said: "There are some projects in the Restoring Our Railways fund – like the Tavistock railway line – that are vital to delivering prosperity in parts of the country that don't get the same focus as London and the South East. As the government reviews these projects, we'll be making the case for those that we think are best value for money."

The trade unions backed Ms Reeves's decision to prioritise public sector pay. TUC general secretary Paul Nowak said: "If we want to repair and rebuild our country – and secure higher growth – we need strong public services, investment in infrastructure, and a plan to make work pay."

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The financial hole is real but the chancellor's still digging



More pain to come: Britain's economic woes are not wholly down to Reeves's predecessors (BBC)

JAMES MOORE
CHIEF BUSINESS COMMENTATOR

So there's a £22bn "black hole" in Britain's public finances – even larger than the £20bn we had been led to expect would be unveiled in the chancellor's Commons statement.

It was scarcely credible for Reeves to pretend for so long that it was a surprise to find that the numbers didn't add up. Everyone knows that Britain is in a fiscal bind. Paul Johnson, head of the Institute for Fiscal Studies, said that the "last government left public finances in a bad state".

Yet some of the hole is of Reeves's own making, with roughly half coming from her decision to agree to accept the recommendations of the various public sector pay review bodies in full. This, said Reeves, was "the right decision for the people who work in and use public services". She added: "Giving hardworking staff the rises they deserve [ensures] we can recruit and retain the staff we need."

Now, this is a perfectly credible position to take. And it is one that ought to help with the delivery of improved public services. But, while justified, the rises were always going to need paying for, either by tax rises or by cuts elsewhere.

Some of the savings designed to do that were widely expected: the previous government's promise to build 40 new hospitals, which was proceeding at the speed of a dyspeptic snail with a broken foot, is now under review. Some road and rail projects have been canned, and the economy will have to take one for the team there. "If we cannot afford it, we cannot do it," said Reeves. Repeatedly. Comedians and satirists take note: by the time the chancellor sat down, it was looking like a catchphrase.

What else? The farcical policy to ship asylum seekers to Rwanda is gone. Promises to speed up processing and to stop using hotels for housing those waiting for decisions have also been made. How that works in practice remains to be seen. If the processing problem was easily fixed, then it would have been dealt with by now.

Reeves stressed that she is retaining the triple lock. This is a massive fiscal bugbear and increasingly hard to justify

We also heard the recently dumped phrase “levelling up”, because projects are being cancelled. So are plans for a new Advanced British Standard qualification. If we cannot afford it, we cannot do it.

The previous government’s plan for a retail sell-off of part of the government’s remaining NatWest stake has been shelved. From an economic standpoint, that makes all sorts of sense. It is cheaper to sell off your shares to City institutions. The discounts you have to offer them to gobble up big chunks are much smaller than the public would demand.

Some people whose taxes bailed out what was then the Royal Bank of Scotland may feel somewhat miffed at being denied the chance to make a quick buck through participating in the re-privatisation of the bank. But Reeves’s approach offers better value to the vast majority of taxpayers, many of whom wouldn’t have had access to the capital necessary to take part.

But then came a real surprise: in future, pensioners’ winter fuel payments will (in effect) be means-tested and linked to certain benefits, saving £1.5bn. Reeves stressed that she is retaining the triple lock, which increases the state pension in line with average earnings, inflation, or 2.5 per cent, whichever is higher. This is a massive fiscal bugbear and increasingly hard to justify.

Pensioner poverty has dramatically fallen. Child poverty, on the other hand... But even Reeves, at the height of her political powers, didn't dare renege on Labour's pledge to keep it. So we're going for rich pensioner benefits instead. I wouldn't be surprised to see more of this in the future.

Will these measures balance the books? For now. But there will be more pain to come on 30 October, set as the date for Reeves's first Budget. I'd suggest replacing the famous red box with a black one, except that would cost money. And, as we know, there isn't much of the latter around.

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Saving the Tory party might be harder than we thought...



On yesterday's evidence, the Conservative leadership challengers are tumbling over themselves to fall into the chancellor's trap (PRU/AFP/Getty)

JOE MURPHY

Rachel Reeves walked into the chamber wearing a funeral director's expression that quelled any hurrahs on the Labour benches. Backbenchers took one look at her baleful glare and quietened down.

Opposite, Jeremy Hunt simmered petulantly. He had seen an advance copy of her statement and knew what was coming. Around the chamber, expectations sharpened, the mood intensified. This was shaping up to be more important than

some end-of-term knockabout statement. Indeed it was. It was a defenestration. A political and economic disembowelment of the last government.

“Mr Speaker, on my first day as chancellor of the Exchequer, I asked Treasury officials to assess the state of public spending,” Reeves began. “That work is now complete.” Her tone was one of ice-cold anger – like a company shareholder explaining why he had needed to call in the fraud squad following the departure of a dodgy accountant. “First, I will expose the scale – and the seriousness – of what has been uncovered,” she scowled.

Most people’s image of Reeves is probably the video they keep playing on 24-hour news channels of her walking up Downing Street on 5 May looking awfully pleased with herself. But she told us how she had discovered, in her first weeks in office, that “there were things I did not know. Things that the party opposite covered up”.

Hunt crossed his legs awkwardly, adopting what psychologists might interpret as a stressed position. Now he began fidgeting and muttering “Rubbish.” But Reeves was relentless. A £22bn black hole of unfunded promises. The national reserves not just blown, but double-spent. She did not quite point a finger across the chamber with a trembling bellow of “*J’accuse*”, but that was the gist.

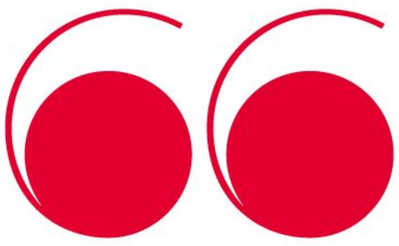
On she went: unfunded promises had not been shown to the Office for Budget Responsibility (an allegation that raises questions about what will happen to the Treasury civil servants who did not pass this information to the spending watchdog – presumably a matter at least as deserving of an inquiry as Partygate).

Hunt has never looked so angry. “Absolute rubbish,” he heckled. He seemed to be saying that the reserves had been “managed down”, which is as reassuring as Father Ted saying that the money was just “resting” in his account. Across the Tory benches, confused faces stared back at Reeves in defeat. Many of these MPs have never been in opposition before, and it showed

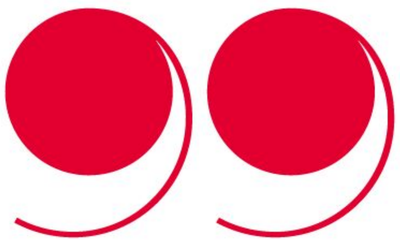
in their failure to challenge the mighty chancellor who bestrode the house.

Her announcement that the winter fuel allowance was being abolished for 10 million pensioners went over with barely a squeal, not even from the SNP. Ditto the massive pay rise for junior doctors, which ends the strike. Wes Streeting trolled a teary-looking Victoria Atkins over the despatch boxes, saying: "It took me *three weeks*."

Reeves, squeezing maximum headroom, gave a clear signal of tax rises while saying that Labour would abide by what she called "*our* fiscal rules", which sounded like a hint of new, perhaps looser, such rules in the next Budget.



The previously quiet Labour benches now raised a racket. Mr Speaker intervened to tell Keir Starmer's front bench to 'act like a cabinet, not a rabble!'



Hunt was classy in response, replying forensically and spiritedly to her allegations. It was "a cock-and-bull story about how bad everything is" that would "fool absolutely no one", he said, accusing Reeves of simply rolling the pitch for tax hikes. The shadow chancellor pointed out that the deficit was down from 10.3 per cent in 2010 to 4.4 per cent when the Tories left office, inflation was down from 3.4 per cent to 2 per cent, and the UK had the fastest-growing economy in the G7. He was effective but completely outgunned, a lone charge up the beach.

The previously quiet Labour benches now raised a racket. Mr Speaker intervened to tell Keir Starmer's front bench to "act like

a cabinet, not a rabble!" Sarah Olney, speaking for the Lib Dems, merely rehashed her party's election attacks on the Tories, making no challenge to the government and offering zero insight into the statement just given. The day belonged to Reeves, who said in triumph that Hunt and Rishi Sunak should "hang their heads in shame".

She ended by vowing to "fix the foundations of our economy", a taunting echo of George Osborne's 2010 soundbite about "fixing the roof while the sun's shining" – a tease that, having won with Tony Blair's playbook, Labour were now rolling out Osborne's blame strategy to consolidate their power.

Famously, the chancellor was a teenage chess champ and is therefore familiar with the Queen's gambit: not the TV series about a sassy woman who beats the men, but an opening to a game that aims for domination of the centre of the board. For this metaphor to succeed, her opponents will be pushed to the fringes and driven to madness and endless defeats. On the evidence of yesterday, the Tory leadership challengers are tumbling over themselves to fall into the chancellor's trap.

Nominations closed for the Tory leadership race at 2.30pm – and five minutes later, a perspiring Bob Blackman, chief of the men in grey suits, stood in broiling sunshine on College Green to announce the six candidates. Behind him, a man with a "Jesus Saves" placard strolled into camera view. Blackman confirmed that Suella Braverman had dropped out – news that gave her former cabinet colleagues almost as much pleasure as when Liz Truss got the slow handclap.

Blackman proudly revealed a new "yellow card" to punish contenders guilty of "backbiting and attacks on colleagues". However, when journalists asked hopefully if there would be a red card, the chair of the 1922 Committee conceded that the preservation of law 'n' order among Tory MPs is reliant on their "embarrassment" at being ticked off. This may be overconfidence on his part, since anyone remaining in today's Conservative Party must possess a seriously high embarrassment threshold.

Hacks were eager to get back in the shade, and there was an uncomfortable silence when Blackman invited more questions. "I've got a question," pitched in the Jesus Saves man. "What about Jesus?"

Meanwhile, the current frontrunner, Kemi Badenoch, revealed in *The Times* that what truly antagonised voters on 4 July was "postmodernism that can best be described as joyless decadence". Finger on the pulse of the nation, that one.

Braverman, explaining her withdrawal to *The Daily Telegraph*, listed "pedicabs" as one of the mistakes of the Sunak era. Of course! A bill to regulate rickshaws in London's West End was the last straw.

Saving the Conservative Party might test even the powers of the almighty himself...



There may be trouble ahead, but Reeves's plan could work

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News

Two children killed near Southport dance workshop

Eight people in critical care after knife rampage by teenager



Emergency services in Southport yesterday morning after the frenzied assault (Getty)

HOLLY EVANS

Two children have been killed and nine people injured in a stabbing attack close to a Taylor Swift-themed dance workshop in Southport, north of Liverpool. Six children and two adults remain in a critical condition in hospital with knife wounds.

Armed police detained a 17-year-old boy and seized a knife, with one eyewitness saying the incident was like “a scene from a horror movie”. The suspect is from Banks, a village outside Southport.

Merseyside Police confirmed that the incident is not currently being treated as terror-related, while the motive behind the stabbings remains unclear.

Merseyside Police chief constable Serena Kennedy told reporters that the adults injured are believed to have been protecting the young victims.

She said: “It is understood that the children were attending a Taylor Swift event at a dance hall when the offender, armed with a knife, walked into the premises and started to attack inside.



Eight patients with stab injuries, including children, have been taken to hospital (PA)

“We believe that the adults who were injured were bravely trying to protect the children who were being attacked.”

The teenager, who is originally from Cardiff, has been arrested on suspicion of murder and attempted murder and remains in police custody.

A local business owner, who was one of the people who called the police, said he believed six or seven “young girls” had been stabbed.

Colin Parry, owner of Masters Vehicle Body Repairs on Hart Street, said: “The mothers are coming here now and screaming.

“It is like a scene from a horror movie.” He added: “Police have got him. It’s like something from America, not like sunny Southport.”

Another local resident, Ryan Carney, said that his mother had overheard “screaming and crying”, before seeing paramedics bring out young children “covered in blood”.

“She came out and there was a woman who was screaming, saying she can’t find her child,” he added.

“They let her into the cordon and she ran down and all she could hear was screaming and crying, saying, ‘That’s my child! That’s my child!’”.



Eyewitnesses saw children with stab injuries running onto the road (PA)

In a post on X, formerly Twitter, North West Ambulance Service said they received an emergency call at 11.48am to a report of multiple stabbings.

They added: “We have dispatched 13 ambulances along with specialised resources of our Hazardous Area Response Team, air ambulance and merit doctors to the scene.

“So far, NWAS has treated eight patients with stab injuries who have been taken to Alder Hey Children’s Hospital, Aintree University Hospital and Southport and Formby hospital.”

In a statement, Alder Hey Children’s Hospital confirmed they were dealing with a major incident, and warned parents to avoid bringing their children to the emergency department unless it was urgent.

Eyewitness Bare Varathan, 35, who owns a corner shop on Hart Street, said he was called by a staff member who told him, “Boss, get to the shop!” He said: “I saw seven to 10 kids outside the nursery. They were injured, bleeding. They were in the road, running from the nursery.

“They had been stabbed, here, here, here, everywhere.” Mr Varathan indicated the neck, back and chest area. “They were all aged about 10. One of them was really seriously injured.”

He added that emergency services descended upon the street, and that the suspect had reportedly arrived in a taxi with a knife.

One local resident recalled seeing a mother hysterically screaming for help as children were being treated on the floor by paramedics. He said: “She was screaming ‘my daughter’s been stabbed’.



“The woman was in hysterics. Then two police cars rushed up the street the other way. It was a mum with her 10-year-old

daughter who had been stabbed."

A large police cordon has been put up around the building, with police officers guarding either end.

Officers and vehicles can be seen from a distance inside the cordon, including scenes-of-crime officers in white boiler suits.

Sir Keir Starmer shared his condolences: "The events today are just truly awful and I know the whole country is deeply shocked at what they have seen and what they have heard.

"I know I speak for everybody in the whole country in saying our thoughts and condolences are with the victims, their families, their friends and with the wider community. It is impossible to imagine what they are going through right now."

The King said that he and the Queen had been "profoundly shocked". Charles added: "We send our most heartfelt condolences, prayers and deepest sympathies to the families and loved ones of those who have so tragically lost their lives, and to all those affected by this truly appalling attack."

A parent, who did not wish to be named, said his daughter was "traumatised" by the attack. He said: "My daughter was in it and she was traumatised. She ran away and she's safe."



Local residents reported hearing screaming and shouting as children lay injured in the street (@J1985DAVE/PA Wire)

One woman who lives nearby told the *Liverpool Echo* that residents had warned each other on Whatsapp groups to lock their windows and doors.

She said: “It was about 20 past 12 I think and we heard loads of sirens and then there was a helicopter circling above.

“Then the messages started to go around the local WhatsApp groups, saying ‘lock your windows, lock your doors’, we were told a man was running around stabbing people.”

“We are all absolutely terrified, panicking and sick with worry – everyone is trying to reach anyone they know in the area. I don’t know how this can happen on a Monday lunchtime.”



A forensics officer at the scene yesterday (PA)

Leigh Walton, who owns Yates Motor Engineers, told Sky News he could see the aftermath of the stabbings from his garage.

He said: “The first thing I knew was all the sirens going up and down the street, I could hear something major had happened. Then the police helicopters and multiple air ambulances, you could just tell it was something big, something major.”

Yvette Cooper, the home secretary, said she was “deeply concerned” about the “very serious incident”.

Southport MP Patrick Hurley said: “I am deeply saddened by the news that two children have been fatally injured. I hope for the swift and full recovery of all the other victims of this senseless attack.”

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Which Tory hopefuls pose a threat to frontrunner Kemi?



Kemi Badenoch will have her work cut out rebuilding the party if she wins in November (AP)

SEAN O'GRADY

Nominations for the Conservative Party leadership contest have closed, and the long summer of campaigning now begins for the six contenders. They are, in order of declaration: James Cleverly; Tom Tugendhat; Mel Stride; Robert Jenrick; Priti Patel; and Kemi Badenoch. Whoever wins will be faced with rebuilding a

demoralised party that has gone down to its worst defeat since the dawn of modern democratic politics in 1832.

Dazed and confused, the party will have not only the hard work of renewing itself, but the additional, and until recently unfamiliar, sensation of being ignored by the general public. It's a tough gig, being leader of the opposition, but someone has to do it...

How long is this all going to take?

Being in the immediate aftermath of catastrophic defeat and descent into irrelevance at least means that they can take their time in choosing the person to take them forward. Even so, it's fairly self-indulgent. The six candidates will spend much of the summer going around the country, meeting and canvassing Tory members as well as MPs old and new.

The six will be whittled down to four after parliament gets back, with several rounds of voting scheduled between 4 and 11 September. The four will then take part in an informal "beauty contest" during the Conservative Party conference (29 September to 2 October). The MPs will then vote in October on which two of the four candidates will be presented to the wider membership to decide between in a final vote on 31 October. The new leader will take over from Rishi Sunak on 2 November.

Why so drawn out?

The official answer is that there's no great hurry, and a long campaign will allow the candidates to make themselves better known to the membership – only Badenoch and Tugendhat have run before. It may also be the case that elements within the Tory hierarchy were keen to ensure that Badenoch, the current favourite, wouldn't be able to just walk into the role, and would at least be thoroughly tested over the next few months. The timing certainly hasn't helped her chances, though she has some momentum behind her.

What are the issues?

Being that the Tories are an argumentative bunch, they can't even agree on that. Thus, while most want to start by analysing

the divisions the party suffered, it is less clear which issues contributed to its past failure and which might be key to its future success. Patel, Cleverly and Tugendhat, for example, stress the need for "unity", while Badenoch argues that "it's not enough to call for 'unity to win'. We need to ask ourselves, what are we uniting around? What are we winning for?"

It's early days, but the indications are that migration, tax cuts, "culture wars", and the question of whether to leave the European Convention on Human Rights will be some of the major areas for debate – just as they were in the period leading to the disastrous defeat on 4 July. More broadly, the discussion will also be about whether the party was "not Conservative enough" and "too liberal"; and in electoral terms, how on earth it will win back the voters it lost to Reform on the one side, and Labour and the Liberal Democrats on the other.



On centre ground: James Cleverly was the first of the six leadership hopefuls to declare his candidacy (PA)

It's going to get quite amorphous – and, if the past is anything to go by, nasty and personal, too. Worryingly for the Tories, at this stage, the candidates don't seem to be reflecting the concerns of the electorate over public services and the cost of living.

Who will the MPs pick?

Interestingly, the clearout at the last general election doesn't seem to have altered the complexion of the party in the Commons – it remains fairly evenly balanced between the "One

Nation" centre-right grouping and the various shades of Eurosceptic, socially conservative hard right. The control over new candidates exercised by Sunak's team seems to have limited the march of the right, while the restoration of the whip to Michael Heseltine may be an early hint that some in the party want its civil wars to end.

As to the processes, in the case of the parliamentary party we're talking about a highly sophisticated selectorate, in which leading candidates may "lend" their supporters to the challenger candidate most likely to knock out a more serious rival. There will be horse-trading and improbable alliances, and unlikely "dream tickets" based entirely on personal ambition and the desire for plum jobs in the shadow cabinet. Presumably, all six have the means to raise the £200,000 they'll need to pay the party in order to go all the way to the final vote.

Who will win?

The conventional wisdom is that if one of the more right-wing candidates (Badenoch, Patel, Jenrick) makes it to the final two, then they'll overtake the more centrist candidate (Cleverly, Tugendhat or Stride). This is what happened when Boris Johnson beat Jeremy Hunt in 2019, and when Liz Truss overtook the MPs' choice, Sunak, in the first of the two elections in 2022.

The shock of the defeat in July might prompt a few among the grassroots to consider someone who's an avowed unity candidate, such as Cleverly, but that would have the disadvantage of postponing tough choices on policy and tone. At the moment the contest is Badenoch's to lose (and she quite easily could, simply by patronising people), and Stride is probably just trying to get the shadow chancellorship. Aside from those observations, it's more open than it looks.

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Labour lost almost a third of its ethnic minority support

Polling shows Black and Asian voters turned to other parties



Pro-Palestine demonstrators surround a car carrying Keir Starmer earlier this month (PA)

NADINE WHITE
ALICJA HAGOPIAN

The Labour Party lost almost a third of its support from Black and Asian communities in the run-up to the general election, according to exclusive polling from Ipsos.

Among ethnic minority voters, Sir Keir Starmer's party led the Conservatives with 46 per cent of ballots to 17 per cent, and among white voters, Labour clinched 33 per cent compared to 26 per cent for the Tories. However, Labour's support among ethnic minority voters was higher during the last general election in 2019 under Jeremy Corbyn at 64 per cent and has fallen by 18 percentage points.

Jabeer Butt, chief executive of the Race Equality Foundation, said: "Some have marvelled at the efficiency of Labour, securing a huge majority based on a lower share of the vote in comparison to 2019. Nevertheless, it should concern Labour that they have not only lost votes from Asian communities, but they have lost seats. How Labour addresses the concerns of these communities, such as a disproportionate experience of poverty, excess deaths during the pandemic and now Palestine, is likely to be crucial in whether this is a blip or becomes a trend."

The "mega-poll" by Ipsos of 15,234 adults, carried out just after the general election, found significant variation in Labour support among different ethnic minority groups with younger people from these groups less likely to rally behind Sir Keir. Grassroots Black Left, a socialist organisation backed by former frontbencher Clive Lewis, said the polling reflects Labour's recent race rows, its fragmented relationship with Black and Asian communities and disappointment around its position on Gaza. "It's not surprising that disenchanted former loyal Labour supporters, especially younger ones, are increasingly voting for the Green Party and radical independent candidates," a GBL spokesperson said.



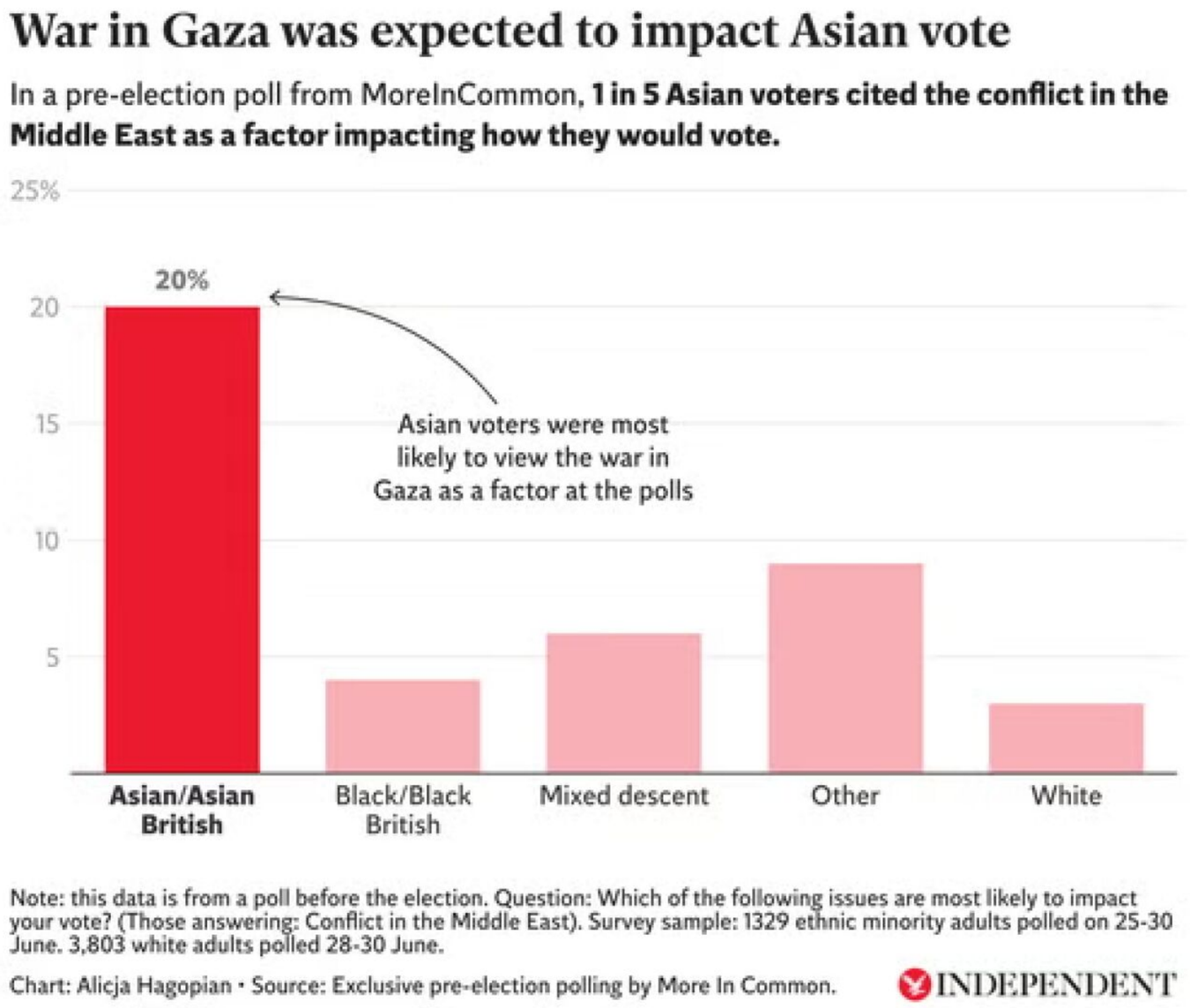
Starmer's comments on Israel's response to the 7 October attack angered many minority voters (PA)

In an interview last year, Sir Keir made comments which suggested he thought Israel has a right to limit water and electricity in Gaza. He later said that Israel has a right to self-defence but not to withhold aid. This earlier statement put off voters, the GBL spokesperson said. "He also needs to end the supply of British arms to Israel," they added. "Starmer and his ministers must show they are prepared to listen to the Black communities about our concerns and act on our demands. They could do this by holding US-style town hall meetings in Black communities around the country."

The Independent's analysis showed that Labour's vote share was much higher among voters from a Black ethnic minority background than among voters from an Asian ethnic minority background, at 68 per cent to 39 per cent. Among those of a mixed ethnic background, the party's vote share stood at 50 per cent. Sir Keir received the keys to Downing Street in July after defeating Rishi Sunak after 14 years of Conservative-led power.

Yet talk of a 1997-level landslide, when Tony Blair first came into power, was unfounded. Not only did Labour win less of the popular vote overall this time, with 45 per cent in 1997 and 34 per cent in 2024, but ethnic minority groups in particular appeared much less convinced by Sir Keir than Mr Blair's Labour. Although Labour lost 22 per cent of support among young people – more than any party in that age group – the

analysis shows that the party's vote share increased in every category over the age of 34.



Gideon Skinner, head of politics at Ipsos, said the polling results were evidence of the fragmentation of British politics, "where old certainties can now no longer be relied upon". "We had already seen ethnic minority satisfaction with Keir Starmer start to fall in the second half of 2023, then playing a role in the local elections, and this looks like continuing that trend, with the Greens and independent/smaller parties benefiting instead," he said. "The conflict in Gaza can't be ignored as a factor, as it was much more likely to be cited as an important issue, especially by Asian voters.

"At the same time, we shouldn't think of ethnic minority voters as a single group or only concerned about a single issue – public services like the NHS and education, the cost of living, the economy and jobs, tax, housing and crime were all just as or often even more important issues in their decision. Ethnic minority Britons have shown the power of their vote in 2024, and we will also need a better understanding of the data behind their views to respond to their concerns."

Carla Denyer, co-leader of the Green Party, said issues around immigration and Gaza meant that people felt Labour's anti-

racism credentials had been tarnished. She said: “For voters with those concerns, our work towards being a more inclusive party, along with our offer of real hope and real change, be that on housing, fixing our public services, the climate crisis or the war on Gaza, made us an inspiring alternative. This is one reason why we achieved our record vote share and secured four new MPs.”

The Labour Party was approached for comment.

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News

Far-right Robinson flees UK after breach of court order



A High Court judge has issued a warrant for the arrest of EDL founder Tommy Robinson (PA)

TARA COBHAM

Tommy Robinson has fled the country after committing "flagrant" contempt of court relating to a film played at a protest in central London, the High Court has been told. An arrest warrant has been issued for Robinson, real name Stephen Yaxley-Lennon, after he failed to appear at the Royal Courts of Justice yesterday for a hearing in a contempt of court case.

The solicitor general launched legal action against Robinson, 41, in June over an alleged breach of a court order after he lost a libel battle in 2021. But Adam Payter, representing the solicitor general, said yesterday that it is believed the English Defence League founder left the jurisdiction hours after being released on unconditional bail following his arrest in Kent on Sunday.

Mr Justice Johnson issued a fresh warrant for Robinson's arrest after he did not attend the hearing, but ordered that it not be carried out "until early October" to allow Robinson time to indicate that he would attend the next hearing voluntarily or to apply to "set aside" the warrant. Mr Payter said the far-right figure had been part of a large demonstration in central London on Saturday, which featured the showing of a film that was "central to this application" and showed a "flagrant" and "admitted" breach of the court order. The court heard that Saturday's incident is not currently the subject of contempt of court proceedings, with police saying officers are making further inquiries.

Around 1,000 police officers were mobilised to "keep the peace" on Saturday as three protests – a "Uniting the Kingdom" demonstration organised by Robinson, a Stand Up to Racism march, and a trans-Pride protest – drew thousands of people to central London, with at least nine people arrested following clashes. On Saturday afternoon, Robinson also posted a one-hour-45-minute version of the film on Twitter/X, in which he said he had previously avoided publishing the video because he was "scared".



Protesters at the Uniting the Kingdom march organised by Robinson in London on Saturday (Maja Smiejkowska/PA)

Kent Police did not name the political campaigner but confirmed a 41-year-old man had been arrested on Sunday for the “frustration” of a port stop at the Channel Tunnel at Folkestone under Schedule 7 of the Terrorism Act 2000 and was subsequently released on bail. Under Schedule 7, police are allowed to stop anyone passing through a UK port “to determine whether they may be involved or concerned in the commission, preparation or instigation of acts of terrorism”.

The person who is detained can be held for up to six hours, is legally obliged to answer questions, and must provide the password or PIN for electronic devices, or be held to have committed a criminal offence if they refuse. In an audio clip posted on Robinson’s Twitter/X account, he is heard telling his ex-wife that officers have demanded the PIN code for his phone. Robinson says he objected to the request because there would be legally privileged information on his phone, relating to an ongoing High Court case, and interviews that he has carried out relating to a documentary he is making.

At the hearing yesterday, Mr Payter said: “We understand he failed to cooperate with a port stop and search. The implication is he was attempting to leave the country and therefore was not intending to attend this hearing this morning.” He added that Robinson was reminded of yesterday’s hearing before being released on unconditional bail at 10pm on Sunday, but that it is

now believed he “left the UK last night and there was nothing to prevent him from doing so”.

Under the court order imposed in 2021, Robinson was barred from repeating allegations he made against a Syrian refugee, Jamal Hijazi, who sued him for libel. The solicitor general claimed in written submissions that Robinson “knowingly” breached the order by having “published, caused, authorised or procured” a film titled *Silenced* in May last year. It is claimed he then repeated the allegations banned by the injunction in three interviews between February and June 2023.



‘No to facism’: a counterprotest on Saturday (AFP/Getty)

Mr Payter said that, at the demonstration on Saturday, the film was shown again, with a new introduction showing Robinson addressing a camera outside the Royal Courts of Justice. He added that Robinson “is not within the jurisdiction of the UK” and had returned to the UK “with the purpose of publishing the film” before leaving the country again “to put himself beyond the reach of this court’s jurisdiction”.

Mr Justice Johnson said he was “entirely satisfied” that the hearing could proceed in Robinson’s absence, telling the court that a further hearing in the case is expected to be held in October.

Mr Hijazi successfully sued Robinson after he was assaulted in 2018 when a pupil at Almondbury Community School in Huddersfield, West Yorkshire. After a clip of the incident went

viral, Robinson made false claims, including about Mr Hijazi attacking girls in his school, leading to the libel case.

Mr Justice Nicklin ordered Robinson to pay Mr Hijazi £100,000 in damages and his legal costs, as well as making the injunction preventing Robinson from repeating the allegations he made against the then-teenager.

Campaign group Hope Not Hate alleged that Robinson had ignored the injunction and repeated the allegations, providing a "dossier of evidence" to the attorney general's office, with the solicitor general then taking legal action.

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News

Retired colonel ‘died after four-hour ambulance delay’



No bed was available at Royal Cornwall Hospital for Colonel John Codd, 88 (Supplied)

ROD MINCHIN

A former senior army officer died after waiting more than four hours in the back of an ambulance stuck outside a busy hospital because there was no bed for him, an inquest has heard.

Colonel John Codd, 88, died in Royal Cornwall Hospital in Truro on 16 January this year after suffering a fall earlier that day. Mr Codd, who was known as Bill, had fallen as he got out of a taxi which was returning him to a nursing home in St Austell where he was receiving respite care.

Cornwall Coroner's Court heard Col Codd, from St Austell, had fallen onto the ground outside the home at 12.30pm and staff called for an ambulance. The ambulance reached Col Codd at 2.49pm – two hours and 14 minutes after first being categorised as needing a response within an hour – as he lay on the ground covered in blankets.

Col Codd arrived at the Royal Cornwall Hospital in Truro at 4.30pm but was not admitted until 9.11pm because no bed was available inside – despite an ambulance handover target of just 15 minutes.

He was triaged by a nurse at 5.47pm and then examined by a consultant at 6.10pm. An X-ray was taken for a suspected fractured hip and at 8pm Col Codd was reviewed by a junior doctor, who then ordered a CT scan of his pelvic area.

At 9.11pm, Col Codd was finally admitted to the hospital and placed in the "majors" area of the department. An hour later he was found on the floor with breathing difficulties having suffered a cardiac arrest from which he could not be resuscitated.

A post-mortem examination found Col Codd had suffered a fracture to the cup of his right femur and had developed a rare rectus sheath hematoma from the earlier fall, which was the cause of his death. He had pre-existing atrial fibrillation – an irregular heartbeat – and changes in his blood pressure noted during medical reviews by doctors in the emergency department were attributed to this rather than the hematoma.

A report into Col Codd's death by the South West Ambulance Service NHS Foundation Trust said delays in reaching him were due to the hold-ups in handing over patients at hospital.

Emergency department consultant Dr Aaron Green said those delays continued to be an issue. "It has been an ongoing problem in many departments across the country, particularly in Cornwall, for many years," he told the inquest.

The inquest heard that for the six months to January, delays in admitting patients to a ward or sending them home totalled 24,000 hours at the hospital – the equivalent of shutting 32 emergency department cubicles for a whole month.

Andrew Cox, the senior Cornwall Coroner, said he had previously raised concerns with the hospital and ambulance trusts about handover delays. “The problem is the ambulances in the wrong place at the wrong time – they are parked outside the emergency department at Truro who can’t then respond to a call,” he said.

The coroner said there were also delays in discharging patients back into the community due to a lack of social care or beds in community hospitals.

“This is why I wrote to the secretary of state for health saying this was a systemic issue. It is not a problem that lies at the door of the South West Ambulance Trust or the Royal Cornwall NHS Trust. It is across the system,” he said. “Unless we get the flow of patients through the hospital, it bottlenecks in the emergency department.”

Asked for his view of this, Dr Green replied: “I would agree wholeheartedly.” Dr Green said if the system had been working properly then Col Codd would have been seen by a doctor within an hour and the CT scan would have likely been ordered earlier.

“That may well have shown evidence of the hematoma. I can’t say with certainty that it would have done because it was something developing over time,” he said. “That may have given us time to take a different course of action and intervene.”

The coroner recorded a narrative conclusion and said he would be writing to the Health Secretary to raise his concerns about delays in the system.

“There was a delay in the arrival of an ambulance and a further delay in his subsequent admission into hospital,” he said. “It is probable that an earlier admission into hospital would have resulted in an earlier CT scan being performed that would have revealed the presence of the hematoma. It is possible that if a blood transfusion had taken place, the death would not have occurred when it did.”

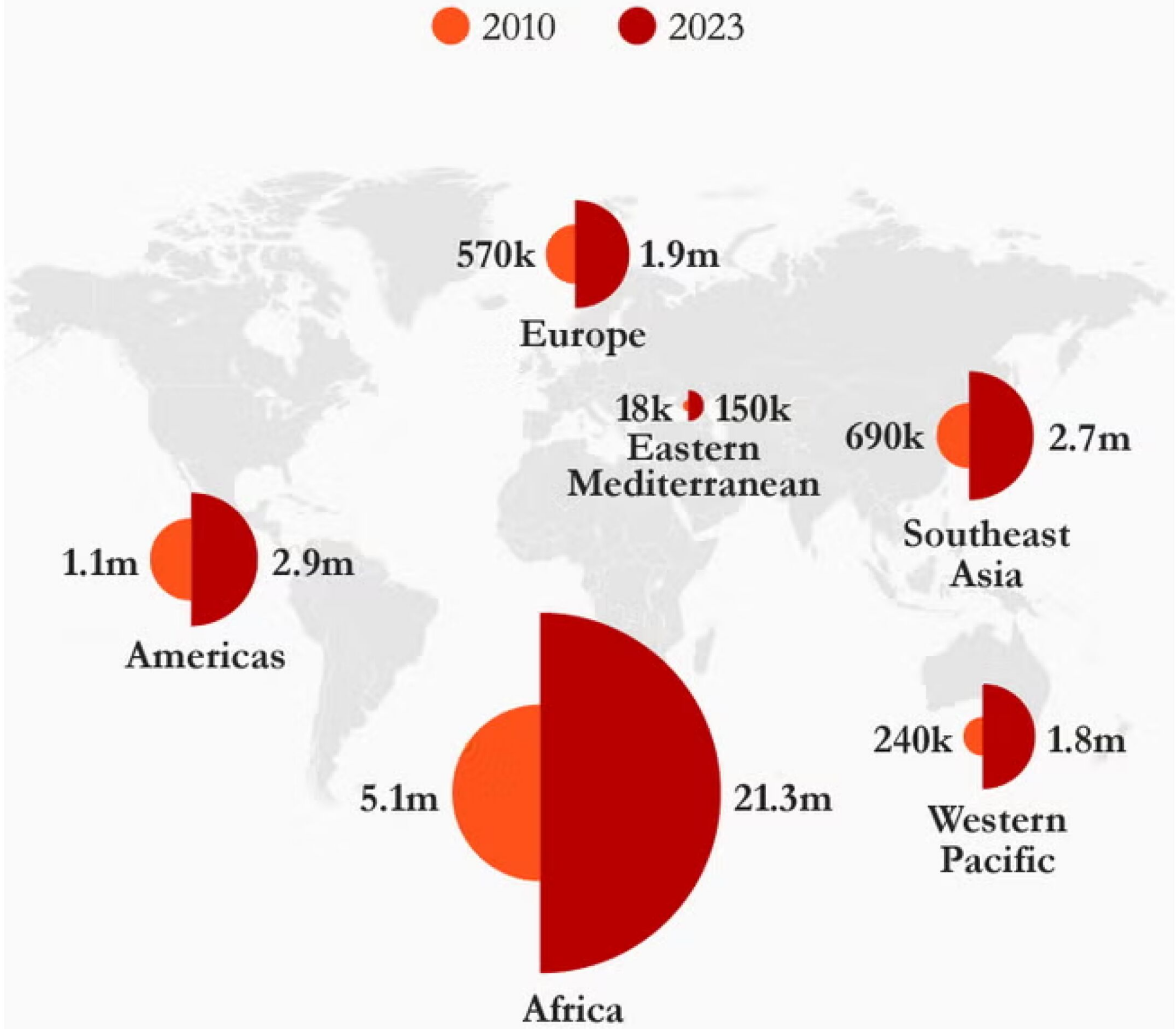
PA

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By Numbers Saving lives globally

The number of people living with HIV who are on antiretroviral treatment, by world region



Source: World Health Organization

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Pictures of the Day



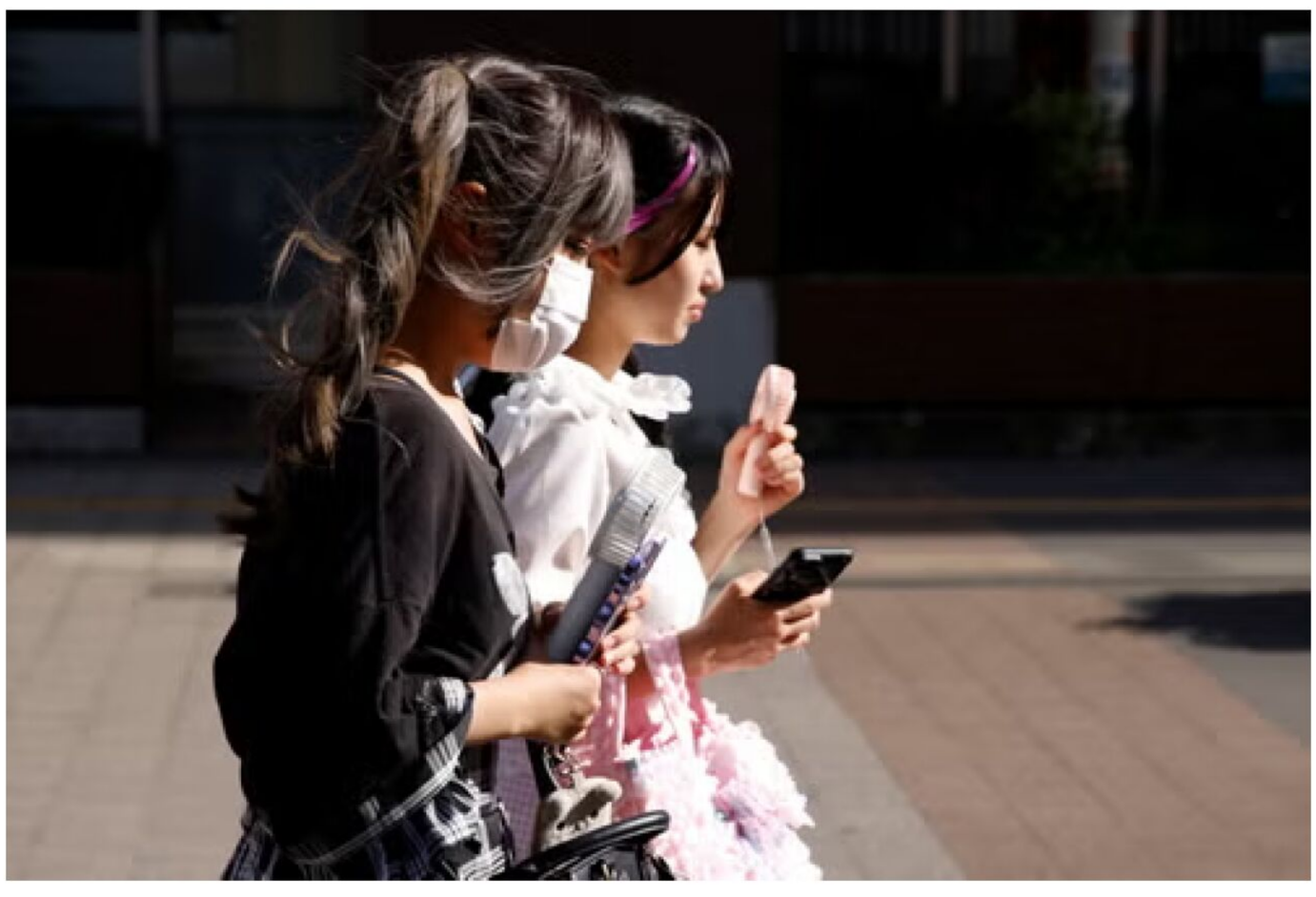
Prophet of doom

Extinction Rebellion activists block Old Queen Street near the Policy Exchange think tank in London. *Reuters*



Here comes the sun

A picture taken with a drone shows a huge work of art created with flowering plants in Jacobsdorf, Germany. *EPA*



Playing it cool

Women with small fans walk in Akihabara as the Japanese government issued heatstroke alerts in Tokyo. *Reuters*



Setting out

Shiite Muslim pilgrims walk on the muddy shore of the Gulf at the start of their march from Iraq's southern city of al-Faw toward Karbala ahead of the Arbaeen religious festival. *AFP/Getty*



Eternal flame

An artist dressed as the Hindu deity Mahakali, the goddess of time and death, performs during a procession to mark the Bonalu festival at the Akkanna Madanna temple in Hyderabad, India. *AFP/Getty*

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Home news in brief



Presenter Huw Edwards has been charged with making indecent images of children (Getty)

Edwards summonsed to court over images

The former BBC News presenter Huw Edwards has been charged with making indecent images of children, the Metropolitan Police said yesterday. Mr Edwards, 62, who quit the corporation in April after 40 years of employment, faces three charges over alleged activity between December 2020 and April 2022. The offences are claimed to be linked to images

shared on WhatsApp, police said. Mr Edwards will appear at Westminster Magistrates' Court tomorrow morning.

According to the charge sheet, he is accused of having six category A images, 12 category B pictures and 19 category C photographs on WhatsApp. If found guilty, he could receive a maximum penalty of six months in prison and an unlimited fine. Police said Mr Edwards was arrested on 8 November last year and charged just over a month ago on 26 June following authorisation from the Crown Prosecution Service.

News of the charges comes less than a week after it was revealed that Mr Edwards received a £40,000 pay rise from the BBC in the last year, despite being suspended for most of that time. In the corporation's annual report, it was revealed that he earned between £475,000-£479,999, up from £435,000-£439,999 in the previous report.

Starmer rejects youth mobility scheme with Spain

Labour has rejected a free movement deal for young people with Spain after Pedro Sanchez, the prime minister, floated the idea with Sir Keir Starmer. Mr Sanchez made the pitch to Sir Keir as part of the PM's drive to reset relations with European leaders. The government repeated the prime minister's promise not to take Britain back into the single market, customs union or restore freedom of movement. But a government spokesperson said: "We are not considering a youth mobility scheme,"

Britain has individual youth mobility schemes with 13 countries including Australia, New Zealand and Canada which lets them study or work in the UK for up to two years. EU nations are not included in the scheme, but the question of whether a post-Brexit deal can be struck has risen up the political agenda. The UK government has said in the past that it prefers bilateral agreements rather than seeking an EU-wide deal.

In April the European Commission said it would seek permission from EU member states to open negotiations on a "youth mobility scheme" for UK citizens aged 18-30. Thousands

of voters have written to their MPs to demand they accept the offer. Brussels has also confirmed that the EU offer of a youth mobility scheme with the UK is still on the table.

Heseltine has Tory whip restored

Former deputy prime minister Michael Heseltine had the Tory whip restored earlier this month, five years after it was removed over Brexit. He was suspended in May 2019 after saying he would vote for the Liberal Democrats at the European elections. On 9 July, the Conservative Party restored the whip to Lord Heseltine, public records show. At the time of Lord Heseltine's suspension, a party spokesperson said the peer should have known that "publicly endorsing the candidates of another party is not compatible" with taking the whip.

A total of 21 MPs had the Conservative whip suspended in September 2019, after rebelling against the government in a bid to avoid a no-deal Brexit. The rebellion helped inflict defeat on Boris Johnson's government, winning a vote to override a Commons rule that says only the government can propose new laws.

Bacteria enzyme could help end antibiotic resistance

Scientists are to spend two years researching whether an enzyme in MRSA bacteria from the 1950s could put an end to antibiotic resistance. Dr Jo Hobbs and her team at St Andrews University are hopeful that they can find the secret to avoiding or reversing the bug's resistance to drugs. The World Health Organisation has identified resistance to antibiotics as one of the top global threats to health, causing around 5 million deaths every year.

Dr Hobbs, who is a molecular microbiologist, said: "Antibiotic resistance gets a lot of attention, but tolerance is an underappreciated problem that must be tackled. In the past 10 years, it's become clear that bacteria become tolerant first, surviving longer in the presence of antibiotics."

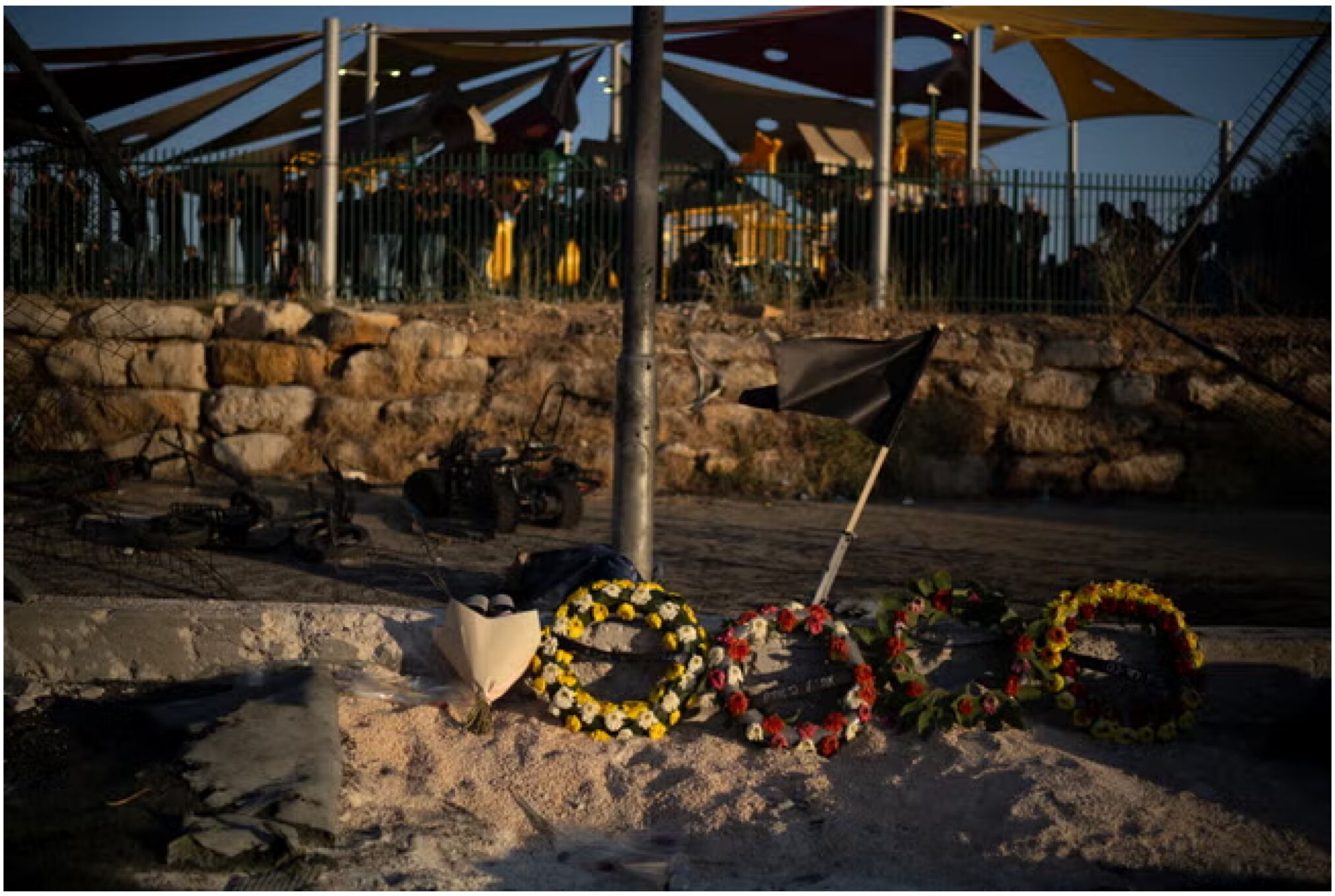
They are investigating a bacterial enzyme called Prs, which changes over time to confer tolerance. They found the mutated enzyme by examining one of the first samples of MRSA taken in the 1950s. “We isolated a special version of Prs from this ancient MRSA and over the next two years, we’ll be studying how its molecular structure has changed, and how this affects the response of bacteria to antibiotics.”

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Israel kills two Hezbollah fighters as tensions rise

Netanyahu hits back at Lebanese militant group blamed for rocket strike that killed 12 children in the Golan Heights



Flowers lie on the site of Saturday's attack in the village of Majdal Shams (AP)

TOM WATLING

Israel killed at least two Hezbollah fighters in a drone strike yesterday amid warnings that an escalation in fighting with the Lebanese militant group could become more serious than the war in Gaza. It was the first cross-border attack since a rocket

strike blamed on Hezbollah that killed 12 children in the occupied Golan Heights on Saturday.

Two Israeli drone strikes killed two people and wounded three more. The widely anticipated retaliation comes after Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu vowed a “harsh” response, though Hezbollah denies responsibility for Saturday’s attack. “The state of Israel will not and cannot let this pass. Our response will come, and it will be harsh,” he said during a visit to the remote town of Majdal Shams, a majority Druze village in a region annexed by Israel from Syria in 1981.

Mr Netanyahu’s defence minister, Yoav Gallant, who was with the prime minister for the visit, added that “Hezbollah will pay a price”. He told grieving families: “The actions will speak for themselves.” The pair attended a funeral for the 12th child killed as a result of the strike.

Israeli officials have sought to play down their reaction to the strike, saying that Israel wants to hurt Hezbollah but not drag the Middle East into all-out war. “The estimation is that the response will not lead to an all-out war,” one diplomatic source told *Reuters*. “That would not be in our interest at this point.”

Asked about the possibility of escalation in the conflict, UK minister Pat McFadden said: “I think this is very serious. Since 7 October last year, we have all been focused on the situation in Gaza between Israel and Hamas. We have known that there is this other situation in northern Israel between Hezbollah and Israel, and that has the potential to be a much more serious situation than even the one that we have been watching unfold in Gaza over the last 10 months.”

He added: “We will always argue for Israel's right to defend itself, but we hope in this situation that cooler and calmer heads will prevail and we do not see a full-scale conflict between Israel and Hezbollah.”

Iran’s newly elected president Masoud Pezeshkian said any Israeli attack on Lebanon would have “serious consequences”, Iranian state media quoted him yesterday as telling French

president Emmanuel Macron in a phone call. Mr Pezeshkian did not elaborate.



Yoav Gallant: 'Hezbollah will pay a price' (Getty)

US secretary of state Antony Blinken, in a phone call with Israeli president Isaac Herzog yesterday, emphasised the importance of preventing escalation of the conflict. The possibility of a wider war between Hezbollah, distinct from the Lebanese government, and Israel has intensified in recent months as the Iran-backed militia continues to fire across the border.

In April, the Israeli military said that it had completed another step in preparing for a possible war along its northern front. In a statement titled "readiness for the transition from defence to offence", the military said the phase completed centred on logistics "for a broad mobilisation of [Israeli] troops".

Two months later, in June, Mr Netanyahu and Mr Gallant toured northern Israel's border with Lebanon and met with military commanders, with the Israeli PM saying that their forces were "determined and committed to the mission of achieving victory, and no less".

Mr Gallant's US counterpart Lloyd Austin III said in a meeting with the Israeli defence minister a couple of days later that "Hezbollah's provocations threaten to drag the Israeli and Lebanese people into a war that they do not want". He added: "Such a war would be a catastrophe for Lebanon, and it would be devastating for innocent Israeli and Lebanese civilians."

Hezbollah has been continually firing on northern Israel since allies Hamas, also backed by Iran, attacked Israel on 7 October, killing around 1,200 people and taking 251 hostage in the Gaza Strip, the enclave they control. Around half of those hostages remain in Gaza.

The hostilities between Israel and Hezbollah have subsequently reached their worst state since they went to war in 2006. Hezbollah said it will only cease when Israel's offensive on Gaza stops. Israeli strikes have killed around 350 Hezbollah fighters in Lebanon and more than 100 civilians, including medics, children and journalists.

Israel said 23 civilians have been killed in Hezbollah attacks since October, along with at least 17 soldiers. Meanwhile, thousands of Palestinians fled a community in the central Gaza Strip yesterday in the face of new Israeli evacuation orders, worsening the humanitarian plight in an area already inundated with displaced people fleeing an assault in the south.

Hamas has accused Israel of blocking a ceasefire, saying Mr Netanyahu's government has inserted new conditions into a longstanding truce proposal at the latest talks, conducted through international mediators.

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Maduro and his opponent both claim election victory



Venezuelan presidential candidate Nicolas Maduro reacts as the results are called (AFP/Getty)

ALASTAIR JAMIESON

President Nicolas Maduro and opposition rival Edmundo Gonzalez have both claimed victory in Venezuela's presidential election as the United States and others cast doubt on the official results.

The national electoral authority said Mr Maduro had won a third term with 51 per cent of the vote – a result that would extend a quarter-century of socialist rule. But independent exit polls pointed to a big opposition win, following enthusiastic shows of support for Mr Gonzalez and opposition leader Maria Corina Machado on the campaign trail.

Mr Gonzalez won 70 per cent, said Ms Machado, who has been barred from holding public office.

Mr Gonzalez told supporters that the rules had been violated on polling day. “Our message of reconciliation and peaceful change still stands ... our struggle continues and we won’t rest until the will of the people of Venezuela is respected,” he said.

It was not immediately clear exactly what the opposition’s next move might be. Mr Gonzalez said he was not calling for supporters to take to the streets or commit any acts of violence.

US secretary of state Antony Blinken said Washington had serious concerns that the results announced by the electoral authority did not reflect the votes of the people. The authority is meant to be an independent body, but the opposition says it acts as an arm of Mr Maduro’s government.

Authorities delayed releasing the results from each of the 30,000 polling booths nationwide, promising only to do so in the “coming hours” and thereby hampering attempts to verify the results.

The delay in announcing a winner ignited debate inside the government over how to proceed, after Mr Maduro’s opponents came out early in the evening all but claiming victory.

After finally claiming to have won, Mr Maduro accused unidentified foreign enemies of trying to hack the voting system. “This is not the first time that they have tried to violate the peace of the republic,” he said to a few hundred supporters at the presidential palace. He provided no evidence to back up his claim, but promised “justice” for those who try to stir up violence in Venezuela.

Mr Maduro, a 61-year-old former bus driver and foreign minister, took office following the death of Hugo Chavez in 2013, and his 2018 re-election is not recognised by the United States and others, who call him a dictator.

Mr Maduro has presided over an economic collapse, the migration of about a third of the population, and a sharp deterioration in diplomatic relations, crowned by the sanctions imposed by the United States, the European Union and others that have crippled an already struggling oil industry.

Argentine president Javier Milei called the official election result a fraud, while Costa Rica and Peru rejected it and Chile said it would not accept any result that was not verifiable. Spanish foreign minister Jose Manuel Albares said that details from all polling stations should be presented in order to guarantee fully verifiable results. “We ask that the calm and civility with which the election day took place be maintained,” he said.

Russia, Cuba, Honduras and Bolivia cheered Mr Maduro’s victory. “Remember that you are always a welcome guest on Russian soil,” Russian president Vladimir Putin said.

Edison Research, which conducts high-profile election polling in the United States and other countries, published an exit poll showing that Mr Gonzalez, a 74-year-old former diplomat, had won 65 per cent of the vote while Mr Maduro had won 31 per cent. “The official results are silly,” said Edison’s executive vice-president Rob Farbman.

Local firm Meganalisis predicted a 65 per cent vote for Mr Gonzalez and just under 14 per cent for Mr Maduro.

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World

French telecoms network hit days after rail lines arson



Up to 800,000 rail passengers were disrupted on Friday as the 2024 Olympics began (AP)

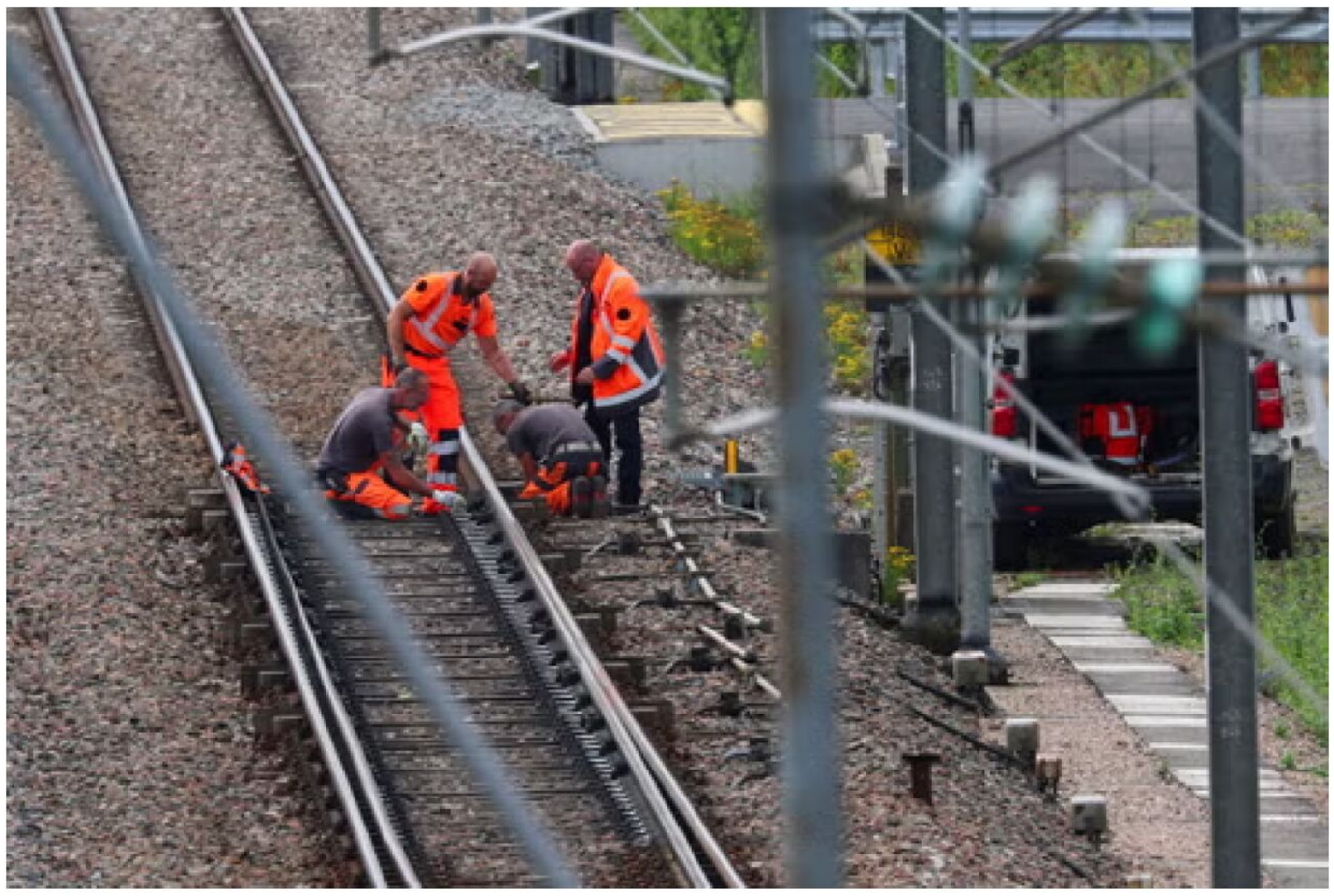
ALEXANDER BUTLER

Fibre-optic cables were cut across France yesterday, disrupting communications just days after the rail network was crippled by coordinated arson attacks close to Paris. Police said it was too early to tell if there was any link to the sabotage of the high-speed rail lines, which happened hours before the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games.

France's interior minister Gerald Darmanin suggested yesterday that a far-left activist had been arrested in connection with the arson attacks. Marina Ferrari, the junior minister for digital matters, said some fixed and mobile services were affected by the latest vandalism, which she called "cowardly and irresponsible".

Cables in electrical cabinets were cut across southern France, as well as in the Meuse region near Luxembourg and the Oise area near Paris. A spokesperson for telecoms operator SFR said its long-distance network had been hit by five cuts in five different parts of France, but that the impact on customers was minimal because the network was designed to reroute traffic.

Meanwhile, the Kremlin dismissed Western media speculation that Russia was behind Friday's railway attacks, which disrupted the journeys of an estimated 800,000 passengers. Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov told reporters: "These are just the latest fakes – more unsubstantiated accusations."



Engineers work to repair some of the damage caused to the French rail network last week (Reuters)

He added: "The fact is that there are a lot of such low-grade media, and even respected ones, that have recently not shied away from doing anything to blame Russia for everything that is happening."

The attacks on the rail network affected travel to and from London beneath the English Channel, between France and

neighbouring Belgium, and across the west, north, and east of France. One in four Eurostar trains was cancelled over the weekend, as passengers at London St Pancras faced 90-minute delays.

Describing the consequences for the rail network as “massive and serious”, French prime minister Gabriel Attal vowed that the authorities would “find and punish the perpetrators of these criminal acts”. A 40-year-old Russian man suspected of planning to sabotage the Games was arrested on Wednesday. However, French police have not publicly stated any link between that arrest and the arson attacks.

The 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games are set to be the biggest event ever to have been organised in France, with 10,500 athletes competing and millions of spectators attending – as many as 15.3 million visitors, according to local reports. The two-and-a-half-week festival of sport involves 32 different disciplines and will conclude on 11 August after 329 events.

France is deploying 45,000 police, 10,000 soldiers and 2,000 private security agents to secure the Games, with snipers on rooftops and drones keeping watch from the air.

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Vintage trains put forgotten Italy firmly back on the map

The 'Timeless Tracks' project takes tourists to the nation's less visited regions. **Giulia Segreti** is along for the ride



Passengers pose for a selfie in front of a vintage train in Palena (Photos by Reuters)

As it rolls across Italy's central regions, a vintage diesel locomotive towing carriages from the 1930s and 1950s crosses the forests of the Majella National park and the Abruzzo highlands, giving tourists on board a glimpse of hidden hamlets.

Across its distance of just over 100km (62 miles), the so-called Italian "Transiberiana" (Trans-Siberian) rail line, also known as the Park Railway, slips into gorges, snakes into 58 tunnels and braves huge viaducts. It is the first of some 1,000km of line to have re-opened under a project by Fondazione FS, part of state-controlled national rail company Ferrovie dello Stato (FS).

The "Timeless Tracks" project takes tourists to forgotten parts of Italy, offering an alternative to the fast-paced mass tourism of the major cities. "These are tracks that have lived through different eras; they have carried soldiers to the front, cows to pasture... they were mistakenly considered unproductive during the 1960s and 70s but are now once again of value," says Luigi Cantamessa, who heads Fondazione FS.

Inspired by train travel in Switzerland, the project now carries 45,000 tourists a year across its 13 lines. Fondazione FS expects to open two new ones by 2026, both in the southern region of Sicily. "What were considered to be the dry branches of Italy's train network have now proved to be the green shoots," Cantamessa adds.



Passenger announcement: a tourist guide speaks on board a train travelling from Sulmona to Palena

"People are used to cities and places, like Florence, that everyone knows... but then there are other areas that need to be discovered. This is the right kind of tourism that does not spoil the authenticity of places," says Norma Pagiotti, a 28-year-old from Florence travelling on the train with two friends.

With arrival numbers above pre-pandemic levels, popular European travel destinations including Venice have introduced measures aimed at managing visitor numbers amid rising concerns about overcrowding.

“The train reminds me of my youth – I feel a bit nostalgic for the things of the past, which were simpler, now everything is fast, short-lived,” says Caterina Quaranta, from Taranto in southern Italy, sitting on the wooden seats of the train.

The trips attract Italians and foreigners, a lot of families and children, younger people who get off to hike and cycle, and older people “who have time to spare”, explains Laura Colaprete, a local guide. “It’s for those who don’t want mass market, cluttered destinations. A conscious traveller, who is looking for something special,” says Cantamessa of Fondazione FS. “These are not trips that serve you frozen pizza for lunch,” he adds.



A vintage train on the ‘Transiberiana’ line

After climbing up almost 1,000 metres in altitude, the “Transiberiana”’s first stop is in Palena, a medieval hilltop town known for its breathtaking views over the national park. Traditional folk music accompanies people getting off the train, with local delicacies such as lamb skewers and soft pancakes made with an iron mould, known as pizzelle, and products by local artisans awaiting them at the station.

“The train helps several small towns around here. This line was a dead line before,” says Gino Toppi, 60, as he helps his wife with

the food stall in the small station.

Milan's Bocconi University recently estimated that for every euro spent by passengers on tickets – which cost between €30 and €70 (£25.50–£59) – up to a further €3 per person is spent on food, accommodation, tours and souvenirs. That helps to support the economy of villages that have long been losing population due to the dwindling birth rate and younger people leaving for the bigger cities.

"There certainly are benefits; this is a way to show my products," says Annalisa Cantelmi, a herbalist. "These tourists are slowly discovering these new territories, their traditions and people," she adds.

Reuters

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World news in brief



Kim Jong-un surveys flooding in North Korea that required 5,000 people to be rescued (EPA)

Kim lambasts officials over flooding response

Kim Jong-un has criticised officials for their response to flooding in the country as the North Korean leader visited affected areas on the border with China. Around 5,000 people have been rescued after a heavy downpour on Saturday caused flooding in the northwestern part of the country, according to the state-run Korean Central News Agency yesterday. The report did not say how many people had been killed.

“I’ve already given a repeated warning to the irresponsibility of officials over such serious practices. And the state repeatedly

gave a precaution before the rainy season and the National Emergency Response Committee was called on July 22, a few days ago," Mr Kim was quoted as saying by the agency.

It comes as typhoons and torrential rain across Asia have forced governments, including those in China, the Philippines, India and Nepal, to prepare for climate-related disaster as scientists blamed extreme weather on the human-driven climate crisis.

Libya jails 12 over floods that killed thousands

A Libyan court has jailed 12 officials in connection with the collapse of a series of dams in Derna last year that killed thousands of the city's residents. The officials, who were responsible for managing the country's dams, were sentenced to between nine and 27 years in prison by the court of appeal in Derna. Four officials were acquitted.

Derna, a coastal city with a population of 125,000, was devastated last September by massive floods caused by Storm Daniel. Thousands were killed and thousands more remain missing as a result of the floods that burst dams, swept away buildings and destroyed entire neighbourhoods.

The attorney general in Tripoli said three of the defendants were ordered to "return money obtained from illicit gains". The defendants have the right to appeal against the verdicts.

Afghan mother jailed over fatal forced marriage

An Afghan mother has become the first person to be jailed under Australia's forced marriage law, for coercing her daughter into a marriage that led to the 21-year-old's murder. Sakina Muhammad Jan, in her late forties, was found guilty of forcing her 21-year-old daughter, Ruqia Haidari, to marry 26-year-old Mohammad Ali Halimi in 2019 in exchange for a small payment. Six weeks after the wedding, Halimi murdered Haidari. He was sentenced to life in prison for the crime.

Yesterday, Jan was sentenced to three years in jail under the law, which was introduced in 2013 and carries a maximum penalty of seven years' imprisonment. Before announcing the verdict, the judge spoke of the "intolerable pressure" Jan had placed on her daughter. Jan, who pleaded not guilty, expressed her grief over her daughter's death but maintained her innocence throughout the trial. The prosecution argued that societal pressure had led to Jan coercing her daughter into getting married. Attorney general Mark Dreyfus said: "Everyone in Australia should be free to choose if, who and when they marry."

Couple survived 36 hours lost at sea after diving trip

A couple from Oklahoma have shared their miraculous survival story after they became separated from their scuba diving group during stormy weather and were lost at sea, where they trod water for 36 hours. Experienced divers Nathan and Kim Maker were scuba diving off the Texas coast in the Gulf of Mexico last Wednesday morning when the swell from stormy weather caused them to lose the rest of their group.

Realising they were nowhere near the boat, the couple swam and trod water to stay alive. "Because our body temperatures were dropping, we needed to keep swimming or we probably would have frozen to death," Kim told ABC. She said Nathan had made the swimming into a game, counting to three before they would "kick for a little while".

The Coast Guard found the couple 24km (15 miles) from Matagorda and brought them to safety. Kim was found to be suffering from an infection, and both were very dehydrated and had multiple jellyfish stings.

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There may be trouble ahead, but Reeves's plan could work



Black hole sums: the chancellor signalled there would be 'difficult decisions' to make on spending and tax before her first Budget on 30 October (Reuters)

ANDREW GRICE

"History is written by the winners," one Keir Starmer ally told me. "We have got to write the narrative for this government, not let others do it."

Rachel Reeves began that task yesterday, in an important Commons statement in which she said the Treasury had found a £22bn black hole in this year's Budget left by the outgoing Conservative government. The chancellor announced £5.5bn of cuts in the current financial year, and £8.1bn in the next.

Her headline-grabber was to end winter fuel payments for all but the poorest pensioners (those on pension credit or other means-tested benefits). She scrapped Tory plans to bring in a £86,000 cap for an individual's lifetime social care costs, and a series of road and rail projects, while unfunded proposals for 40 "new hospitals", originally promised by Boris Johnson, will be reviewed.

Reeves signalled there would be "difficult decisions" to make on spending and tax before her first Budget on 30 October, and signalled a squeeze on welfare payments. With a nod to the financial markets, she said repeatedly: "If we cannot afford it, we cannot do it."

Her "cuts first, tax rises later" strategy is good politics. Reaching for the tax lever immediately would have underlined Tory claims she planned a tax hike all along. She will not break Labour's manifesto pledge not to raise income tax, national insurance or VAT; she believes doing so would further erode voters' trust in politics. But it's clear that other tax rises are coming. Her options include aligning capital gains tax with income tax, raising inheritance tax, and restricting tax relief on pension contributions for high earners.

Labour insiders insist tax rises were not a "done deal" before the election. "It was still an open question until we looked at the books," one said. But the alternative of hoping that higher economic growth would allow Labour to raise spending on public services in a few years was never likely to work politically. The only way to blame tax rises on the Tories is to make them this year rather than closer to the next election.

However, Reeves is open to the charge of jeopardising the very economic growth which is the Starmer government's most important mission, by cutting building projects to save money.

Have the self-styled “builders” already become the “blockers”? Labour has long criticised the Tories for raiding capital spending budgets to preserve day-to-day spending and might now be making the same mistake.

Labour eyes are already on the next election, and Reeves made a good fist of writing the opening chapter in her party’s narrative

Reeves is choosing her battles carefully. She has approved pay review body recommendations for above-inflation 5.5 per cent pay awards for NHS staff, teachers and other public sector workers at a cost of £9bn – and the government is offering junior doctors a 22 per cent rise over two years. Why? More strikes would have scuppered Labour’s pledge to get public services “back to normal” and reinforced the impression of a country where nothing works – hardly the “change” Labour promised.

Reeves made a convincing case about the “black hole”. Inevitably, the Tories claim it is “fictitious”, but are doomed to swallow a dose of their own medicine. Reeves has removed the picture of Nigel Lawson from the wall of her Treasury office, but is using the playbook of another Tory chancellor, George Osborne, who ruthlessly blamed his painful austerity measures on Labour for leaving “no money” when it lost power in 2010. Although the real cause was a global financial crisis, voters bought the Osborne spin.

Today, the Tories can argue their legacy for Labour was due to the pandemic and an energy price shock caused by the war in Ukraine. But, again, voters will probably accept the new government’s version of events while it has the benefit of the doubt (and the party just booted out has lost it).

The Tories' spending plans did not add up. In fact, they barely existed. Their double cut in national insurance was a desperate ploy to save their own skin when public services needed more money, not less. The Tories went to the country this month on a false prospectus of further tax cuts that Jeremy Hunt now admits he could not have afforded. Like Labour, the Tories were complicit in the "conspiracy of silence" on tax and spending during the election.

Labour eyes are already on the next election, and Reeves made a good fist of writing the opening chapter in her party's narrative. Yet there is no guarantee the plan will succeed. "It's not enough to say everything is broken – we have got to fix it," one Labour MP admitted to me. The diagnosis is the easy bit. The cure will be much harder.

Is Labour making a rod for its own back? Yes, but there was no hiding the state of public services. The Tories tried it, and were rumbled: people can see the evidence with their own eyes.

Labour knows it won't fix every problem by the next election, but will have a good chance of winning a second term if it can show tangible progress and if the economy has improved. Then it would have a credible message: let us finish the job, don't risk going back to the party which broke Britain. It might just work.

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Voices

Only one man can stop war between Israel and Lebanon



Caught between bellicose calls for retaliation and the urges of the international community for restraint, Benjamin Netanyahu faces a dilemma (AP)

DONALD MACINTYRE

The falling of a Hezbollah rocket on a football field in the Golan border town of Majdal Shams at the weekend was a calamity, first and foremost, for the families of the 12 innocent Druze children and teenagers who were killed – along with the dozens of others who were wounded. But it is also just the kind of incident that

experts had long warned could finally turn the fierce (but so far contained) cross-border conflict that has raged between Hezbollah and Israel since last October into all-out war.

It doesn't matter that the attack took place in what most of the world still sees as Israeli-occupied territory, or that some of its (particularly older) residents identify strongly as Syrians. Or that Hezbollah presumably misfired, having surely intended, if only in its own interests, to hit a military target – possibly an Israel Defence Forces outpost on Mount Hermon, in whose foothills Majdal Shams sits.

It's also not even that Hezbollah already knew the town's residents had not evacuated – unlike most of the northern Israeli communities along the Lebanese border – and therefore had a responsibility to prevent this from happening. The most pressing issue at hand is that an Israeli government not hitherto known for its restraint will feel obliged to retaliate by exacting from Hezbollah what Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel's prime minister, has warned will be "a heavy price which it has not paid up to now."

What Netanyahu has to decide now – having been entrusted by Sunday's security cabinet meeting with deciding a response, alongside his defence minister, Yoav Gallant – is how far to go. Caught between the bellicose calls from some on his own side to engage in punitive retaliation – for example, by assassinating Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah – and the urges of the international community, including the US, for restraint, he faces a dilemma.

Can he devise some form of heavy blow against the amply armed Shiite militia that does not further escalate the crisis? Or does he risk a regional war, which could involve Iran – of which Hezbollah is undoubtedly a proxy – and the United States, extending across the Middle East and possibly even beyond? Even without such a regional escalation – and it's doubtful that either Iran or Hezbollah is willing to be drawn into such a conflagration at present – an all-out war between the two is still a distinctly sombre prospect.

I can remember taking shelter from Hezbollah rocket fire in a dank cellar under a shop in the mixed city of Haifa, with four doughty Palestinian women

No one who reported on the 2006 conflict – as I did, from northern Israel – can doubt the probable impact. In that 34-day war, which involved a ground invasion of southern Lebanon by the IDF, upwards of 1,000 were killed in Lebanon. At least 118 Israel soldiers and 43 Israeli civilians also lost their lives, mainly in the north.

But this time, such a war would almost certainly be far more lethal. Hezbollah has a formidable arsenal – much greater than that of Hamas. According to CIA estimates, Hezbollah has in its possession some 150,000 rockets and missiles of various types, including long-range models, which its leaders claim can reach every part of Israel. Most of the Israeli victims in 2006 were, of course, Jewish, but the slaughter of Druze people in Majdal Shams is a reminder that not all of them would be this time.

Besides the constant noise of outgoing artillery and incoming rockets in the far northern town of Metula, abutting the Lebanese border, I can remember taking shelter from Hezbollah rocket fire in a dank cellar under a shop in the mixed city of Haifa, with four doughty Palestinian women.

One was 83. Another was a Christian who had come from the funeral of two close friends killed in Haifa two days earlier. Another was visiting Nazareth, where Arab families were grieving after a Katyusha rocket from Lebanon had come out of a clear July sky and killed two small boys aged three and seven.

As at Majdal Shams, both the Haifa and Nazareth victims lacked shelters. But this is only a reminder that if there is another Lebanon war, just as in Hamas's attack on 7 October and Israel's

devastating response in Gaza, many civilians will die – both Jewish and Arab.

Israel, no doubt, has a strong case for the full implementation of UN resolution 1701, which ended that 2006 war and required Hezbollah to withdraw to the north of the Litani river. But Western powers – including the US – have been urging Israel to favour diplomacy rather than force in its efforts to secure such a withdrawal. The problem is, there is little chance of that happening (if at all) until the war in Gaza is over.

There is no doubt that Hezbollah started the present hostile engagement with Israel in support of Hamas. In parallel with the present crisis to the north, negotiations that would see a ceasefire and the return of the 130 hostages held by Hamas for nine months are continuing. But the pace has been painfully slow, with an increasing number of Israeli politicians and commentators, along with the families of the hostages themselves, believing that one of the principal reasons for this is that Netanyahu is dragging his feet.

The omens at present are not encouraging. But a successful ceasefire deal for Gaza may also hold the key to preventing a major escalation over the Lebanese border – a development that no one sane could want.

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Voices

‘Equal Games’? Not with sexist dinosaurs on the mic



Eurosport commentator Bob Ballard made a makeup quip about a swimming quartet who brought home gold for Australia (Getty)

GEMMA ABBOTT

When organisers of the Paris Olympics decided to bill it as the “equal Games” – in celebration of the fact that, for the first time, women make up 50 per cent of the competitors – the claim was always going to come in for scrutiny. But it found itself severely tested on day two, and by a commentator who should have known better.

Having secured gold in the women's 4x100m freestyle relay, the Australian quartet of Emma McKeon, Shayna Jack, Mollie O'Callaghan and Meg Harris made their way out of the Paris Aquatic Centre. It was then that Eurosport commentator Bob Ballard said: "Well, the women, just finishing up. You know what women are like… hanging around, doing their makeup…"

The outrageous comment went viral instantly, and Ballard was subsequently removed from Eurosport's broadcasting roster. Sports commentary is an art form. It takes a sharp mind and a keen eye to encapsulate a moment for an audience, to translate the action in a sports arena to the listener or viewer.

Ballard has had a long and successful career in commentating. The BBC has described him as "a stalwart of global sports coverage since the 1980s, reporting on multiple Olympic Games and world championships". So, with all that experience behind him, what part of Ballard suddenly made him feel it was acceptable to make such an obviously sexist comment?

Misogynistic language isn't new to the Olympics. During the Rio Games in 2016, *Mail Online* described American swimmer Katie Ledecky as "the female Michael Phelps". When US gymnast Simone Biles gave an incredible performance on the uneven bars, an NBC commentator gave a backhanded compliment, saying: "I think she might even go higher than the men."

You'll hear the word 'girls' often used as a descriptor of women competing in sport. But can you remember the last time you heard a group of sportsmen being referred to as boys?

Some comedians appear to think that female Olympians are fair game. At the 2012 London Games, US late-night host Conan

O’Brien tweeted that weightlifter Holley Mangold would “bring home the gold – and four guys against their will”. And it was during Beijing 2008 that Frankie Boyle first made his now infamous jibes about gold-medal swimmer Rebecca Adlington, saying she “looks pretty weird… like someone who’s looking at themselves in the back of a spoon”.

According to a study by Cambridge University Press, sexist thinking runs through the Games. Researchers analysed millions of words relating to men and women and Olympic sports in the Cambridge international corpus (CIC) and the sports corpus – enormous databases of news articles and social media posts. The study found that language around female competitors focussed disproportionately on appearance, clothes and personal lives. Common word combinations for women included “aged”, “older”, “pregnant” and “married” or “unmarried”. In contrast, top word combinations for male athletes included “fastest”, “strong”, “big” and “great”.

I can think of several common examples of such casual sexism in sports reporting. If you listen out for it, you’ll hear the word “girls” often used as a descriptor of women competing in sport. But can you remember the last time you heard a group of sportsmen being referred to as boys?

Likewise, when certain sports are discussed in the media, it is often assumed that the sport being mentioned in the report is the men’s game. How often do we hear the media refer to “women’s football”, whereas men’s football is just “football”?

However, the dial has definitely moved. The proportion of female athletes competing has increased in every Olympic Games since 1964, when it was 13.2 per cent. By Rio 2016, it was 45 per cent. Only now do we finally have a 50:50 ratio.

Female participation in sports has increased, making the media more aware of its responsibility when covering female athletes. The fact that major broadcasters such as Eurosport act swiftly when Ballardisms occur is proof of real progress. As coverage improves, sexist language and comments are more noticeable when they happen.

But I bet this won't be the last bit of casual sexism we hear during these Olympics. Viewers, on your marks…

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The Tories need new blood

What a pity Suella Braverman – and Liz Truss, for that matter – aren't in the running to be the next Conservative leader. At least then we'd have a full house of the very people who have made it such a shambles. Trust them with the country? I wouldn't trust them with my TV remote.

After the 1997 wipeout, the Conservative Party went through three former ministers – Michael Howard, Iain Duncan Smith and William Hague – before skipping a generation to find a winner in David Cameron.

The Conservatives need to skip this generation of failures and look for new blood – someone untainted by the previous shambles.

Barry Tighe *Woodford Green*

The real threat is the one within

It is worrying to hear the senior Tory and one-time possible leadership contender, Braverman, saying that her government "overreacted" to Covid. Did she not think more than 200,000 deaths were enough? Did she have a bigger target in mind?

Despite all the global threats the UK is currently facing, if and when the next pandemic arrives, our biggest threat will be a Tory government that refuses to act accordingly.

Geoff Forward *Stirling*

Labour's rail plans need to be fast-tracked

While I support the government's policy to return the railways to public ownership, I deplore the decision to do it piecemeal as existing contracts end.

This is not fair or even-handed – and means that some parts of the country will not benefit from the changes until after the next general election. If Labour was to lose that election, the planned nationalisation of remaining rail companies could be abandoned by an incoming Tory government.

The current administration must be persuaded to nationalise all railway companies at the same time. It was done in the 1940s, so it can be done now.

John E Harrison *Lancashire*

It's time to lose the middleman

When I started work in November 1963, the private sector far outweighed the public sector. That status has now been reversed.

In my opinion, as much as 40 per cent of the public sector is taken up with unnecessary roles and ineffective bureaucracy. It points to a simple solution: cut out the waste in the public sector, and more funds become available.

One doesn't need fancy management consultants to arrange this. Instigating simple ratio accounting will make our public services more effective and more affordable.

Martin Levin *London*

Police officers are human, too

Many years ago, as a serving police officer in an overseas jurisdiction, I chased a suspected drug trafficker across a large housing estate, eventually catching him in open ground. I was alone, and he resisted violently. Fortunately, the cavalry arrived quickly, and the fight probably lasted only for a couple of minutes – but it seemed much longer. I was shaken and bruised, but otherwise OK.

I can well understand how the officers involved in the recent incident at Manchester airport felt.

In the middle of sudden violence, clear thinking is interrupted by the will to survive and an overwhelming urge to suppress the source of that violence. Turning that switch off in an instant is not always easy.

We are fortunate in this country to have police officers who face danger for us and, it would seem, are doing so with increasing frequency. Video evidence has its place, but understanding the full picture requires time and patient investigation.

David Platts *Newark*



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‘Luxury should be all about what’s special and amazing’

As Mulberry founder Roger Saul prepares to auction off his private archive, he talks to **Laura Craik** about coups, his move from fashion to farming, and the label’s financial woes



Launching the brand in 1971, Saul was a pioneer of the ‘made in Britain’ movement (Roger Saul)

Reinventions? Roger Saul has had a few. Few can boast of a career that spans luxury fashion, homeware, hospitality, food and farming, but Saul has done it all – a jack of all trades, and a

master as well. The TikTok generation probably don't even know that he founded Mulberry – the fabled, but currently troubled, British handbag brand beloved by Kate Moss, Angelina Jolie, Oprah Winfrey and the Princess of Wales.

Saul is not a man to blow his own trumpet, however loudly he has cause to. He is, however, a man of pragmatism. This is why, due to an impending house move, he's auctioning off his private archive of handbags, shoes, clothes, furniture and personal memorabilia next month.

Speaking over Zoom from his home in Somerset, Saul looks far younger than his 74 years, his zest for life apparent even through a screen. When I suggest that this treasure trove of stuff must be hard to part with, he's sanguine. "Yeah, but we seem to have spent our life creating things and then moving on, either under pressure or because we wanted to. We're quite good at retreating, as well as going forward. I just embrace every new bit of life that comes along."



Supermodel Gisele Bündchen with the iconic Mulberry x Luella Bartley bag (Penske Media/Getty)

He launched Mulberry in 1971, manufacturing bags, belts and smaller leather accessories at a factory in his native Somerset – a pioneer of the "made in Britain" movement, as he's been of so many others.

A potted history of his trailblazing includes selling fashion as a lifestyle concept (*Le Style Anglais*, as Mulberry was dubbed by

the French press in 1975), global franchising (used to fund rapid international expansion in the 1980s), fashion as homeware (1990) and reinventing the "It" bag (2002's Gisele). That he's also owned a Michelin-starred restaurant in an award-winning hotel (Charlton House), a designer outlet centre (Kilver Court) and a 270-acre farm growing the UK's only spelt crop (Sharpham Hall) makes one wonder if, like Beyoncé, he has more than 24 hours in his day.

At the turn of the 21st century, the brand was riding high. In 2001, the British designer Luella Bartley asked Saul whether she could collaborate with Mulberry on a bag for her New York fashion show. Before you could say "Jane who?", out strutted the Brazilian supermodel, Gisele Bündchen, swinging a capacious leather tote embellished with straps – and a British "It" bag to rival the Birkin was born. At £500, it was considerably more affordable than Hermes' cult tote, which only added to its glory.

Coverage was global and universally effusive – which made what happened next rather shocking, even in the cut-throat world of fashion. Less than a year later, Saul's 33-year run at Mulberry had come to an end, after a coup by its new Singaporean investor, Christina Ong.



In the hot seat: a set of six Mulberry Home directors' chairs up for auction (Dreweatts)

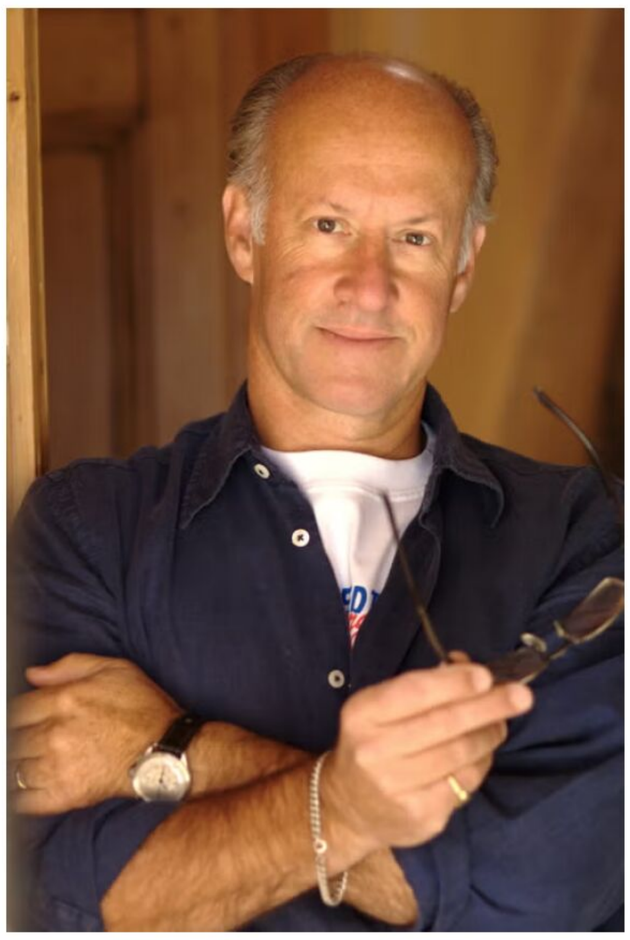
“Almost as soon as Christina Ong had bought her shareholding, it became very clear that she wanted me out,” says Saul. “We made a big mistake, which is easy to say in retrospect. We’d done a lot of negotiating in Japan, and had some very tricky situations with bankers and corporations.

“You learn in Japan that it’s all about respect for each other, and being angry or tough doesn’t work at all. Big mistake when working with the Chinese. You don’t negotiate – you take a position, and you hold that position and try to advance from it. We made the mistake of thinking that the Japanese negotiating tactic would be the right one: ‘How can we accommodate what you want?’”

It was a stance that would cost him everything. “We probably gave [them] too much space in the early period, thinking it was about good relations. And instead, they were just constantly testing the edges to see where our weakness was so that they could try and get through.”

In the end, Saul was ousted after Godfrey Davis, deputy chair of the company, switched allegiance and backed Ong. “We should have known better; done more research on her past before we brought her in. That was our fault. But Godfrey was something else. That was tough – and pretty devastating.”

And so Saul made the almighty pivot from fashion to farming. Sharpham Hall came up for sale the same year, on the market for the first time in a century. He took it as a sign, launching himself into organic farming. “I think [the Ongs’] biggest fear was that I’d reappear as Roger Saul the designer, as a brand, and that would ruin Mulberry. But a friend told me to never, ever go backwards. Once you’ve done something, always move on to the next thing.”



‘Mulberry’s mistake was deserting their core customer base’ (Mike Alsford/REX/Shutterstock)

That he's remarkably unbitter is partly because he believes he was extremely lucky to work in fashion during its golden years, when creativity was high and anything was possible. And while he keeps only a cursory eye on the catwalks these days, he has firm opinions about why his baby is currently in the doldrums.

"Mulberry's biggest mistake was to try and become luxury as opposed to aspirational. They deserted their core customer base when they went from a £350/£500 handbag to a £750/£1,500 one. Would the Hermes, Gucci or Prada customer suddenly want Mulberry? That's a tough ask. You've got to be very clever, if you go into that zone, to be able to succeed."

He also believes that the definition of luxury has changed. "Today, luxury is almost a bad word. It should be more about what's special and amazing. People are looking for preloved and vintage – treasured pieces, rather than necessarily having to have the newest and the latest. When you look at what's happened with Covid, Brexit, and the wars around the world, it's just the wrong time to be conspicuously looking fabulous."

If he were to buy his wife a new handbag, which brand would it be from? "I just wouldn't. I've got so many still in the cupboard. Monty [his wife] wouldn't let go of most of them. We've probably still got another six sales' [worth] in our cupboard here. If I was buying a handbag, I'd probably be doing it in Italy, where creative design is flourishing, or potentially Spain, because they're two great leatherworking countries."



Another world: Saul at his Sharpham Hall estate (Roger Saul)

He’s been married to Monty, a former Dior model, for 47 years. What’s their secret? “We’re good friends, good lovers, good enemies,” he beams. “Monty is feisty. She’s the most amazing lady – the glue that makes it possible for me to do what I do, because I do far too much and get away with it. But at the same time, she loves me, so I’m very lucky.”

Having been forced to abandon spelt farming during Covid, he’s now focused on producing walnuts. “It takes about 20 years for walnuts to mature and get a crop,” he says, as though this were a good thing. “Our first major crop, we sold through Riverford last year, and this year, we’ll get a much bigger one as the trees grow.”

Are the walnuts enough to live off? “Oh no. We’ve been fortunate enough to create enough out of what we’ve done to survive. But it will give a nice return and carry on growing. I’d love to see us doing walnut oil and all sorts, because we’ve got about 300 trees altogether.”

How symbolic that Saul’s latest – though undoubtedly not his last – passion project should involve walnuts, one of the toughest nuts of all.

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Is Georgia safe to visit?



Our travel correspondent is extremely fond of the country's capital (Simon Calder)

Q What's your advice about travelling to and around Georgia? We're thinking of spending a week based in Tbilisi at New Year, but the Foreign Office advice is discouraging.

Roger F

A Georgia is one of my favourite countries and Tbilisi one of my top cities, and I look forward to returning there soon – despite the current Foreign Office advice. The most salient part of the official warning is against travel to the breakaway regions of

Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as well as areas adjoining the "administrative boundary lines" that separate them from the remainder of Georgia. A tourist would not normally venture into these Kremlin-supported regions, and you can have a perfectly enjoyable time exploring the rest of Georgia.

Tbilisi is a spectacular capital city. It has a superb natural setting beneath the mountains and astride the Kura river – the main waterway through Georgia. The old town at the heart of Tbilisi is charming (and touristy), with medieval buildings, but only part of a fascinating repertoire of architecture that also includes Art Nouveau and Soviet-era structures.

Tbilisi is also an excellent base for exploring the east of Georgia, including the magnificent monastery at Mtskheta to the north and the fascinating city of Gori – Stalin's home town – to the west. For more extensive touring of the rest of the country, though, the western city of Kutaisi is the best urban location. You could happily split a week between Tbilisi and Kutaisi, and even add a few days relaxing by the Black Sea at Batumi, close to the Turkish border.

Please, though, let me try to persuade you not to visit in the depths of winter. Like so many nations and regions in the latitudes around 40 degrees north, Georgia is too hot in high summer and too cold (and damp) in deep winter. April and May, September and the first half of October are the times you will find me there.

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

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Section 2

ON THIS DAY



Bobby Moore lifted the World Cup for England on this day in 1966 (Getty)

1718: William Penn, founder of The Quakers, died in Pennsylvania.

1818: Emily Bronte, English novelist, was born. She published her single masterpiece, *Wuthering Heights,* under the name of Ellis Bell, in 1847.

1863: Henry Ford, father of the mass-produced car, was born near Dearborn in Michigan. He built his first car in his spare time in a shed behind his house in Detroit.

1900: London Underground's Central line, originally called the Central London Railway, was opened by the Prince of Wales (later Edward VII) with a flat rate of tuppence for all destinations.

1930: Uruguay won football's first World Cup.

1935: *Ariel: The Life of Shelley,* by Andre Maurois, was the first Penguin paperback book to be published, price: sixpence.

1966: England beat West Germany 4-2 in extra time – with a hat-trick from Geoff Hurst – to win the World Cup.

1973: The Thalidomide case, taken up by *The Sunday Times* on behalf of the victims, ended after 11 years, with compensation of £20m.

1990: Ian Gow, Conservative MP for Eastbourne, was murdered by an IRA bomb placed under his car at his home in the Sussex village of Hankham.

2011: Queen Elizabeth II's granddaughter Zara Phillips married England rugby star Mike Tindall in a simple private ceremony.

On this day last year: England bowler Stuart Broad was given a guard of honour by Australia and a standing ovation by the Kia Oval crowd as he walked out to bat for the final time in Test cricket.

Birthdays

Buddy Guy, blues guitarist, 88; **Paul Anka**, singer, 83; **Frances de la Tour**, actor, 80; **Arnold Schwarzenegger**, actor and former governor of California, 77; **Jean Reno**, actor, 76; **Harriet Harman**, MP, 74; **Kate Bush**, singer, 66; **Daley Thompson**, former athlete, 66; **Laurence Fishburne**, actor, 63; **Lisa Kudrow**, actor, 61; **Sean Moore**, rock drummer (Manic Street Preachers), 56; **Jason Robinson**, former rugby player, 50.

PA

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A CHILD OF OUR TIME

If her stepmother wins the presidency, 25-year-old artist and model Ella Emhoff will destroy the cookie-cutter stereotypes surrounding children of politicians, writes **Katie Rosseinsky**



Kamala Harris's stepdaughter could be her ticket to the Gen Z vote (Getty)

Earlier this month, an old interview with Republican vice-presidential hopeful JD Vance resurfaced online. In it, Vance denounced vice-president Kamala Harris as a "childless cat lady" with no "direct stake" in America's future. His words prompted outrage – and among the first to rush to Harris's defence was her 25-year-old stepdaughter, Ella Emhoff. "How can you be

‘childless’ when you have cutie pie kids like Cole and I?” she wrote in an Instagram story.

Her comment was a testament to her and her older brother Cole’s warm bond with the woman they call “Momala” – and proved that family isn’t just about biological relationships. If Harris, who was endorsed by US president Joe Biden after he announced he’d no longer be seeking re-election, does end up in the White House, then Ella will be a very modern first daughter.

An artist, activist and alternative fashion icon, she feels worlds away from the classic, cookie-cutter stereotype of a political offspring – who smiles politely in photo ops, dresses and acts conservatively, and shies away from any remotely controversial causes.

Ella was born in California in 1999, and has the jazz singer Ella Fitzgerald as her namesake (Her brother, who is five years her senior, was named after the saxophonist John Coltrane). Her parents, film producer Kerstin and entertainment lawyer Doug Emhoff, split up in 2008, but the breakup was an amicable one. “I thought we had it good compared to a lot of other people I’d seen with divorced parents,” Ella told *The New York Times* in 2021. “So I think I felt really lucky.”



Eye-catching: Emhoff’s Miu Miu coat was a standout style moment at the 2021 inauguration (Getty)

She and her brother were politically engaged from a young age, and were “really active” in campaigning against Proposition 8,

the amendment opposing same-sex marriage. As a teen, Ella attended Wildwood School, a private school that also counts celebrity offspring such as Rumer Willis and Frances Bean Cobain among its alumni.

The Emhoff siblings first met Harris when Ella was about to start high school and Cole was gearing up for college. Harris has said that she and Doug waited until they were sure that their relationship had staying power before she was introduced to her future stepchildren, because she "didn't want to insert [herself] into their lives as a temporary fixture".

Their initial meeting was at a seafood restaurant off California's Pacific Coast Highway, and Harris recalled that "Cole and Ella could not have been more welcoming". Beforehand, their dad had given them a heads up about his new partner's high-profile job, telling them: "I think you just have to know, though, that she is the attorney general of California." No pressure, then.

From that moment, it seems, the Emhoff-Harrises have managed to make the whole "blended family" thing look easy. Harris is "dear friends" with her husband's first wife Kerstin, who has described the VP as "loving, nurturing, fiercely protective and always present". The pair would "become a duo of cheerleaders in the bleachers at Ella's swim meets and basketball games, often to Ella's embarrassment".

All of my life, I had really low self-esteem and self-confidence, so this kind of felt like a way for me to take that back

Ella Emhoff on her move into modelling

When Harris and Doug married in 2014, she and the children agreed that they weren't too keen on the term "stepmom". Instead, they decided to christen her "Momala". The name stuck – Drew Barrymore made everyone cringe when she earnestly told Harris that "we need you to be 'Momala' of the country" during Harris's appearance on the actor's touchy-feely chat show in April.

It sounds like the family doesn't exactly do small talk around the dinner table. "We would just have these real conversations at dinner, almost Socratic, where we would all bounce off each other," Cole told *Glamour* in the run-up to the 2020 election. If the kids invited friends round to visit, they'd warn them that they might get the full lawyer treatment from Harris and their dad.

"We always joke that whenever we bring our friends over for the first time, they're going to get grilled," Ella told *The New York Times*. "Like, if you don't have your 10-year plan, like, fully ready and outlined in a spreadsheet for them, you're not going to survive that meal."

After high school, Ella studied at the prestigious Parsons School of Design in New York, specialising in fine art. Her senior year of college happened to coincide with Harris's biggest job yet:

running for vice-president alongside Democratic candidate Joe Biden in the 2020 election. When Biden was sworn in as president the following January, after defeating Donald Trump, Ella found herself in the spotlight for the first time thanks to her idiosyncratic sense of style.

Her inauguration day outfit consisted of a quirky Miu Miu coat with an oversized collar and eye-catching sequinned shoulders, worn over a custom-made dress from New York cult favourite designer Batsheva Hay. It couldn't have been further from the classic "political daughter" look of sedate pantsuits, shift dresses and sensible florals (essentially, dressing at least two decades older than your actual age).



Fashion muse: wearing a Stella McCartney design at the Met Gala in 2021 (Getty)

Inevitably, it became a talking point on social media; according to fashion platform Lyst, six hours after the ceremony, online searches for Miu Miu increased by 455 per cent. And when Ella got caught on camera wiggling her eyebrows at former vice-president Mike Pence during the ceremony, that only won her more fans, too.

Shortly after, Ella signed a deal with modelling agency IMG, the company that represents the likes of Gigi Hadid and Ashley Graham. She'd always loved fashion, but this wasn't a career path that she'd necessarily anticipated. "All of my life, I had really low self-esteem and self-confidence, so this kind of felt like a way for me to take that back," she told *The Washington Post*. "I have body hair, I have tattoos. Like, that's not crazy in the scheme of things today, but it is not what you'd consider, like, the most generic-type model."

Soon, she ended up walking in fashion shows for brands like Proenza Schouler and wearing a custom Stella McCartney ensemble to the Met Gala (she was later announced as the face of McCartney's Adidas collaboration, too).



The creative life: now Emhoff is more focused on her artistic endeavours (Getty)

Since that flurry of publicity, though, Ella, who is in a relationship with the *GQ* journalist Samuel Hine, has stepped back from the catwalk. Instead, she has been focusing on her textile-based artwork, including the knitted paintings she showcases on her Instagram account. “I did [modelling] for a few years, and it helped me now to be able to afford the platform, and the comfortability to be able to do art,” she told *The Times* earlier this year.

She now hosts the Sofa Hands Knit Club in New York, holding craft sessions around the city. Her mother taught her to knit during a childhood trip to Disneyland, and it has always been a “therapeutic practice” for her ever since. “I treat it as something to calm my anxiety and it just happens to be something that I’m also very creatively passionate about,” she has said – and she’s also keen to “expand” her club “into other places, like schools and art therapy. Because I know it helped me so much.”

Ella doesn’t tend to make outright political pronouncements; instead, she lets her activism do the talking. She has previously helped raise money for For The Gworls, a collective that supports Black transgender people, and more recently shared links on social media to fundraisers for relief work in Gaza (a move that inevitably proved controversial).

Should Harris secure the Democratic nomination, the spotlight on Ella will only intensify. We can surely expect her to become a

fixture on the campaign trail. And she might just be Harris's secret weapon: a conduit to Gen Z.

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WIRED FOR SOUND

Steve Hogarty puts top gaming headsets through their paces



The best gaming headsets have to juggle several jobs that most regular headphones don’t. Unlike wireless headphones, gaming headsets are designed to handle finer details such as distant reload sounds mixed in with booming explosions in the game’s audio. They should be comfortable enough to wear for hours-long play sessions, and their mics should be able to pick up your voice clearly, for distortion-free streaming, competitive and cooperative play.

As a bonus – and especially for the more premium headsets in our list – you might want a gaming headset with a detachable microphone and a standard Bluetooth connection, meaning the headset can double up as your regular headphones for music and entertainment. This helps to justify dropping hundreds on some of the pricier models.

Many streamers will choose a gaming headset mic over a USB microphone, particularly on PC, as desk mics are more prone to picking up the thud of keyboard tapping and mouse clicking. Gaming headsets also have a unique advantage in that they let players move around in their gaming chair freely, without falling out of the optimal range of their desk mic.

Whether you're playing fast-paced online shooters or sedate city builders, choosing the best gaming headset depends on your own preferences and the platform on which you play. You have a huge range to choose from, including flashy e-sports-inspired RGB headsets, gaming headsets from trusted audiophile brands, wired and wireless models, and budget headsets costing less than £20.

Wired gaming headsets will work anywhere there's a 3.5mm audio port – such as the Nintendo Switch or your laptop – but Xbox players will need to choose a wireless gaming headset that's been specifically made to work with Microsoft's console. This is because the Xbox uses a proprietary wireless protocol, meaning PS5 and PC headsets won't work on the console. Luckily, many of the most popular gaming headsets offer a "made for Xbox" version – so, just be sure you're grabbing the correct model.

How we tested

We put the best gaming headsets through their paces over weeks of testing, paying attention to how they performed across many of our favourite new releases on PC, Xbox, PlayStation and Switch. In *Dragon's Dogma 2*, being able to hear clearly the constant nattering of your pawns in surround sound gives you a tactical advantage, while in the chilled-out city builder *Cities:*

Skylines 2, we wanted to hear that dynamic soundtrack in as much detail as possible over the traffic noise, for example.

For microphone testing, we used Discord and based our results on feedback from listeners, as well as measuring and comparing audio quality and each mic's passive noise reduction with recording software.



Turtle Beach stealth pro: £258.99, Amazon

This headset looks and feels every inch as premium as its price point suggests. The best wireless gaming headset we've tested, it has a quietly refined fit and finish and a refreshingly minimalist aesthetic, steering well clear of the dazzling look-at-me RGB lighting effects found on rival headsets.

It sounds sensational, too, with loud 50mm drivers delivering a spacious and detailed soundstage across the spectrum. Bass is powerful but controlled, mids and vocal tones are clear, and highs are crisp, even with spatial audio activated. That performance means the stealth pro is a superb headset for music and movies as well as gaming.

It also offers excellent active noise cancellation, not often seen in gaming headsets, effectively eliminating external sounds, to immerse you more fully in the experience. It also comes with a wireless transmitter dock, which doubles as a charging point for the headset's pair of swappable battery packs. Mic quality is

decent, if a little flat and compressed-sounding by default, with directional pick-up meaning you're always heard clearly.

Buy now



Corsair HS55 stereo: £64.95, Amazon

The Corsair HS55 punches above its weight at the budget end of the best gaming headsets. The muted design keeps things simple and neat, with none of the flashy RGB lighting found in the more attention-seeking headsets in our list, but the HS55s deliver where it counts. They feature a comfortable adjustable head strap and memory foam earpads, boast remarkable audio quality for a sub-£100 pair of cans, and pick up your voice with clarity and minimal distortion.

The lightweight build makes them comfortable for longer gaming sessions, and the fit of the headband avoids that clamping force found on some budget headsets. The 50mm drivers produce clear audio across genres, from explosive shooters to chilled-out Sims sessions, with balanced mids and an overall neutral-sounding mix. Bass presence is there but not overpowering. We liked the classic volume roller on the earcup, too, which is easier to adjust with a single finger than a rocker or button.

Buy now



Steelseries arctis nova pro wireless: £314.99, Amazon

This is a near-faultless premium gaming headset. Great-sounding, and stylish enough to replace your day-to-day headphones, the cans feature everything you'd expect from a pair costing more than £300.

The dual-diaphragm, 40mm neodymium drivers provide crisp, rich and high-fidelity audio suited to music playback and gaming, while the impressive active noise-cancellation and transparency mode makes them ideal for commutes and travelling. Two batteries are included, so you can swap one out for effectively infinite battery life.

The retro-styled base station acts as a charger for the battery you're not using, a hub for switching between multiple audio sources, and a volume controller. There's even a hidden USB-C port under one of the earcup plates, for charging on the go.

We're big fans of the sleek, understated design – there are no gaudy RGB light shows here – and the comfortable ski-band headband distributes the weight of the headset evenly.

The soundstage is nicely balanced out of the box but, if you want to fiddle with EQ, the Sonar audio app lets you finely adjust

frequency bands for game audio and chat audio, activate virtual 7.1 surround sound and spatial audio, and adjust your mic settings on a per game basis. The mic is the best we've tested on any wireless gaming headset – aggressively filtering out keyboard taps and background noise, without muddying your vocals.

This is a do-it-all headset that excels in every aspect. Expensive at more than £300, it's worth every penny.

Buy now



Corsair HS80 max: £124.99 Amazon

A super comfortable gaming headset, the Corsair HS80 max gets everything right. The fit is snug, thanks to a softened floating headband that rests atop the head without pinching, and a pair of plush, breathable memory foam earpads that are glasses-friendly and avoid putting much pressure on the ears. The simple silhouette looks great on camera, and we happily wore them for hours without getting that icky, toasty sensation.

Custom-tuned 50mm neodymium drivers provide superb audio fidelity across the spectrum and at high and low volumes – from rounded vocals and crisp delicate high notes to decent, if a little underdeveloped, bass. The omnidirectional mic can be flipped

up to mute, which is always a nice touch, while PC and PS5 players can take advantage of 3D audio or Dolby Atmos, depending on your platform. The bundled Bluetooth wireless receiver can also connect up to three devices, so you can swap easily between console, desktop and laptop.

Buy now



Audio-Technica ATH-M50xSTS: £169, Amazon

The Audio-Technica ATH-M50xSTS is a bit of a mouthful, but this premium gaming headset is built on the revered audio brand's professional-grade ATH-M50x monitor headphones. In fact, this is essentially that pair of headphones with the audiophile brand's excellent 20-series cardioid condenser studio microphone attached, for streamers and online gaming.

This means you're getting exceptional sound quality from 45mm large-aperture drivers, delivering crisp highs, detailed mids and punchy, rounded bass. You also get a flip-to-mute adjustable mic that delivers great voice clarity in-game, owing to a cardioid pickup pattern that passively tunes out unwanted external noise. Ostensibly designed to be worn all day by sound engineers, the headset comes with two sets of earpads, one for sound isolation and one for breathability, while the wide, padded headband is comfortable for long play sessions.

Buy now



Audeze Maxwell wireless: £319, Amazon

Another gaming headset from a revered audio company, the Audeze Maxwell wireless goes all in on top sound quality. Taking centre stage are the two 90mm planar magnetic drivers, a driver type typically reserved for high-end audiophile headphones.

This gives the Audeze Maxwell an unbeatable frequency range on paper. In testing the difference is stark compared to mid-range and budget headsets, producing impressive, immersive and noticeably more nuanced sound in cinematic games like The Last of Us and Spider-Man.

The design is plain and pleasingly retro, and the headset is comfortable to wear despite its relatively heavy weight. Mic performance is decent too, with automatic noise suppression working well to reduce background noise and focus on just your voice. The Audeze Maxwell could consistently tune out the hum of a nearby fan, as well as our mouse clicks.

Buy now



Razer Blackshark V2 Pro: £114.99, Amazon

This is the 2023 edition of the superb Razer Blackshark V2 Pro gaming headset, which adds a few notable improvements over the original. You now get Bluetooth connectivity as well as the usual PlayStation or Xbox USB wireless dongle – a small update that makes the Blackshark V2 Pro way more versatile, particularly if you want to pair them with your phone or use them as a regular pair of headphones.

The Razer brand has huge sway in the e-sports community, and with good reason. This headset looks and sounds amazing, is comfortable to wear for long play sessions and is tuned for gaming straight out of the box. The balanced soundstage and an emphasis on bass frequencies help you pick out important aural cues like footsteps and reloading sounds, while the companion software gives you full freedom to tweak the EQ to your own preferences. We found that useful when playing more relaxed titles with richer orchestral soundtracks.

The boom mic performs well in noisy situations, and the price is remarkably good value – the Razer Blackshark V2 Pro punches above its weight in the mid-range gaming headset category. We tested the PS5/PC model, but there's an Xbox version available too.

Buy now



Logitech G733: £99.99, Amazon

This is one of the best mid-range gaming headsets Logitech makes – coupling a balanced soundstage with a stylish and sleek design. Futuristic without looking too silly, the headset is complemented by some subtle RGB detailing that can be customised or switched off to conserve battery life.

They're comfortable, too, with memory foam ear cups, a snug clamp and a soft inner strap that takes the pressure off the top of your head. Logitech's lightspeed wireless protocol gives the G733 an impressive 29-hour battery life, too.

Sound quality is decent out of the box but Logitech's excellent companion software can be used to tune the profile to your exacting preferences, delivering great tonal detail in noisy shooters while still rendering orchestral music and softer notes in laidback games. We found the detachable microphone to be flat and inconsistent at first, though, once you've adjusted settings and found a mic positioning that works, overall voice clarity improves.

Buy now



Sony inzone H5: £109.99, Amazon

While, at first glance, they appear to be exclusively PlayStation accessories, the Sony inzone range of gaming headsets, earbuds and monitors are designed and built by Sony Electronics, the folks behind some of the best wireless headphones and televisions around. The inzone H5 is an exceptionally slick-looking gaming headset, mirroring the minimalist white lines of the PS5, but actually performing at its best when connected to a PC.

Immersive spatial audio and a dynamic, crisp sound profile ensure your games are being experienced as the developers intended, and the lightweight (borderline-flimsy) construction means they're comfortable to wear for hours on end.

Wireless connectivity is a little finicky, however: the H5 doesn't have Bluetooth, relying instead on a 2.4GHz dongle to connect to your PC or PS5 (or even your phone, if you really wanted). You can also use Sony's powerful tuning software on PC to tweak the inzone H5 to your tastes, while on a console you can't. That, oddly enough, means there are better gaming headsets to recommend to PS5 players than Sony's very own.

Buy now



HyperX cloud III: £79.99, HP

A great value option, this gaming headset excels where it matters. Plush memory foam ear cups and a lightweight design create a pressure-free and comfortable fit, while the braided 3.5mm cable adds a premium touch to a sub-£80 pair of cans.

The 53mm drivers perform at their very best around the mids and highs, but they tend to give up a little detail at the extremes of the lower end. Some muddiness in the deepest end of the bass means darker sounds can lose their clarity, but the overall soundscape is balanced and zingy. The HyperX cloud III supports DTS headphone X spatial audio and are generally great-sounding headphones at this price point.

The 10mm microphone punches above its weight, taking advantage of its wired connection to give vocals a dynamic and well-rounded sound. Noise reduction is well-tuned, too, eradicating background noise such as keyboard taps and mouse clicks.

Buy now

The verdict

The Turtle Beach stealth pro is our pick of the best gaming headsets, matching excellent and immersive audio quality with a

sleek aesthetic and well-thought-out features such as the charging dock and swappable battery packs. If you can spend a little extra, we'd recommend the Steelseries arctis nova pro wireless.

If your budget doesn't stretch that far, we were also impressed by the more affordable Corsair HS55 and HyperX cloud III, which both offer great performance without compromising on sound and build quality.

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‘Everyone needs reminding they were once nobody’

Actor, activist and Springsteen lieutenant Steven Van Zandt tells **Craig McLean** why he has no plans to ‘retire on a yacht’



The 74-year-old first played with Bruce Springsteen as a teenager (Getty)

Some 150,000 Wembley-goers can’t be wrong: Bruce Springsteen is worth every penny of his newly minted status as A Billion Dollar Rock Star. This past week the 74-year-old boss of all bosses played twice at the stadium, earthquaking event

concerts that *The Independent*'s reviewer characterised as a "three-hour shift of blazing, hi-octane rock'n'roll [with] no sign of the wear and tear dogging other such Sixties and Seventies greats".

That cash valuation came from the blue-chip bean-counters at *Forbes,* their calculations arising in large part from Springsteen selling his song catalogue to Sony in 2021 for a reported half a billion. Then there were the 1.6 million gig tickets he sold last year, bringing in another $380m (£295m).

How meaningful, one wonders, is that $1bn status to a superstar who's sold 141 million albums and won 20 Grammys, an Oscar and a Tony in a 50-year-plus recording career? His best pal probably has the answer.

"It's great for me because I'm gonna definitely borrow some money, I tell you that. I'm joking, of course," says "Little Steven" Van Zandt, the guitarist who's been standing stage-left of Springsteen, on and off, since their shared teenage garage-band origins in New Jersey. "My bookie's gonna love him. I'm joking again!

"I'm not sure how accurate that is, first of all. But I don't think it matters, honestly," continues this time-served stalwart of the outfit Springsteen introduces from the stage as "the heart-stopping, pants-dropping, hard-rocking, booty-shaking, love-making, earth-quaking, Viagra-taking, death-defying, legendary E Street Band".

Van Zandt is Zooming in from his suite at Claridge's: "When you have enough money to live, that's the point where it matters. Do you continue to work? Or do you retire on a yacht and drink mojitos off the coast of Portugal? The fact is: this is what we do. And so the money has absolutely no factor. It hasn't affected him for many, many years. Ever since, really, [1984 album] *Born in the USA*. What's that, 40 years?



Colourful character: Van Zandt in the new HBO documentary ‘Disciple’ (Sky/Now TV)

“So no matter how many zeros is on the bank account, it doesn’t make any difference!” this piratical charisma-bomb cracks again, his pearly white super-smile almost as loud as his ever-present bandana and scarves.

Even at 11am on a Saturday, a weekend morning wedged between two stadium gigs and a special screening the previous evening of Van Zandt’s new HBO bio-doc *Stevie Van Zandt: Disciple,* the 73-year-old gives good rock’n’roll showmanship. It’s a skill that’s served him well across music, political campaigning and an iconic TV acting role as right-hand man to another kind of boss in *The Sopranos*.

Disciple director Bill Teck justifies making a film that lasts almost as long as a Springsteen show as “Stevie was involved in so many different things, people may not know the whole journey. They may not know that Silvio Dante helped free Nelson Mandela.”

That skill has been honed with Springsteen since their days in The Source and The Castiles, respectively, rival mid-teenage bands on the Jersey shore. In Disciple, Springsteen recalls how Van Zandt “became my rock’n’roll brother instantly”. Then, once The Boss leapt ahead of his peers and landed a recording

contract, Van Zandt became his “sounding board… I wanted him near me, I wanted him by my side.”



Van Zandt and wife Maureen star as Silvio and Gabriella Dante in ‘The Sopranos’ (Getty)

But Van Zandt forged his own path, too. With his own band, The Disciples of Soul. With his forming of Artists Against Apartheid, the 1980s organisation with which he rallied rock’s conscience to the cause of freeing Nelson Mandela. And with his knack for songwriting, production and arranging, for projects and artists including 1985 AAA protest anthem “Sun City”, Springsteen, Gary US Bonds, Darlene Love and the soundtrack to *Home Alone 2: Lost In New York*.

Helping Teck deliver that story are talking heads ranging from Bono to Pearl Jam’s Eddie Vedder, Paul McCartney to Peter Gabriel, *Sopranos*’ creator David Chase to Van Zandt’s wife

Maureen (who also played Silvio Dante's screen wife), and, of course, Springsteen.

"It was very bonding back then, even though we were 15 – being in rock'n'roll was still an unusual thing to do," says Van Zandt by way of explaining the pair's lifelong connection. "It was a very small cult. A tribe of misfits, outcasts and freaks that really did not fit into society… But me and him really took it seriously right from the beginning, knowing that this was a lifeline that we very much needed in our own ways.

"Beyond that, we both had a really strong work ethic, and a compassionate, independent, liberal philosophy in terms of feeling like we're on the planet to help a little bit. Make things a bit better for the next guy. As opposed to every man for himself, let's make as much money as we can, and don't worry about the rest of the world. We shared a morality and compassion that I think helps keep the friendship more solid."



E Street survivors: with Springsteen in the early days of their careers (Sky/NOW TV)

That was tested, but also proven, when, in 1983, Van Zandt decided to leave Springsteen's side after 15 years – just before the release of the record that would change the life of the latter and, arguably, the course of Eighties rock. Reflecting now, Van Zandt acknowledges that he wasn't thinking of "the big picture"

when he quit ahead of Born in the USA, lest he become what he calls an “encumbrance” to his friend.

Van Zandt had been around since *Born to Run* (1975), through *Darkness on the Edge of Town* (1978), *The River* (1980) and *Nebraska* (1982), before the album that caused everything in Springsteen’s life to “go berserk,” he says. “We thought three million records was the most you could possibly sell! And the next one sells 20 million? You can’t blame him for lifting off the ground there for a minute. When those things happen, you don’t necessarily want the guys from the old neighbourhood hanging around! Reminding you that you were once nobody. Even though I think every celebrity and superstar does need that guy from the neighbourhood, reminding them that they were once nobody!

“That’s part of what happened there: not intentionally, not consciously, but he started to distance himself from me,” Van Zandt continues. “And I felt I needed to leave the band in order to preserve the friendship.”

That’s exactly what happened. The pair reconciled soon after, with Springsteen seeking Van Zandt’s advice on “what to do on the Born in the USA tour. That was the meeting where I told him he should start doing benefits at every single show in every single city, instead of the usual things that people did in those days, which was once a year making some kind of charity thing. I said: ‘You got a reputation as a man of the people. It’s time to prove it. It’s time to be it.’”



'I felt I needed to leave the band in order to preserve the friendship' (Getty)

Equally, Van Zandt's own conscience was propelling him in another direction. As the architect of Artists Against Apartheid, Van Zandt agreed to be smuggled into South Africa under blankets, which terrified Maureen. Teck describes her response: "I married this rock'n'roll guy – now he's a political animal? This machine who's on this mission?" Teck understood her point, "because it was scary and stressful. It did put his entire career and their relationship at risk, Stevie following his passions."

Van Zandt, though, got to meet Mandela in person – "I felt what must have been the feeling when people met the great spiritual leaders of the world – if they even existed! – the Moses and Jesus and Muhammad and Buddhas of the world. Certain people literally have a physical aura, you can feel it."

Having jeopardised his career once, Van Zandt risked doing it again when he took the role in *The Sopranos*. David Chase had been mesmerised by Van Zandt's hilarious, role-playing speech when he inducted New Jersey soul band The Rascals into the 1997 Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. He duly created for the musician the part of pompadoured strip-club owner Silvio Dante in the drama he was developing about a New Jersey mob boss (James Gandolfini's Tony Soprano) who was in therapy.

Certain people literally have a physical aura, you can feel it

But: what if the first-time actor fell flat on his bandana'd face?

"I was concerned about the whole concept," admits Van Zandt. "This first script is great. What if the second one sucks? As musicians, we're used to controlling our own destinies, artistically anyway. You sing a song, you come into the [studio] control room, you say, 'I think I could do a better job', and you go and try it again. *This thing*: you act in a scene. The director – who's never seen you before in his life – decides whether you just did the right job or not. And you're gonna see it six months later. What a freaky sort of way to make a living! My life's gonna depend on some total stranger?"

How were his connections with the show's proper actors?

"That was the other thing I was very concerned with. Are these guys gonna accept me, half a hippie guitar player coming off the street? But It turns out Jimmy [Gandolfini] was completely respectful of what I had accomplished in my other life."

Even more concerning was Tony Sirico, who played Paulie Walnuts. "He was the real thing – he did time and he was a tough guy," says Van Zandt. "But we became best friends. Turns out he actually knew my wife from the early days. He used to go into [legendary New York club] The Scene when Maureen was there, seeing Jimi Hendrix. She was there when Tony Sirico was basically pulling up Jimi Hendrix in the bathroom. extorting him for money!"

Then, as the series and roles developed, Van Zandt and Dante found their feet: the newbie actor was playing a character who was consigliere to a boss.

“Jimmy and I bonded on the fact that we’re both character actors – in rock’n’roll language, that’s a sideman. Jimmy was surprised to suddenly find himself a lead actor. And was uncomfortable with it for quite a long time. I mean, he literally quit every other day. Then the writers picked up on the fact that we were bonding. Then by the end of the first season, that’s what it became: I became the younger boss and consigliere. And at that point, the entire relationship with Bruce my whole life kicked in. I was like: ‘Oh, I know what the job is now.’ It turned out to be perfect.”



Gangster wrap: Van Zandt, James Gandolfini and Tony Sirico in ‘The Sopranos' (Getty)

Speaking of the Boss, Steven Van Zandt has to split. It’s almost, again, time to get on stage. He’s conscious of their role in spreading the gospel of rock'n'roll – “the best possible communication that we’ve ever created on this planet” – but he knows too that in live terms, things “can never go back to the Sixties, and Seventies and Eighties. Because the infrastructure is not there.

“The nature of the corporate takeover has changed things,” he continues. “Nobody wants to spend time developing anything any more. That's the problem with our entire society, our entire culture, not just entertainment. Once the accountants take over

the world, which they have, suddenly there's no concept of development any more. Everybody just wants to deal with the next fiscal quarter. If you're dealing with the next fiscal quarter, you're never going to build anything."

Van Zandt and Springsteen might be millionaires and billionaires, but for these septuagenarian besties, the show must always – will always – go on.

"Bruce hasn't had trouble paying the rent now for quite a while," says Van Zandt with another toothy cackle. "That's the turning point in your life. When you don't have to do this [for money] any more, do you still do it? But you look at our two biggest heroes and it's fascinating – The Beatles and The Stones were the biggest when Bruce and I grew up. And The Beatles and The Stones are still the biggest right now, pretty much. Except," that grin again, "for us."

'Stevie Van Zandt: Disciple' is on Sky/NOW TV

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Marvel sequel claws at the very idea of cinema as art

‘Deadpool & Wolverine’ is uninterested in anything beyond perpetuating its own brand and making cheap meta jokes. Is this the future of film? **Louis Chilton** is terrified it might be



Sorry spectacle: Hugh Jackman as the wolf-inspired superhero (Marvel Studios)

What is a movie? It sounds like a silly question, perhaps, but it’s one that’s been rattling around my head ever since I walked out of *Deadpool & Wolverine* last Friday. Marvel’s cameo-stuffed, fourth-wall-breaking superhero sequel made a staggering $438.3m across its opening weekend – a record for an R-rated

film. It feels in many ways like a watershed moment. But not a good one. If we are watching, as some critics have suggested, the death of cinema happen before our eyes, then it's taken the form of a public execution.

There have been plenty of "worse" movies than *Deadpool & Wolverine*. Even within the remit of Marvel's own conveyor-belt oeuvre, last year's *Ant-Man and the Wasp: Quantumania* and 2022's *Thor: Love and Thunder* were far messier affairs – structurally chaotic and aesthetically rebarbative to the extent that *Deadpool & Wolverine* is not. But *Deadpool* feels somehow the most cynical of all of the canon to date, the most spiritually and creatively bereft. It is a film that is about absolutely nothing – a film with no discernable purpose or artistic ambitions, beyond the perpetuation of its own corporate myth.

There are jokes about the Disney-Fox merger. Jokes about producer Kevin Feige. Jokes about the widespread disillusionment towards the Marvel franchise. Around halfway through the film, the two eponymous leads (played by Ryan Reynolds and Hugh Jackman, the latter exhuming – literally at one point – his famous X-Men character) encounter a team of throwback superheroes: Jennifer Garner's Elektra, Wesley Snipes' Blade, Chris Evans's Johnny Storm (from *Fantastic Four*), Channing Tatum's Gambit (never produced) and Dafne Keen's mini-Wolverine from *Logan*.

The film invites us to gawp at these comebacks. Meta-referential dialogue explains that these characters, ostensibly stuck in some kind of out-of-universe "void", are simply trying to *get the endings they deserve*. What these "deserved endings" actually look like in practice is fewer than 10 lines of dialogue apiece – in Snipes' case, mostly just repeating catchphrases from the first three *Blade* films – before they all drive out to a skirmish in the desert and get swallowed up by some kind of deadly CGI air monster. There's no attempt at characterisation, no point behind the meta-joke.

If cinema starts losing the notion that it even ought to function as a work of art – if it becomes not just bad art, but some new and insidious other thing – then the jig, as it were, is truly up

The insistence that audiences are for some reason gagging to see Reynolds' Deadpool exchange one line of insipid banter with Tatum's Gambit, is baffling. Audiences didn't love *Blade* because Snipes just showed up, stood there and barked catchphrases – he was part of a story, with a proper character, and stakes, and intentionality. That Marvel cannot see the difference – or, even worse, if it can see the difference but chooses to ignore it – is surely damning.

It's telling, too, that Reynolds has spent much of the *Deadpool & Wolverine* press tour performatively retching in the vague direction of *The Green Lantern*, his critically panned 2011 DC Comics blockbuster that, were it owned by Marvel and not DC, would surely have been reclaimed here as a "forgotten gem" along with the other dross.

To be clear, *Deadpool & Wolverine* is not the first movie of its kind. In many ways, it's simply re-applying the lessons learned from 2021's *Spider-Man: No Way Home* – a film that made waves (and more than $2bn) with a glut of surprise cameos, giving Tobey Maguire, Andrew Garfield and more the chance to reprise their bygone Spider-Man roles. But even that film offered more in the way of story and purpose than *Deadpool & Wolverine*. Garfield, Maguire and co were given the barest bones of

character arcs, to play around with as they saw fit. (Garfield ended up making considerably more of the opportunity.)

If you'll allow me to get a little philosophical about things: how do we define what is and isn't a movie? Over the past two decades, Marvel has re-shaped Hollywood in its own image, whittling away some of the things that made filmmaking unique as an art form and shifting it towards something more televisual and serialised. We call *Deadpool & Wolverine* a movie because it is released in cinemas, and is two hours long, but other than these technicalities, it shares almost nothing with a traditional blockbuster, when it comes to intent. The problem isn't that it tells its story badly – it's that it has no interest in telling a story well at all. It's interested exclusively in the maintenance and consolidation of Marvel's brand, in its viability as both product and advertisement, a snake eating its own tail.

"Turn off your brain and enjoy it for what it is," has become the prevailing mantra of the *Deadpool* defenders on social media. And of course, people are allowed to enjoy what they like. But freebasing cocaine is surely enjoyable to many people; that doesn't mean we should all get on board with its production and distribution. If cinema starts losing the notion that it even ought to function as a work of art – if it becomes not just *bad art*, but some new and insidious other thing – then the jig, as it were, is truly up. If *Deadpool & Wolverine* is what the future of cinema looks like, it'll take more than a few plucky heroes to save it.

'Deadpool & Wolverine' is in cinemas now

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Business news in brief



Tim Martin has grown the pub chain to 801 sites since founding it in 1979 (AFP/Getty)

Wetherspoon boss cashes in with shares sale

The founder of JD Wetherspoon has sold almost £10m worth of shares in the pub giant. Tim Martin, who is also chair of the hospitality giant, sold 1.361 million shares in the business on Friday, according to a London Stock Exchange announcement, at a price of about 739p per share, securing £9.58m.

No reason was disclosed for the share sale, which has reduced his stake in the firm from 25.68 per cent to 24.58 per cent. Mr Martin founded the pub firm in 1979 and has since grown the business to 801 sites across the UK, with it also employing

43,000 people. Earlier this month, Wetherspoons revealed another improvement in sales in recent weeks as it continued selling off some venues.

Crackdown on 'spoof' calls from abroad

Millions more calls from abroad that use spoofed UK landline numbers are to be blocked under new curbs. Companies will now have to identify and block overseas calls that falsely display a UK telephone number under strengthened guidance from Ofcom. A common tactic used by criminals to defraud victims is to imitate or "spoof" phone numbers from a trusted person, organisation, or government department, so their calls are more likely to be answered.

Fraudsters based abroad often spoof UK numbers, knowing people are more likely to answer them than if an unknown international number is displayed. Ofcom said evidence suggested that the new blocking measures would have a significant impact on protecting the public from scam calls.

Pearson targets AI-boosted growth as sales dip

Educational publisher Pearson has revealed a decrease in sales for the past six months, but a slight increase in profits for the period. The FTSE 100 firm hailed a "solid" performance over the first half of 2024 amid "operational progress" across the business. The group said it sees opportunities to improve growth by addressing pressure for skills driven by baby boomers quitting the workforce and leaving shortages.

It also said it would look to "increasingly powerful AI models" amid changing skills requirements in the world of work. Chief executive Omar Abbosh said: "Significant demographic shifts and rapid advances in AI will be important drivers of growth in education and work over the coming years."

Mortgage approvals steady, says Bank of England

Mortgage approvals made to home buyers remained “broadly stable” in June, according to the Bank of England. Some 59,976 mortgages for house purchases got the green light, compared with 60,134 in May. The BoE’s money and credit report said: “Net mortgage approvals for house purchases, which is an indicator of future borrowing, remained broadly stable at 60,000 in June.”

The base rate has remained at 5.25 per cent since August last year, but with inflation hitting the 2 per cent target level for the past two months, hopes have been raised that rates can start to be reduced, perhaps as early as Thursday. Simon Gammon, managing partner of Knight Frank Finance said: “Repeated false dawns in the battle against inflation have left the property market stuck in first gear, but it’s now very likely that we’ll have a busier second half of the year.”

PA

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Thrills and spills as Pidcock takes mountain bike gold



Brit's true grit: Tom Pidcock celebrates at Elancourt Hill after fighting back to overtake French rider Viktor Goretzky (AFP/Getty)

LAWRENCE OSTLERE
IN PARIS

Three hundred and twenty-eight other gold medals will be handed out at these Paris Games, but surely none will be won as dramatically as this. Tom Pidcock lost the race to a puncture, won it back, then lost it again to the determined Frenchman

Victor Koretzky before pulling off a do-or-die overtake around a tree to defend his Olympic title.

It was a superhuman display of racing. On the third of eight 4.4km laps, Pidcock was forced to stand still for half a minute while a frazzled mechanic changed his punctured front tyre and rivals whizzed by. He lost 36 seconds in all but soon began picking them off, one by one. Koretzky had watched Pidcock's race dismantle firsthand as he took the lead, so what must he have thought when he turned a hairpin four laps and 40 minutes later to see Pidcock reincarnated?

In the final throes they went wheel to wheel, and in a wooded section of the course with trees peppering the middle of the track, Pidcock threw everything at gold, diving down the inside lane and emerging at the next bend half a wheel in front. They came together and made contact, Koretzky's left foot was briefly dislodged from his pedal, and Pidcock sped away to emotional glory.

He fell into the arms of his family waiting at the finish, as some in the disappointed French crowd booed him. They were understandably frustrated but Pidcock had done nothing wrong.



Pidcock had to make his way back through the field (PA)

"I knew Victor was going to be strong," he said afterwards. "Then the puncture happened. At that point I just imagined when I did a little ride this morning that, when I punctured, I

was just going to say ‘fuck fuck fuck’ three times, slowly, calmly, and then I’m just going to have to get on with it.

“Bruno [his mechanic] wasn’t ready in the pits but he did a fast change, and I knew at that point I had almost five laps, that’s almost 50 minutes, so I thought, anything’s possible.”

So Pidcock proved. He is a double Olympic champion aged 24 – he turns 25 today – something only a handful of Britons have achieved. Adam Peaty was 25 when he defended his Olympic title; Andy Murray and Mo Farah were in their thirties. Pidcock’s name will now be held in similar esteem.

The Yorkshireman is an underappreciated jewel of British sport, perhaps because mountain biking does not carry a mainstream following. Yet his talents are multi-disciplined, as a cyclo-cross world champion and the winner of the queen stage of a Tour de France. Here he was up against mountain bike specialists, but that road race training with Ineos Grenadiers has developed his engine to go with the sublime, natural feel that makes him one of the best bike handlers in the world.

He needed that engine to haul himself back to Koretzky in 32C heat, but the winning moment, sending his bike up the inside of the split track, was pure racing instinct.

“In the end I just had to go for a gap. Rubbing is racing, that’s what I’ve always done and the Olympics are no different. I’m sorry for [Koretzky], the support for him was incredible, but it’s the Olympics. You have to go all in.”



The Yorkshireman with his gold medal (AFP/Getty)

Pidcock had begun the race ensconced safely in the middle of the 36 riders before working his way through the pack, and by the third lap he led. But suddenly he was losing speed and control as the puncture struck, forcing him to clamber down a sheer drop carrying his bike as Koretzky flew off the ledge and into the lead.

Pidcock never faced this adversity three years in Tokyo, where he built a gap which grew into a dominant victory. But after swearing at himself he stayed calm, not charging to close the gap but refinding his rhythm and gradually eroding Koretzky's lead.

The French crowd had witnessed Pauline Ferrand-Prevot prevail on Sunday and were becoming frenzied at the thought of another mountain bike gold. Perhaps Koretzky felt the weight of their expectations when he lost control in the woods on lap seven, colliding with a tree and giving up his lead to the chasing Pidcock.

Koretzky recovered, fought back and surged clear into what seemed like an unassailable lead. He appeared to have the reserves of energy, fuelled by home support, as Pidcock began to tire from his almighty effort. But the Briton stayed close enough to give himself one more shot, and he made it count.

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GB shake off scandal as they strike gold in team eventing



Rosalind Canter on Lordships Graffalo – who helped claim victory alongside Laura Collett on London 52 and Tom McEwen on JL Dublin (Getty)

JAMES TONEY
SPORTSBEAT, IN PARIS

Much of Versailles' gilded grandeur was made off with during the 1789 French Revolution but it was Great Britain who snatched the gold from under French noses at their Olympics.

Laura Collett praised her prince of a horse as he delivered another Olympic title in the garden of France's famous Sun King.

Louis XIV's palace seems the fitting venue for Team GB to make the top of the podium for the first time in Paris, meaning they remain the only nation that have won a gold medal at every Olympics dating back to 1896.

Collett and Tom McEwen won team gold three years ago in Tokyo and joined forces with Ros Canter to defend their title, as hosts France and Japan completed the podium.

They'll get the medals while their respective horses, London 52, JL Dublin and Lordships Graffalo will just get the treats.

"I wanted to have been sat on a nervous horse but thankfully he rose to the occasion," Collett said. "He loves showing off and he thinks he's right at home with the palace in the background and everyone watching him. He's waited three years for a full stadium.

"The noise was unreal but it didn't distract him at all. He's a true professional and I think he knew what was at stake. I wouldn't wanted to have sat on any other horse.

"We knew coming here we stood a good chance because the horsepower Team GB has at the moment is second to none, we could have fielded another team with the reserves as they could have won a gold medal."

It's been a difficult few days for the British equestrian team in Paris, following the suspension of six-time Olympic dressage medallist Charlotte Dujardin, after footage emerged of her repeatedly whipping a horse in training.

But Collett insists the team's performance would not be possible if horses were mistreated.

"It's huge for our sport for people to see our horses go out there and look a million dollars," she added. "There is a huge team behind us that makes it possible and horses don't perform like that if they are not happy. Our job was to focus on our horses

and show the world that they are the real stars of the show, we are just the ones that get to enjoy these moments on them."

Britain had a slender five-point advantage heading into the decisive jumping and after Canter picked up just four penalties and McEwen went clear, Collett had the luxury of knowing she could knock down four fences and still win.



Tom McEwen participates in the evening yesterday (Getty Images)

France's final rider whipped up the crowd as Collett entered the arena, the entente cordiale creaking, but Collett and London 52 were nerveless under the most intense pressure.

"I wasn't that nervous watching her," said McEwen. "She jumped amazingly, I thought I would be more nervous, I much prefer doing it myself to be honest. But it was a class round from Laura, and it was poetry in motion."

Collett and McEwen could also add to their medal haul in the individual event later today, sitting third and fourth in those standings.

These equestrians are made of tough stuff – Collett spent seven days in coma 11 years ago after a fall which left her blind in her right eye.

She wears special goggles in bright sunlight, which she certainly needed as temperatures reached 34C in Versaille.

She describes London 52 as her horse of a lifetime, though he was outside her budget when first spotted in Germany. Instead, she clubbed together with co-owners Karen Bartlett and Keith Scott, training the horse at her base in the Cotswolds.

Collett later added to her medal haul by taking bronze in the individual eventing, also riding London 52.

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Sportsbeat

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Daley completes Olympic set as son causes a splash



Tasting success: Team GB's Tom Daley and Noah Williams took silver in the synchronised 10m platform yesterday (Mike Egerton/PA)

JACK RATHBORN
IN PARIS

Tom Daley gazed up after completing the set of Olympic medals with a fabulous silver alongside Noah Williams in the synchronised 10m platform yesterday. But then came a surprise: a juice cup launched from above in his direction. It was his adorable son Phoenix, revelling in his father's latest glorious

Olympic moment, tossing down his cup in pure excitement as reporters scattered.

It was a moment to justify Daley's decision to return for Paris 2024 on a glorious Monday in the city, a silver medal was wonderful, but forging memories alongside his young family proved extra special. In his fifth Olympics, Daley and Williams were only beaten by the "flawless" Chinese duo of Junjie Lian and Hao Yang. His medal collection now expands to five following that famous gold in Tokyo and three more bronze medals.

The bubbly Daley was back, yet an hour earlier, he was soaking in his final Olympic dive before an exciting switch to broadcast duties with Eurosport in Paris. The 30-year-old displayed a fierce intensity. Clasping his trademark rainbow towel, the Pride shammy giving greater visibility to LGBT+ athletes and the millions watching around the world, Daley soaked in the final seconds, not knowing if it would be his last dive at the Olympics. He brushed his limbs and twirled the cloth around before a slow march to the top of the 10m platform.

The pair delivered a forward tuck with four-and-a-half somersaults; an explosive dive executed supremely with a crisp entry into the water from both at the Aquatics Centre. The hushed silence before was replaced by a roar with the dizzying 93.24 points enough to clinch a silver medal. If Daley had bemoaned an absence of "razzmatazz" three years ago in Tokyo, that hollow feeling without support due to the Covid pandemic was replaced by a raucous atmosphere here.



Daley's husband Dustin Lance Black and their son Phoenix watch from the stands (Mike Egerton/PA)

The intensity of diving captivates an audience every four years, but the synchro events deliver straight-up finals in a hurry. Six dives, 45 minutes and minimal margin for error. It was the Chinese pair's gold medal to lose. Gold or bust. Daley knew it

was “possible” though, but lightning did not strike twice as China put on a clinical display, breaking 100 points with their final dive and over 490 points overall. Too good.

“We were there if China faltered,” Daley conceded, with Team GB on 463.44 points to bronze medalists Canada on 422.13 points. “But they were flawless today. To be in front of my family and kids, I know at any moment you can get injured and not compete, I didn’t want to believe I’d make a fifth Games until I completed training; to get here in one piece was amazing.”

This showman, whose infectious personality has been embraced and clenched warmly by the British public throughout the last 16 years, since the 14-year-old Daley first dared to be great at Beijing 2008. A little battered and bruised, according to coach Jane Figueiredo, Daley has carefully built a new life with husband Dustin Lance Black and sons Phoenix and Robbie, away from the intensity of the British camp.

“Being there with my kids was the gold medal,” Daley admitted. “They were stood above the mixed zone doing interviews. Phoenix threw his juice cup at me in excitement, it nearly took out one of the reporters, it was so nice to have them there to share it. Robbie is excited as he wrote in his journal at school about the Eiffel Tower in the middle of the medal.”

Beyond Andy Murray, it is Daley whose influence perhaps stretches furthest in Team GB. The flagbearer from a drenched opening ceremony, he found humour in posing alongside Helen Glover to recreate the iconic *Titanic* moment on the River Seine. His passion for knitting, too, has thrilled his millions of followers on social media.



Pride and joy: Daley on the diving board (Mike Egerton/PA)

And his fan club, complete with “Team Daley” T-shirts, had arrived early for what might be the final chapter of a glittering Olympic career, soaking up the blazing sun in Saint-Denis. Led by Daley’s Grandma, attending her fifth Games, confidence was high after being lured back to the sport at the request of one of his young sons and a complex arrangement with Williams, given his new home in Los Angeles and his partner’s London residence.

“I was told, ‘Don’t come back if Matty and Noah win a medal at the World Championships,’ but they didn’t, so I tried to come back. I did some synchro with Matty [Lee], some with Noah, but Matty got injured,” Daley added.

“If we got a medal at the world championships, that would be the team. November was the first time we did synchro together and we got maybe two months of training together in total, because I live in LA and he lives in London, we’d only train at competitions and turn up and wing it. It’s not how you’d normally do it, but I wasn’t planning on coming back, I was in LA because my husband’s work is out there. I was training at UCLA, which was incredible, training away from the intensity of the national programme. It was a challenge, but it worked in our favour.”

Daley may not have prevented China from claiming a clean sweep of eight diving golds again, which now appears inevitable.

But, alongside Williams, who hails Daley as his hero, the last year has been made possible not by harder work, but smarter work.

“As an athlete, you know to train smarter. You have to prioritise things in your life, not just diving,” Daley concluded. “I was getting emotional just getting prepared for this. My husband has really been there, he’s taken the kids allowing me to travel when I’ve needed to. A happy athlete is a successful one.”

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Richards settles for silver after losing by 0.02 seconds



Matt Richards was pipped to the post by Romanian sensation David Popovici (PA)

JACK RATHBORN
AT LA DEFENSE ARENA

It was a breathtaking silver medal for Matt Richards, but Team GB suffered a cruel twist once again in what has been an agonising 24 hours in the pool.

Richards, the world champion from Fukuoka last year, was bullish entering the Olympics, but stumbled in the final.

David Popovici, hailed as “The Chlorine Daddy” by his fans, provided a menacing pose on the block as a hushed silence descended on La Defense Arena ahead of the men’s 200m freestyle final.

The Romanian has flicked a switch this year with his ominous form making many wonder if the intrigue surrounding this race was surrounding silver and bronze.

The Romanian prevailed with a swim of 1min 44.72secs after a nerve-wracking wait after the touch, seizing a first Olympic gold medal.

Mystery briefly clouded the arena – had the Briton pulled off a stunning gold? A flicker of the board would soon dash his hopes, crowning Popovici by just 0.02secs.

“I’m walking away with a silver, this time last year, I was on the right side of the touch, myself and David, we’ve raced many times, I’ve beaten him, he’s beaten me, fundamentally I loved every minute of that,” Richards said in the immediate aftermath.

“It doesn’t get much better, I’m over the moon, devastated at the same time. If anything, I think the silver is fantastic, but it’s made me want it more than ever.”



Gold medalist David Popovici, centre, with silver medalist Matthew Richards, left, and bronze medalist Luke Hobson, of the US (AP)

It was familiar pain for Great Britain, even if Richards was ultimately thrilled to grab a first individual Olympic medal after

a supreme gold in the 4×200 m freestyle in Tokyo.

It was a moment of deja-vu after Adam Peaty, who has since tested positive for Covid-19, was beaten out by the same margin, denying him immortality and a place alongside Michael Phelps as only the second man to win three consecutive Olympic gold medals in an individual event.

While Max Litchfield suffered pain, too – 0.19secs outside of bronze in the men's 400m individual medley, his third successive fourth-place finish at the Olympics.

A word for Duncan Scott, too, the silver medalist in Tokyo, an event that fellow Briton Tom Dean won, but then failed to requalify for after a tenacious battle at the British trials.

The Scot finished fourth in a comparatively lofty eight-hundredths of a second behind the USA's Luke Hobson in bronze.

Such margins define swimming and its compelling nature at the very top. The pressure of the Olympics, combined with this thunderous atmosphere, which resembled a rock concert as much as a gala, ensured an unforgettable battle.

Indeed, Richards was not overly concerned by his semi-final result, telling *TheIndependent* that swimming comes down to "the mental edge".



Matthew Richards checks the board after the race (PA)

It was curious to wonder whether this refreshing mentality helped him to contend with the debate swirling around the Games and swimming's tactics. The psychological impact of lane assignment for finals is debated furiously, but Richards, who won world gold last year in Fukuoka from lane two, adapted marvellously from lane one here.

On reflection, Richards can revel in a storming start, which set up the silver medal here. He tooik the race out hard, an audacious move saw him just a tenth of a second off the lead at 50m and then placed second and just 0.40secs behind Lukas Maertens at the half-way stage. The German's lead must have sent shivers down the competition, given his strength from a 400m freestyle gold already.

But Richards would not relent, out of sight and perhaps out of mind in lane one, he slashed his way down the final 50m to step out of the relay shadows and into the limelight. At 21 years of age, Great Britain has a star.

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Sports news in brief



Adam Burgess celebrates after winning silver in the canoe slalom singles yesterday (Getty)

Crafty canoeing but Team GB miss out in gymnastics

Adam Burgess claimed his first Olympic medal with canoe slalom singles silver at the Vaires-sur-Marne Nautical Stadium in Paris yesterday. Burgess put in a superb run save a small error on upstream gate 17, but recovered at the bottom of the course, crossing the finish in 96.84 seconds for the fastest run of the final with three men left to challenge.

Burgess was still sitting in gold medal position when home favourite Nicolas Gestin, the reigning world silver medallist, left his best run for last, destroying the Briton's leading time in

91.36, with Slovakia's Matej Benus rounding out the podium. Burgess, 32, from Stoke-on-Trent, is a five-time world medallist, all in team events, including silver at last September's home championships at Lee Valley.

Great Britain came up short in their bid to claim a first Olympic men's team gymnastics medal since London 2012. The team, comprising Max Whitlock, Jake Jarman, Joe Fraser, Luke Whitehouse and Harry Hepworth, finished in fourth place, more than two points off bronze medallists the USA, while Japan dramatically pipped China for gold.

The British team, who had qualified for the final in third place, did not do much wrong, but were simply edged out by a series of small margins, left with too much to do by the time they reached their final and arguably strongest rotation on the floor.

Above them, the competition saw a dramatic late twist when China's Su Weide fell twice from the high bar, earning a score of 11.6 that allowed Japan to sneak in with a brilliant, nerveless performance from Daiko Hashimoto to snare their first team gold since 2016.

Peaty tests positive for Covid-19

Adam Peaty's hopes of adding more medals to his individual breaststroke silver at Paris 2024 have been thrown into doubt after the Team GB swimmer tested positive for Covid-19. Peaty narrowly missed out on an historic gold in the 100 metres breaststroke, and Team GB have now confirmed that Peaty tested positive for Covid yesterday, leaving his further participation at the Games uncertain.

If fit, he would play a key part in Great Britain's men's and mixed 4x100m medley relay quartets, having helped the latter unit to gold at Tokyo 2020. The men's final is not until the final night of competition at La Defense Arena on Sunday 4 August, with the mixed event concluding a day prior.

Djokovic ends Nadal's Olympic dream

Spain's "King of Clay" was hoping for a spirited final act at the scene of his 14 French Open titles as he faced great rival Novak Djokovic at Roland Garros yesterday, but the Serbian was ruthless as he won 10 of the first 11 games to win 6-1, 6-4 despite a late rally from his 38-year-old opponent.

Injuries had meant Nadal had barely played since the two last faced each other, in a late-night duel in the quarter-finals of the 2022 French Open, which the Spaniard won en route to his last grand slam title. However, 37-year-old Djokovic was clearly on top of his game and never let Nadal into the match. The latter's hopes of a medal now rest alongside Carlos Alcaraz in the men's doubles.

Arsenal sign Calafiori as Fulham move for Smith Rowe

Arsenal have completed the signing of Italy defender Riccardo Calafiori from Bologna for a fee of £42m. The 22-year-old was regarded as a priority target for the Gunners this season and signed a five-year deal at the Emirates. "He gives us huge strength to reinforce our defence," said manager Mikel Arteta. "Riccardo is a big personality and character, with specific skills which will make us stronger as we push to win major trophies."

While Calafiori offers options to his manager as he can play centrally or at left-back, England international Emile Smith Rowe looks set to leave for London rivals Fulham on a deal worth up to £34m, a Cottagers club record. The 24-year-old academy graduate struggled for first-team opportunities in North London last season.

United consider building 100,000 seater stadium

Manchester United could construct a new 100,000-capacity stadium as part of the biggest regeneration project in Europe, sources have said. While a task force chaired by Lord Coe and featuring former United defender Gary Neville and Manchester mayor Andy Burnham is understood to have discussed a newly built stadium, redevelopment of Old Trafford would be a

cheaper option – estimated at £1.2bn rather than £2bn – albeit with complications such as the railway line that runs along one side of the current stadium.

United co-owner Sir Jim Ratcliffe has suggested the new stadium could regenerate the Old Trafford area in the same away London's Olympic stadium aimed to do with East London, although his suggestion that the project might be partly funded with taxpayers' money met with hostility in some quarters.

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