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# THE WEEK

22 MARCH 2025 | ISSUE 1532

THE BEST OF THE BRITISH AND INTERNATIONAL MEDIA

## Slashing the state Starmmer takes on Whitehall

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## What happened

## The welfare overhaul

The Government unveiled the biggest overhaul of the benefits system in a decade, which it said would save £5bn a year by 2030. Announcing the measures, which are expected to remove disability and incapacity benefits from up to a million people, Work and Pensions Secretary Liz Kendall said the system was “failing the very people it is supposed to help, and holding the country back”. According to the DWP, 700,000 more working-age people are claiming incapacity benefits now than before the pandemic.

The reforms include tighter eligibility rules for personal independence payments (PIPs), designed to cover the extra costs of living with a disability; a freeze on the health top-up to universal credit (UC) in real terms from next year, and a ban on under-22s claiming it. To offset the cuts, she announced an above-inflation rise to the standard rate of UC. The plans were heavily criticised by disability charities, and by some Labour MPs. Ed Balls, the former shadow chancellor, had warned that “cutting the benefits of the most vulnerable” is “not a Labour thing to do”.



Kendall: a “cruel” blow?

## What the editorials said

Kendall deserves praise for grasping this nettle, said The Times: one in ten working-age adults are now receiving health-related benefits (up from one in 13 before Covid), and the bill for health and disability benefits is projected to reach £100bn by 2030. Many of her reforms are sensible, such as a new “right to try”, enabling disabled people to try going back to work without risking losing their benefits. But she could have gone further, for instance by scrapping “discredited” work capability assessments – adding a reported 2,000 people a day on to sickness benefits – now, instead of in 2028. Kendall has made a start, said The Daily Telegraph; but her reforms don’t go far enough to “restore the system to sustainability”.

She had hoped to go further, said The Guardian: she had planned to freeze PIP payments. Labour MPs rightly put a stop to that, but Kendall’s plans will still deliver a “cruel” blow to hundreds of thousands of people. Those who don’t meet the new PIP eligibility criteria will lose £3,500 a year, for instance; and though the health top-up of UC for existing claimants is only being frozen, not cut, new claimants will get £2,444 a year less. Labour should rethink these “shameful” reforms.

## What happened

## Putin rejects ceasefire

In a 90-minute phone call with Donald Trump on Tuesday, Vladimir Putin rebuffed a US proposal for an immediate ceasefire in Ukraine, instead agreeing to a 30-day pause in attacks on energy infrastructure. Although Moscow broke that pledge within hours, the White House described it as the first step in a “movement to peace” that it hoped would eventually include a maritime ceasefire in the Black Sea and an end to fighting. Talks on those steps, it said, would begin immediately in Saudi Arabia. The Kremlin said that Putin had demanded that Ukraine be banned from rearming or mobilising during the partial truce, and had called for a “complete cessation” of Western military and intelligence assistance to Kyiv. Trump, however, denied that they’d discussed such aid.

Trump proposed the ceasefire last week after Kyiv agreed to it in principle. Putin, while not rejecting it outright, said the “root causes” of the war had to be tackled. Western leaders accused Putin of stalling for time and “playing games”.



Putin: “maximalist demands”

## What the editorials said

It seems Putin is ready to agree to a full ceasefire, said The Daily Telegraph – but only “on terms calculated to leave Ukraine at a severe disadvantage should hostilities resume”. He’s insisting on taking entire provinces of Ukraine, including territory his troops aren’t even occupying today. There’s no way Kyiv could accept such a one-sided deal, and nor should we expect it to. The UK and other European nations should make clear that they’ll keep sending arms to Ukraine, even if the US stops. Britain and Europe mustn’t allow themselves to be “strong-armed by Washington” into endorsing an unfair ceasefire, agreed The Observer. “Peace at any price is no peace at all.”

If Putin continues with his maximalist demands, it will be time for Trump “to drop the niceties and break out the sticks”, said the New York Post. Most Americans would back him. A new Gallup poll shows that 46% of them think the US isn’t doing enough to help Kyiv – the highest level since the poll began. Meanwhile, the share who think the US is doing too much has fallen from 37% in December to 30%. A majority – 53% – actually want to help Ukraine reclaim lost territory, even if it prolongs the war.

## It wasn’t all bad

The astronauts Suni Williams and Butch Wilmore finally arrived back on Earth on Tuesday, after being stuck for nine months on the International Space Station. The pair had left Earth in June last year, for what was supposed to be an eight-day mission, but their Boeing capsule suffered a fault and Nasa decided it was unsafe for them to travel back in it. They ended up having to stay there for 285 days, while Nasa arranged for a SpaceX craft to bring them home.

**Storrington in West Sussex has been named as the UK’s first “stork village”, in the wake of a successful breeding programme at the nearby Knepp Estate. The wading birds vanished from Britain’s skies some 609 years ago, but are thriving again at Knepp, where 53 storks fledged from wild nests in 2024. The designation makes Storrington and Knepp part of a network of 16 villages in Europe where stork habitats are being preserved. Isabella Tree, Knepp’s owner, now wants to set up webcams to beam footage of the nests into care homes or hospitals. “It’s the kind of soothing thing we should be watching,” she said.**



A piece of the Bayeux Tapestry that was stolen by Nazi researchers during the War has been rediscovered in Germany. The fragment was found in the state archives of Schleswig-Holstein, where a collection amassed by Karl Schladow, a textile archaeologist, had been held for decades. Schladow was a member of the Ahnenerbe, an SS-linked pseudo-scientific body that looked for evidence to back up the Nazi’s racial theories – and which was sent to examine the tapestry in 1941. The fragment is now slated to be returned to France.

## What the commentators said

The welfare state has become shockingly bloated in recent years, said Andrew Neil in the Daily Mail. The number of adults deemed eligible for PIPs is up 76% in five years; and government spending on sickness and incapacity benefits has risen from £46bn in 2019 to £65bn this year, and is projected to soon exceed the amount we spend on police, the courts and defence combined. Yet instead of seizing its opportunity for “radical reform”, Labour has tinkered around the edges. Kendall didn’t announce plans to review current claimants and weed out those gaming the system; nor did she freeze PIPs. All told, this package is a “damp squib”.

Kendall’s challenge was to “square the circle” between Labour’s aim to deliver social justice on the one hand, while sticking to its self-imposed fiscal rules on the other, said Patrick Butler in The Guardian. It isn’t clear she succeeded. Some of Britain’s poorest citizens are now facing the kind of “brutal cut” to their incomes that Labour spent 14 years in opposition denouncing; and the plans may not even deliver the savings promised. Worse, Kendall didn’t announce any steps to examine the underlying problems with the benefits system, said Stephen Bush in the FT. Why does the UK spend the same share of GDP on benefits as it did in 2007, but have higher rates of destitution? And why has Britain experienced a bigger increase in the number of people claiming disability and incapacity benefits than other wealthy nations?

Still, No. 10 is confident that these changes chime with public opinion, said George Eaton in The New Statesman. Keir Starmer has spoken of the “moral duty” to save the young from long-term worklessness; and he believes that the “vast majority” of voters don’t like the fact that one in eight young people are now Neets (not in employment, education or training), and will support moves to get people back into the labour force. For now, the polls suggest that No. 10 is right; but if disability activists take to the streets – as they did under Tony Blair – then public opinion could shift, and the rebellion brewing among Labour MPs could gain momentum.

## What the commentators said

Don’t hold your breath for peace in Ukraine, said Mikhail Zygar in The New York Times. I’ve been talking to Kremlin insiders who’ve known Russia’s president for a long time and they all agree: “Putin has come to love war and can no longer imagine a future without it.” He hasn’t given up on his dream of subjugating all of Ukraine, and war helps him suppress dissenting voices at home. Peace, on the other hand, would remove one of Russia’s few engines of economic growth and return hundreds of thousands of embittered veterans to Russian streets. Putin donned military uniform last week for the first time in this war, on a visit to the Kursk region – an “unmistakable sign of intent”. But Trump seems oblivious to Putin’s bad faith, said David Blair in The Daily Telegraph. He bullied President Zelensky into signing up to a ceasefire, yet glosses over Russian intransigence. Putin’s agreement to pause attacks on energy sites – a pledge matched by Kyiv – was a paltry concession: Ukraine’s long-range drone strikes on oil refineries in Russia have done more damage lately than Russia’s attacks on Ukraine’s grid.

The Trump-Putin phone call could have gone worse, said Katie Stallard in The New Statesman. Trump had caused some alarm in Kyiv in the days before the call by remarking that he and Putin intended to discuss “land” and “power plants” and “dividing up certain assets”. Zelensky can take comfort from the fact that Trump “does not yet seem to have agreed a grand bargain with Putin to carve up Ukraine” over the heads of its citizens. We now face the prospect of talks and war going on simultaneously for the foreseeable future, said Patrick Cockburn in The i Paper. That suits Russia, which is making some progress on the battlefield, even if it’s still a long way from a decisive victory. But Putin will need to take care not to overplay his hand with the US. He needs to “keep Trump on side” because it’s to his advantage to deal bilaterally with America, with minimal input from Ukraine or the European states of Nato. And that will require further concessions. “Trump will not want to be seen as the US president who lost Ukraine.”

## What next?

Kendall is now meeting Labour MPs in an effort to shore up support for her plans, says Politico. The depth of their ill feeling will only become clear in May, when they will vote on the changes. Many say they won’t make up their minds about how to vote until they see the impact assessment of the cuts, which is due to be published after next week’s Spring Statement.

Voter reaction to the reforms will be tested in a by-election due to be held in Runcorn, Cheshire, by 1 May. It was triggered by the resignation of Mike Amesbury, the former Labour MP convicted of assault last month. Polls suggest that Labour will face a stiff challenge from the Tories and Reform UK.

## What next?

The Kremlin says that Putin and Trump agreed to work together on “global security”, including in the Middle East and the Red Sea, reports Lisa Haseldine in The Spectator. They apparently also agreed to hold ice hockey matches between their two nations – a move that would delight the ice hockey-mad Putin and help end Moscow’s sporting isolation.

Ukraine has drawn up a series of red lines for a lasting peace deal, says The Independent. They include the ceding of no further territory and the return of tens of thousands of Ukrainian children abducted by Russia.

## THE WEEK

It’s not where you’d expect to find it, but one of the best places to look if you want to understand the popularity of Donald Trump is the Dorset town of Wareham, scene of a 45-year-old battle over a pedestrian level crossing. In the interests of safety, as The Times reports, rail bosses have long wanted to close it, but the KC employed by irate locals said this would breach the Equalities Act, and the local council turned down Network Rail’s most recent proposed solution: to add an ugly ramp to an existing Grade II-listed Victorian footbridge. What we see in Wareham are all the restrictive decencies of the modern liberal state, with each affected voice allowed to state its case and argue its corner. It is a grand expression of democratic accountability. And it ensured that the battle over the crossing drags on. There is, however, another quite distinct expression of democratic accountability: the electoral mandate – the assurance that the party elected by the voters will enact what it undertook to enact. And this becomes impossible, as Keir Starmer lamented last week laying out his plan for rebuilding Britain, when you have “a cottage industry of checkers and blockers slowing delivery... [when] parts of the state see their job as blocking the Government from doing the very things it was elected to do”. It felt like an homage to the US president, a recognition that Trump’s readiness to sweep away checks and blocks in the name of decisive government is the key to his appeal. Trouble is, the blocks aren’t bureaucrats: they’re part of the architecture of accountability.

**Jeremy O’Grady**

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## Controversy of the week

## Starmer vs. Whitehall

"Every new prime minister has an Elon Musk moment," said Simon Jenkins in *The Guardian*: "a sudden attack of frustration" that makes them want to take a "chainsaw" to the British state. Eight months into the job, Keir Starmer has already reached this slash-and-burn stage. In a wide-ranging speech last week, the PM laid out his vision to transform what he calls our "flabby" and "unfocused" state, and take on the "cottage industry of checkers and blockers slowing down delivery". He vowed to make the Civil Service leaner and more productive; to roll out AI across Whitehall; and to cut down on the number of quangos – starting with the abolition of NHS England (see page 20). Starmer's speech could have come straight from the mouth of Dominic Cummings, "self-proclaimed scourge of the public sector", said the *Daily Mail*. But will the PM have the guts to take on the "Blob"? His track record "is hardly encouraging": in the Government's first six months, it "created 25 new quangos and ordered 67 reviews and consultations", only adding to our already bloated bureaucracy. Still, if he manages to get the Blob "off the sofa", Starmer's "conversion from Corbynism to common sense politics will be complete".



The PM: taking on the "flabby" state

Many said the Starmer era would be "Tory-lite", said Nesrine Malik in *The Guardian*. "It's worse than that." With benefit cuts, the slashing of international aid and a harsh squeeze on public spending looming in next week's Spring Statement, Labour is now pursuing a right-wing agenda "the Conservatives could only dream of". It won't wash with the public, said Dan Hodges in *The Mail* on Sunday. Starmer can dress his reforms up as "a leaner state" or a "state rejuvenated by the white heat of AI all he likes", but after years of watching their communities crumble, "the British people are simply not going to put up with another round of austerity driven erosion of their basic services".

But spending doesn't guarantee better results, said Martin Kettle in *The Guardian*. The British state is bigger than ever, employing "more than five million people", a million more than in 2000. Yet only 6% of people in a recent poll thought public services were working well. Starmer, unlike Musk, believes in the power of government to improve lives; but he thinks it has to change. Over the years, I've heard the same complaints about the Civil Service from Labour and Tory politicians, said Andrew Rawnsley in *The Observer*: "the charge list includes inertia, group-think, arse-covering, being too comfortable with mediocrity and obsessing over process at the expense of outcomes". Starmer wants a slimmer, less cautious Civil Service that "weeds out its underperformers". But so have many before him. Reform requires "remorseless attention to detail and sustained effort over many years". If it were easy, successive PMs "wouldn't have been gnashing their teeth about it for so long".

## Farming subsidies cut

England's largest agricultural subsidy has been abruptly closed to new applications, because its £1.05bn budget is exhausted. The Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) scheme was designed to replace EU subsidies; it incentivises farmers to maintain soil, hedgerows, wildflower meadows and other natural assets, rather than simply rewarding them for owning farmland. No notice was given of the cut-off and, for the first time, the Government has hinted the subsidies, which support the majority of UK farms, could end entirely. Environment Minister Daniel Zeichner said that farm incomes would not be "supported for ever by the public purse". Currently, the Government pays out about £2.4bn per year in support to farms in England. New SFI plans will be set out in June; they are likely to be targeted at less well-off farmers.

## Economy shrinks

The UK's economy shrank by 0.1% in January, according to data from the ONS. The contraction was unexpected, as the economy had expanded by 0.2% in the three months to January; it was driven by a sharp drop in manufacturing output. The news poses more difficulties for the Chancellor, Rachel Reeves, whose key objective is to grow the economy.

## Spirit of the age

One of London's leading comedy clubs says it is banning punters who have had Botox. The Top Secret Comedy Club in Covent Garden says that having audiences full of people with faces that have been "frozen" by the injections alters the atmosphere in the venue, and that comedians can't bounce off the audience's reactions if faces don't move. It says guests must now take an "expression test" on arrival.

Virtual reality headsets have been included in the basket of 752 commonly bought goods that the ONS uses to measure inflation for the first time. Other additions include yoga mats, men's slider sandals and pre-cooked pulled pork. Gammon joints, DVD rentals and ads in local papers have been removed.

## Good week for:

**King Charles**, after his music radio show reached No. 1 in Apple Music's podcast chart. In *The King's Music Room*, released to mark Commonwealth Day last week, he introduced 17 songs that had meaning for him, ranging from Bob Marley and the Wailers' *Could You Be Loved* to Beyoncé's *Crazy in Love* and Dame Kiri Te Kanawa's traditional Maori song *E Te Iwi E*.

**Gardeners**, with news that this winter's series of cold snaps and the recent dry spell are likely to lead to fewer slugs this year.

## Bad week for:

**Donatella Versace**, who stepped down as creative director of the Versace fashion empire. She is said to have repeatedly clashed with Capri Holdings – which acquired the business in a £1.67bn deal in 2018 – over falling revenues. Versace, 69, had run the firm since the murder of her brother Gianni in 1997.

**The French**, after the White House rejected a suggestion that the Statue of Liberty be returned to Paris. A French MEP had argued that since the US had opted to "side with tyrants", Liberty (gifted by France 140 years ago) would be happier back in Europe. The White House hit back, saying that "low-level" French politicians should remember that if it weren't for the US, the French would be "speaking German right now" – and "be very grateful".

**Nathan Gill**, the former leader of Reform UK in Wales, who was charged with bribery. Allegedly, the former Brexit Party MEP had accepted money in return for making statements about Ukraine that would benefit Moscow. The alleged offences took place from 2018 to 2020. Gill has indicated that he will plead not guilty.

## Poll watch

Only one in three Britons would support conscription if the UK were at war. Over-60s are the keenest backers of compulsory military service (47% support it), whereas only 20% of those who are under 26 back it. Among military-aged men (21-36), a quarter would be willing to fight in Ukraine. *More in Common/The Daily Telegraph*

The proportion of British men aged 15 to 24 who believe women are just as capable as men in leadership roles has fallen from 82% in 2019 to 51% today. In Germany, the proportion of young men who believe "a woman's place is in the home" has surged from 5% in 2021 to 22% today; in France it has gone from 11% to 25%. *Kantar Media/The Times*

## Nuuk

**Trump spurned:** The heads of the five main political parties in Greenland have united to condemn as “unacceptable” Donald Trump’s calls for US annexation of the island. Their statement came the day after a general election in which the centre-right Democrats won a surprise victory, tripling its share of the vote to 30%. Democrats’ leader Jens-Frederik Nielsen, who has also condemned Trump’s calls for a US takeover, is likely to become the next PM, and has begun coalition negotiations. In common with most of Greenland’s 41,000-strong electorate, his party favours independence from Denmark, but advocates a slow and careful route to it. In a White House meeting with the Nato secretary general, Mark Rutte, this week, the US president doubled down, saying the annexation is something he thinks “will happen”.



## Budapest

**Pride ban:** On Tuesday, Hungary’s parliament passed a bill banning gay pride marches, the latest move in the crackdown by Viktor Orbán’s coalition government on LGBTQ+ rights.

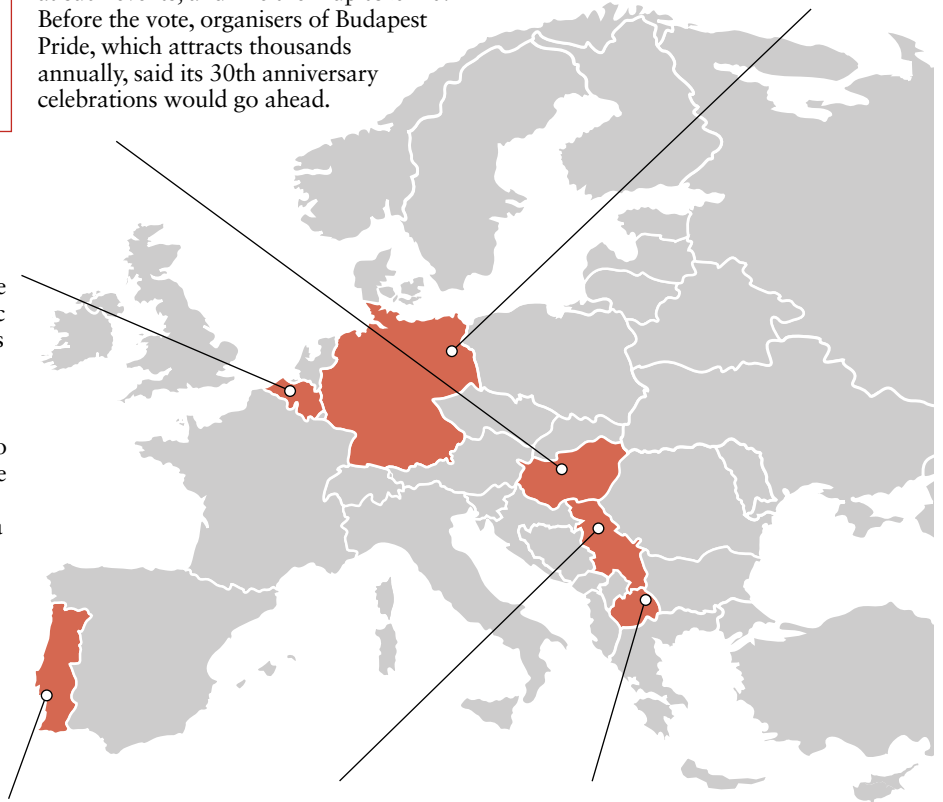
The bill extends 2021’s controversial “child protection” law – which bans “depiction or promotion” of homosexuality in content available to minors – to cover public events. It also allows police to use facial recognition software to identify attendees at such events, and fine them up to £420. Before the vote, organisers of Budapest Pride, which attracts thousands annually, said its 30th anniversary celebrations would go ahead.

## Berlin

**Fiscal boost:** “Germany is back,” declared conservative leader Friedrich Merz, after his Christian Democrats, backed by the Social Democrats and the Greens, voted to scrap the “debt brake” imposed by Angela Merkel in the 2008 financial crisis. Merz is soon likely to be elected chancellor, and this clears the way for his planned €500bn investment fund to pay for a vast increase in military and infrastructure spending. The brake limited new borrowing to 0.35% of GDP. Enshrined in Germany’s Basic Law, it required a two-thirds majority to overturn it. Merz achieved this by holding the vote before the convening of the new parliament on 25 March, when an enhanced minority of far-right and far-left MPs would have been able to block it.

## Brussels

**Rwanda sanctions:** At the urging of Belgium, EU ministers have agreed to impose sanctions against military officials in Rwanda, which they claim is fuelling the conflict raging in neighbouring Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The EU accuses Rwanda of funding M23, the rebel group that has fought the Congolese army for a decade over access to the mineral deposits on DRC’s eastern edge. It also claims, as do the US and UN, that Rwandan troops have been fighting alongside M23 in a renewed offensive in which they have seized an area the size of Greece, and in which thousands have been killed and millions displaced. Rwanda denies the accusations, and has severed diplomatic ties with Belgium, its former colonial ruler. The decision to impose sanctions was made ahead of this week’s peace talks between the presidents of the DRC and Rwanda (M23 pulled out at the last minute).



## Lisbon

**Government collapses:** Portugal is to hold its third election in as many years in May, after its centre-right government collapsed over corruption allegations levelled at the PM. Luís Montenegro, who heads the Democratic Alliance, has led a fragile coalition government for just 11 months. He called a confidence vote after the opposition Socialists threatened an inquiry into his family business, a data protection consultancy said to have been favoured by government contracts. In the vote, the Socialists and other left-wing parties joined together with Chega, a far-right populist party, to oust Montenegro. The previous PM, Socialist António Costa, also resigned under the shadow of a corruption inquiry. Disillusion with corruption and high taxes has eroded confidence in the political system among voters. Polls suggest that the next election will also prove inconclusive and lead to another weak government.



## Belgrade

**Giant protests:** Around 325,000 people – about one in 20 of Serbia’s entire population – marched peacefully through Belgrade on

Saturday, in the biggest anti-government march in Serbia’s modern history. Student-led protests have been growing for months, in a major challenge to the 11-year rule of the increasingly authoritarian pro-Russian president, Aleksandar Vucic. The weekend also saw large-scale anti-Russia, pro-Europe protests in Hungary and Romania. In Budapest, tens of thousands of people marched against the 15-year rule of Viktor Orbán, Vladimir Putin’s closest EU ally.

## Kocani, North Macedonia

**Nightclub blaze:** A devastating fire that broke out this week in a nightclub in the North Macedonian town of Kocani, killing at least 59 people, has triggered huge anti-corruption protests across the nation. More than 500 people were attending a hip-hop concert at the Pulse nightclub when special-effects pyrotechnics set the roof on fire. The authorities have attributed the deaths and injuries to the stampede that ensued, as well as to smoke inhalation and burns. A former carpet warehouse, the club reportedly had inadequate fireproofing, no fire alarm, only two fire extinguishers and just one exit. Prime Minister Hristijan Mickoski has let it be known that the club had an invalid licence obtained through bribery of economy ministry officials; he would have “no mercy”, he said, in pursuing those responsible. Police have detained 20 people, including a former economy minister.

**Washington DC**

**Legal showdown:** The Trump administration has been accused of violating the order of a federal court judge by transferring hundreds of Venezuelans to a “mega jail” in El Salvador. Donald Trump had sought to sidestep immigration rules by using powers granted by the 1798 Alien Enemies Act to deport the migrants, who are accused of

being gang members. To justify invoking an act that is only supposed to be used in times of war or invasion, he said the suspects were members of a hostile foreign force (the notorious Tren de Aragua gang). Civil rights groups were outraged, however, and the following day, US district judge James Boasberg ordered a block on the deportations, pending a hearing. When he was informed that some flights were already in the air, he gave a verbal order that they should turn back. But the flights landed anyway, and a video later emerged of prisoners being marched away in shackles. “Oopsie... Too late,” tweeted El Salvador’s president, Nayib Bukele, a post that was later shared by White House officials.

The Trump administration claimed the verbal order had no legal basis. Trump himself said Boasberg was a “troublemaker”, and that he should be impeached – prompting a rare rebuke from John Roberts, the chief justice of the Supreme Court.

**Montecito, California**

**Harry files:** Documents relating to Prince Harry’s visa application were made public for the first time this week. The right-wing Heritage Foundation had argued in a Freedom of Information request that the public had a right to know how Harry came to be granted a visa, despite having been a drug user (in his memoir he admitted to taking cocaine and marijuana). It suggested that he’d either lied on his visa application, or been given preferential treatment by the Department of Homeland Security. But although a judge did agree last week that papers related to the case should be released, he ruled that these should be heavily redacted to protect the prince from harassment and “unwanted” media attention, and his visa application was not among them.

**La Estanzuela, Mexico**

**Mass grave:** Mexicans searching for their missing relatives have discovered what they claim is a cartel “extermination camp” on an abandoned ranch outside Guadalajara. Visiting the ranch following a tip-off, the group found three underground cremation ovens, along with burnt human remains, bone shards, around 200 pairs of shoes and hundreds of personal items, including notebooks, underwear, rucksacks and children’s toys. They believe the site may have been used by the Jalisco New Generation Cartel – one of Mexico’s most violent criminal organisations – both to train their members and to torture and kill their victims. The site was not unknown to police: in a raid last September, they had made ten arrests and released two hostages. It remains unclear how they missed clear evidence of sustained violence at the compound.

**Butler County, Missouri**

**Killer storms:** At least 40 people were killed, and many more injured, when tornadoes ripped through parts of the Midwestern, Southern and Southeastern United States last weekend, flattening hundreds of buildings and leaving thousands of people without power.

At least 12 people died in Missouri, the state worst hit by the twisters, while dust storms in Kansas and Texas caused road traffic accidents in which a further dozen people died. Other states badly affected included Mississippi, where six people died, and Oklahoma, where winds fanned nearly 150 wildfires and killed four people. Alabama and Arkansas each reported three fatalities.

**Washington DC**

**Voice of America silenced:** President Trump has signed an executive order ending funding for Voice of America – the global news broadcaster founded in 1942 to counter Nazi propaganda – as well as Radio Free Asia, Radio Free Europe and other services overseen by the US Agency for Global Media (USAGM). Trump accused VOA of being “radical” and “anti-Trump”; 1,300 of its employees have been put on leave. USAGM is known for funding independent reporting in authoritarian regimes; news it was being dismantled was welcomed in Russia and China. Meanwhile, Trump’s campaign against diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) policies reached the Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia, where some 400,000 US veterans are buried. This week, its website was stripped of sections highlighting the service of the black and female soldiers buried there, including General Colin L. Powell, the first black chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

**Belém, Brazil****Controversial highway:**

Authorities in northern Brazil have been fiercely criticised for clearing tens of thousands of acres of protected Amazon rainforest to make way for a new four-lane highway, apparently as part of their preparations for the Cop30 climate summit that is being held in the city of Belém this autumn. Dozens of infrastructure projects are being undertaken to prepare the port city for the arrival of tens of thousands of Cop delegates: new hotels are being built, and its airport’s capacity is being doubled. However, the state government of Pará has denied that the eight-mile-long road around the city was approved for Cop30; it says that work on the road had started before the summit location was confirmed.



## Deir al-Balah, Palestinian Territories

**War resumes:** Israel has resumed its military offensive in Gaza at “full force”, and it will not stop until it has achieved its “war aims”, its PM Benjamin Netanyahu declared this week. He was speaking after Israeli forces launched a wave of deadly air strikes that killed more than 970 people in 48 hours, according to the Hamas-run health ministry. Israel insisted it had targeted senior Hamas officials; six were killed. Netanyahu (pictured) said this was “only the beginning” and, on Tuesday, new evacuation orders were issued for parts of Gaza.



An Israeli official said that the US had “given the green light” to the air strikes, and blamed the ending of the ceasefire on Hamas’s refusal to release the remaining 59 hostages in Gaza. The militants released 33 hostages during the first phase of the ceasefire, which ended on 1 March, and had wanted to enter the agreed second phase, which involved the total withdrawal of Israeli troops from Gaza along with further hostage releases. However, Israel had called for phase one to be extended, to allow more exchanges of hostages and prisoners without the withdrawal of troops. Families of some hostages have accused Netanyahu of “giving up” on their loved ones.

## Damascus

**New constitution:** Syria’s interim president, Ahmed al-Sharaa, has issued a temporary constitution to guide the country until elections are held in five years. It places executive power in his hands, and upholds the rule of Islamic law, but it also guarantees freedom of the press and of expression, safeguards women’s rights to work and education, and promises protections for minorities. Sharaa hailed the declaration as the start of a “new history” for Syria. However, his critics say that it gives him far too much power – including the right to appoint a third of MPs, and the members of the committee who select the rest. They also note that it was issued days after the massacre of members of the minority Alawite sect. The Kurds declared that the constitution did not reflect the “diversity” of Syria.

## Tokyo

**Missile plans:** Japan is planning to deploy long-range missiles on its southern island of Kyushu, amid growing fears of a conflict in the Taiwan Strait. With a range of 1,000km, the missiles could hit North Korea and coastal China, and would beef up the defences of the strategically important Okinawa island chain to the south. A spokesman said that Japan needed to boost its “counterstrike capabilities”. Tokyo recently announced that it is increasing defence spending from 1.6% to 2% of GDP by 2027.

## Sana’a

**Houthis targeted:** The US launched a wave of strikes against Yemen’s Houthi rebels this week in which at least 53 people were reportedly killed. The US and UK began striking Houthi targets in 2023, in response to the rebels’ attacks on Red Sea shipping that it said were in solidarity with Hamas. The Houthis paused their attacks when Israel and Hamas agreed a ceasefire, but last week they said that they were resuming operations, owing to Israel’s decision to block the supply of aid to Gaza. Trump had threatened to unleash “hell” on the Houthis if they did not desist. But the US strikes may also have been designed as a show of force to the Houthis’ backers in Tehran, whom Trump is hoping to pressure into a new nuclear deal.



## Pretoria

**Ambassador expelled:** Opposition parties in South Africa have urged President Ramaphosa not to be bullied by the US, in response to Washington’s expulsion of the country’s

ambassador. Ebrahim Rasool (above) was given 72 hours to leave after Secretary of State Marco Rubio described him on X as “a race-baiting politician” who “hates” the US and its president. He’d reportedly called the Mga movement “supremacist”. Trump has been a vocal critic of a South African law allowing land to be seized without compensation in some circumstances, and he recently cut aid to South Africa.

## Quetta, Pakistan

**Train hijacked:** About 350 passengers were rescued last week from a hijacked train in the mountainous Balochistan province of Pakistan. The train had been seized by members of the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), who demanded the release of Baloch militants from jails; instead, Pakistan sent in troops. Over the next 36 hours, 26 security personnel and passengers and 33 rebel fighters were killed. It was the deadliest in a series of attacks by the separatist group, which Islamabad says is being aided by Pakistan’s “eastern neighbour” (India) and Afghan “handlers”.

**Ian McKellen's advice**

When Ian McKellen decided to come out in 1988, Section 28 was banning the promotion of homosexual lifestyles in schools; and many other gay actors were too scared to leave the closet. (Simon Callow, he notes, was an exception: "He refused to see the closet at all.") Alec Guinness took him out to lunch to advise him against "getting involved in politics"; and, even at 90, decades after his arrest for "importuning men for immoral purposes", John Gielgud refused publicly to acknowledge his support for Stonewall. Things have improved in Britain since then, says McKellen, now 85. Yet there still hasn't been an openly gay best actor Oscar winner, or Premier League footballer. It's a pity, he told Tim Teeman in *The Sunday Times*. "I have never met anybody who came out who regretted it." So to anyone famous he has this advice: "Being in the closet is silly – there's no need for it. Don't listen to your advisers, listen to your heart. Listen to your gay friends who know better. Come out. Get into the sunshine."

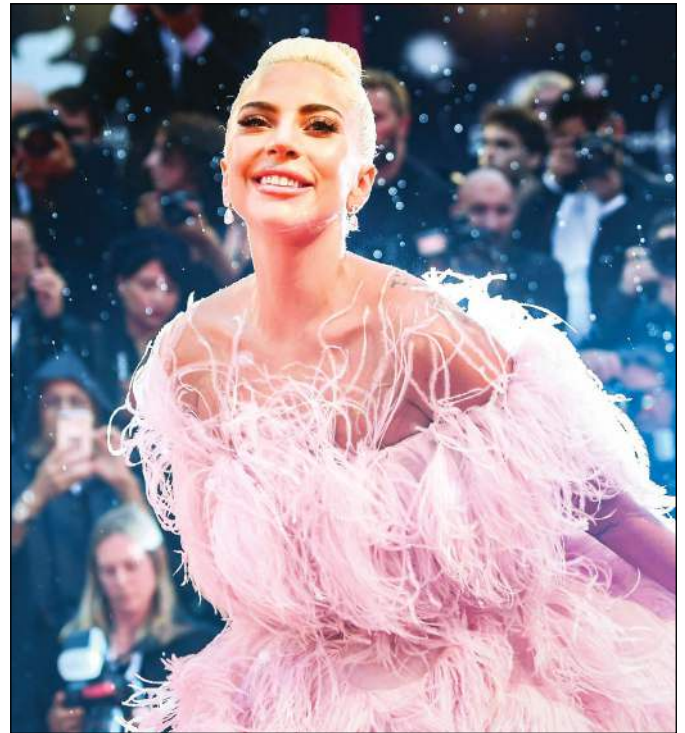
**Enraging Donald Trump**

When Tina Brown took over as editor of *The New Yorker* in 1992, its staff were appalled, she says on her Substack. "I was, after all, the lady editor who, 11 months before, had put the naked and very pregnant Demi Moore on the cover of *Vanity Fair*. *Where was the gravitas?*" But they came to accept her, and she loved her six years in the role.

One highlight was in 1996, when she published a "stinging profile of Donald Trump" by the writer Mark Singer. The piece, she recalls, contained "the classic Trumpism ('This is off the record but you can use it')". Trump was livid, and called her "to deliver a tirade, shouting, 'You told me I would love the piece and you lied!'" He also sent a note to Singer reading: "Mark, you are a total loser! And your book and writing sucks!" Framed, it now hangs in Singer's bedroom.

**A voice for the village idiot**

Lorraine Kelly is the popular host of her eponymous ITV show, says Simon Hattenstone in *The Guardian*. But she has faced a backlash of late, for not presenting it for the full five days a week: an X/Twitter account logs her absences, and she has faced online pile-ons. Kelly says the criticism has been "hurtful", and unfair: she has been absent partly because her mother has been ill. But we live in toxic times, and she knows what's to blame. "*That!*," she says, pointing at her mobile phone. "All the villages had idiots and extremists, but they were sitting there on their own. Now they've found their kindred spirits on this bloody thing." Her voice rises. "Jesus Christ, David Attenborough gets people being shitty to him! I mean, *David Attenborough*, who is holding the universe together! People shout at him – climate-change deniers, hunters have a go at him. And you think, well if they're having a go at him, what's the point?"



After gate-crashing "formulaic Planet Pop" in 2008, Lady Gaga rose to become the mainstream's "resident freak", says Jonathan Dean in *The Sunday Times*. Her multi-octave voice and OTT outfits won her legions of fans; and she has now sold 170 million records. Yet she hasn't relished all aspects of her 20-year career. It's not that she isn't grateful, she insists; it's the lack of normalcy that comes with fame. "Eating at the dinner table with your family, it never happens," she has said. "Being in a room by yourself never happens." Instead, you're "surrounded by systems figuring out how to monetise and market you, to turn you into an enterprise". She has, however, managed to retain some control, by insisting on choosing her own outfits – with some outlandish results. In 2010, she turned up to an awards ceremony in a dress made of raw meat; on stage, she has worn bras that spit fire. "Sometimes I was retaliating," she explains. "There are all these beauty standards that I would have had to adhere to if I was trying to look perfect, in some way that was defined by the patriarchy forever ago. I found freedom in not trying to stick to those standards that felt really hard for me. I wasn't considered the most beautiful girl in the room, so my superpower was my creativity. It meant that I could avoid being part of a race that I didn't want to run as a woman."

**Castaway of the week**

*This week's edition of Radio 4's Desert Island Discs featured the conservation biologist Professor Carl Jones*

- 1 *Peter and the Wolf, Op. 67* by Sergei Prokofiev, performed by Sir Ralph Richardson and the London Symphony Orchestra (cond. Sir Malcolm Sargent)
- 2 *Under Milk Wood* by Dylan Thomas, performed by Richard Burton
- 3 *Sex & Drugs & Rock & Roll* by Ian Dury and Chaz Jankel, performed by Ian Dury and the Blockheads
- 4 *La Rivière Noir*, written and performed by John Kenneth Nelson
- 5\* *Asimbonanga* by Johnny Clegg, performed by Johnny Clegg and Savuka
- 6 *Sega accordéon*, traditional, performed by La Troupe de l'Union
- 7 *Londonderry Air*, traditional, performed by Beatrice Harrison
- 8 *Clear Sky*, written and performed by Catrin Finch

**Book:** *The Complete Works of Dylan Thomas*

**Luxury:** a good pair of binoculars \* Choice if allowed only one record

**Viewpoint:****Social media fanatics**

"It feels like the new 21st century midlife crisis isn't buying a motorbike or having an affair; it's becoming a single-issue fanatic, constantly weeping, or shouting, or speechifying on social media. Within my social circle, I have people who, ten years ago, were posting about every aspect of their life – jolly, sad, ridiculous – but are now only posting about Israel, or Gaza, or trans rights, or vaccines, or the Deep State, or racism, or neurodivergence, or child abuse gangs. They have all found their Uni-Cause. They're 'doing their own research' and 'hooking up with like-minded people'. The Uni-Cause has replaced everything else." *Caitlin Moran in The Times*

**Farewell**

**Group Captain John Hemingway DFC**, the last known Battle of Britain pilot, died 17 March, aged 105.


**Stanley Jaffe**, producer of *Kramer vs. Kramer* and *Fatal Attraction*, died 10 March, aged 84.

**Jane Reed CBE**, inspirational editor of *Woman's Own*, died 27 February, aged 84.

**Fred Stolle**, tennis player and commentator, died 5 March, aged 86.

**Marian Turski**, historian and Holocaust survivor, died 18 February, aged 98.





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# Killer asteroids

*The threat posed to Earth by a newly discovered asteroid has been downgraded. But others could be headed our way*

## What was the recent scare all about?

It was caused by a football pitch-sized asteroid designated 2024 YR4. Detected last December by a telescope in Chile, the space rock was flagged for its trajectory – which put it on track to possibly hit Earth on 22 December 2032, and for its size: it is 130 to 300ft in size, big enough to “collapse residential structures across a city”, as Nasa put it. The space agency initially put the chance of an impact at 1%. The odds soon jumped to 3.1%, or one in 32, the highest-threat asteroid ever detected. But after closer study of its orbit, the threat of a hit was downgraded to a negligible 0.004%. While humanity’s plans for Christmas 2032 were saved, the scare highlighted a threat that scientists say needs more focus: the millions of giant rocks that are hurtling through space, some of which may be on a collision course with our planet. “Take it as a warning shot across our bow,” said astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson. “These things are out there.”



“These things are out there”

## How many space rocks pose a threat?

Nasa’s Centre for Near Earth Object Studies (CNEOS) tracks more than 37,900 asteroids whose trajectories approach Earth’s orbit. About a third are 30ft wide or less; many are the size of a car or smaller and pose no risk, because they will burn up in our atmosphere. At the other extreme are “planet killers”: asteroids a kilometre or more across that could potentially wipe out civilisation. About 900 have been identified. In between are a range of potential threats. A 160ft-wide asteroid could cause “local devastation”; those are thought to strike once every 1,000 years. A 500ft-wide rock could inflict mass casualties across a metropolitan area; those arrive every 20,000 years. Of course, “these numbers are very approximate”, said planetary geologist Gordon Osinski, “and they don’t really help us figure out when the next one might happen”.

## When did the last one hit?

On 15 February 2013, a roughly 60ft-wide asteroid entered the atmosphere and exploded 18.6 miles above the Russian city of Chelyabinsk. It set off a blinding flash and a shockwave that damaged 7,320 buildings over 200 square miles, and injured more than 1,600 people, many of them hit by shattered glass. The light from the blast was like “the end of the world”, said Valentina Nikolayeva, a teacher. In 1908, a 130ft-wide asteroid exploded six miles above a remote stretch of Siberia, releasing 185 times more energy than the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima. Some 800 square miles of forest were levelled in the so-called Tunguska event. Still, that rock was a pebble compared with the one, six to nine miles wide, that wiped out the dinosaurs 66 million years ago (see box). There’s no current fear of anything of that magnitude hitting Earth, but other Tunguska-sized threats are out there.

## Can we stop them?

Possibly. But first we have to see them coming. In 2005, the US Congress directed Nasa to find and track, by 2020, 90% of near-Earth

objects – asteroids or comets that come within 30 million miles of our planet’s orbit – that are 460 feet or larger. Right now “we’re at something like 45%”, said CNEOS director Paul Chodas. Nasa has built a network of telescopes, including the one in Chile that detected 2024 YR4, to identify threats. An infrared space telescope, NEO Surveyor, that will further boost detection, is scheduled for launch in 2027. When a new object is found, data is shared with a global web of space agencies and observatories that go to work determining its shape, size and orbital path. If one is judged to be headed for Earth, the next task would be to try to alter its path – something Nasa recently proved feasible.

## How did Nasa do that?

In 2022, it launched the golf cart-sized Double Asteroid Redirection Test (Dart) spacecraft, which slammed into Dimorphos, a 525ft “moonlet asteroid”, at 14,000 miles per hour. The collision, which took place ten months’ journey away in the Didymos system, successfully slowed the asteroid down and altered the projectile’s orbit. Researchers are also studying the use of a “gravitational tractor”, a spacecraft that would orbit alongside an asteroid, exerting gravitational pull that would gradually alter the rock’s course. All these efforts require years of advance planning and may not be effective against a giant asteroid. If a space rock is too large for deflection – or due to hit with relatively short notice – humanity would need to use a nuclear bomb to deflect or vaporise it.

## Would a nuclear bomb work?

A 2021 study showed that a one-megaton bomb launched at least two months before impact could annihilate a 330ft asteroid. But dealing with a dinosaur-killer-sized one would be immensely difficult, probably requiring the Earth’s entire nuclear arsenal, according to Andrew Rivkin, of Johns Hopkins Applied Physics Laboratory. And that might just turn one large asteroid into 1,000 smaller ones – like a radioactive shotgun shell. Besides, setting off a nuclear bomb in space “could be very awkward geopolitically”, says Robin George Andrews, author of *How to Kill an Asteroid*.

## Are different nations working together on this?

The Chelyabinsk explosion led to the creation of Nasa’s Planetary Defence, in part to link efforts with groups such as the UN-sponsored International Asteroid Warning Network. And last year, for the first time, international representatives attended Nasa’s biennial Planetary Defence Interagency Tabletop Exercise, which modelled how to deal with the (hypothetical) discovery of a massive asteroid with a 72% chance of impacting Earth in 2038. Scientists say this cooperation is a step in the right direction, but global asteroid defence is still in its infancy. What’s the best approach? Who would be in charge? “Asteroid impacts are one of the few natural disasters that we actually have the means to both foresee and prevent,” said Nasa aerospace engineer Brent Barbee. We must be “as prepared as possible”.

## The Chicxulub impact

Some 66 million years ago, an asteroid at least six miles wide slammed into Mexico’s Yucatán Peninsula. The impact dug a crater 125 miles wide and 12 miles deep, known as the Chicxulub crater (now partly underwater and filled in with sediment). It triggered earthquakes and tsunamis, and firestorms that may have spanned the globe. Gas, soot and dust blanketed the planet, blotting out the Sun and sending global temperatures plummeting. That extinction event wiped out 76% of life on Earth – including the dinosaurs. But some experts believe the impact would have been far less calamitous if the rock had landed elsewhere. A 2017 study concluded that the asteroid struck a spot unusually rich in hydrocarbons, which worsened the blackout effect. The dinosaurs might have survived if not for that happenstance, the researchers believe, and the rise of the mammals – including humans – might never have occurred. So it “is maybe a lucky coincidence that everything came into place like it is today”, said geochemist Mario Fischer-Gödde.

## Europe is fooling itself on defence...

**Hans Kundnani**

*The New Statesman*

European leaders are facing up to the reality of a dangerous new world – or so they keep telling us. But to me their approach to Ukraine reeks of denial, says Hans Kundnani. The idea they can go on giving military support without US backing is pure wishful thinking. They say they want European “boots on the ground” in Ukraine as a safeguard for any peace deal: even if Putin were to accept this, would they really want to go ahead now that Trump says the only security guarantee he’ll offer Ukraine is the presence of US contractors extracting rare earth minerals? What if Russia then killed British troops? Should the US not treat this as a strike on a Nato partner and come to our aid, it would herald the end of the alliance: we’d have to back down or declare war on Russia. Conversely, if talks break down and Ukraine opts to fight on, would Europe really go on giving support to Kyiv, knowing that Ukraine was losing the war even with US support? That would set us at odds with Trump, and might lead him to abandon Europe entirely. Here’s the reality: there is no way Europe can continue supporting Ukraine without endangering its own security.

## ... and on being able to profit by going green

**Ross Clark**

*The Spectator*

So much for Europe’s dream of profiting from the technologies of the future, says Ross Clark. Northvolt, the Swedish electric-vehicle battery-maker and flagship of the continent’s green ambitions, has filed for bankruptcy. Truthfully, the writing had long been on the wall. The company just couldn’t compete with China, which accounts for over three-quarters of global EV battery production, thanks to its massive state subsidies, control of nickel and cobalt markets and near-monopoly on the material used for anodes and cathodes. China has also patented a new form of battery, using lithium iron phosphate: it has a longer life span and is cheaper to produce. In fairness, Northvolt did try to develop an even better type of battery using sodium-ion, but it ran out of funds before it could perfect it. Yet even if it had succeeded, it would have been hamstrung by energy costs vastly higher than China’s, where 60% of energy still comes from cheap coal. Europe may set the net-zero targets, but it’s China that’s securing the green jobs and profits. And “that’s how it looks like being for the foreseeable future”.

## No one really knows the cost of red tape

**Robert Colville**

*The Sunday Times*

Labour is taking an axe to red tape and will slash businesses’ compliance costs by a full 25%. Sounds great, says Robert Colville. The problem is that we’ve no idea what those costs actually amount to. All the impact assessments of the costs are wildly inaccurate – the numbers often thrown together to justify decisions already taken. Take MiFID II, the huge set of financial reforms implemented in 2018. “Anyone in the City” would put the annual cost well into the billions, yet the official estimate is just £105.2m – and slapdash form-filling means it’s actually listed as £105.20. Or take the second-staircase rule brought in after the Grenfell fire, to aid evacuations. It included the cost of building extra stairs, but didn’t take account of lost floorspace. Do that and the estimated annual cost of £268m was closer to £2bn. Official estimates of the compliance costs of the new Employment Rights Bill look equally wayward. “If Starmer is serious about cutting the costs of regulation, he needs to get serious about measuring them.”

## It’s good to see the aid gravy train derailed

**Ian Birrell**

*The i Paper*

The Western aid boom is faltering: the US has frozen most of its foreign aid contracts; the UK, France, Sweden and Germany are slashing their budgets. Cue much lamenting and cries of betrayal. But actually, we should welcome this development, says Ian Birrell. Aid cash is sprayed around the world, even to nations with their own aid agencies and space programmes, in ways that are deeply wasteful and patronising. The sector has become a “gravy train”. The claim by former foreign secretary David Miliband that the cuts are “devastating for people who need more help” would cut more ice were he not taking home some £1m a year as head of his aid charity. Same goes for Save the Children: it has eight staff based in London on six-figure salaries. It would be one thing if all this cash – the total given in overseas aid by 32 donor nations has risen almost threefold this century – worked miracles: too often, it fuels corruption and bad governance. Take Rwanda: its president, Paul Kagame, runs a brutal dictatorship and sponsors Arsenal FC to the tune of millions, yet he is handed £1bn a year by Western donors. Cracking down on money laundering at home would do far more to aid poor nations than this “deluded neo-colonialism”.

### IT MUST BE TRUE... I read it in the tabloids

Tall men in the Hertfordshire village of Flamstead are being terrorised by a rampaging hawk. So far this month, 20 men – most above average height – report being targeted by a Harris’s hawk, which swoops on unsuspecting victims and claws at the backs of their heads. “It’s moving around the village,” said one resident. “My mum wants me to go out with a bike helmet,” said another.



A Japanese park measuring just 2.6 square feet has been named the world’s smallest by Guinness World Records. The “pocket park”, in the town of Nagaizumi, amounts to little more than a wooden stool and a clump of grass surrounded by bricks – but has proved a hit with locals and Instagrammers alike.

**Vaccine Drive; Laboratory Place; and Virology Grove** – these are some of the names bestowed upon streets in a new Glasgow housing estate. The roads in Ashlar Village, Ruchill, have been so named because the development lies on the site of a former hospital, built in 1900 to deal with infectious disease. But the choices have divided opinion: one social media user called the names “crazy”; another said “be thankful there isn’t a Dysentery Drive”.

A top Bulgarian football club held a minute’s silence on Sunday – in honour of a former player who turned out to be alive and well. FC Arda Kardzhali paid tribute to Petko Ganchev, 78, before their 1-1 draw with Levski Sofia; when Ganchev himself returned home to watch the match, he found his wife in a panic. The club retracted its tribute at full-time, and stated: “We wish Petko Ganchev many more years of health.”



## The detention of Mahmoud Khalil: an assault on free speech?

You have to watch what you say in America these days, said Andrew Sullivan on [Substack](#). Hold the wrong views or turn up to the wrong protest rally and you could find yourself chucked out of the country, even if you're a legal permanent resident and have committed no crime. Just ask Mahmoud Khalil. Immigration officers arrested the Syrian-born pro-Palestinian campus activist earlier this month in his flat in Manhattan, and whisked him off to a detention facility in Louisiana. Pending the result of a legal battle over his future, he's set to be deported – and other student visa and green-card holders could potentially face the same threat.

The Trump administration has launched a “McCarthyite” AI-assisted programme called “Catch and Revoke”, which will scan social media accounts and news reports for signs of non-citizens allegedly engaging in antisemitism. “This is the first arrest of many to come,” the president posted on social media following Khalil's detention. “We will find, apprehend, and deport these terrorist sympathisers from our country – never to return again.”

Deporting green-card holders is not a step that should be “taken lightly”, said [The Wall Street Journal](#). There are nearly 13 million of these people in America and they secured their residency status through a legitimate legal process. However, a green card does come with obligations. The law grants the secretary of state the power to deport an immigrant who either “endorses or espouses terrorist activity”, or is a representative of a group that does so. Khalil would seem to have violated that term. He was a lead



Khalil: “the first arrest of many”?

negotiator for the Columbia University Apartheid Divest group, which, among other things, has referred to Hamas's 7 October slaughter of Israelis as a “moral, military, and political victory”. As the “public face” of such a hateful outfit, Khalil fully deserves to be chucked out of America, said Josh Hammer in the [Los Angeles Times](#). “The day the US loses the ability to deport noncitizens who espouse such toxic beliefs is the day the US ceases to be a sovereign nation-state.”

I'm not going to defend Khalil's views, said Mona Charen in [The Bulwark](#), but since when did we

detain and expel people for saying things we find objectionable? America is supposed to be a nation that values law and due process. Immigration law specifies that aliens can't be deported for opinions or actions that “would be lawful within the US”, unless the secretary of state determines that their continued presence “would compromise a compelling US foreign policy interest”. No evidence has been presented that Khalil presents such a threat. “Taking a law-abiding legal permanent resident into custody for speech crimes is un-American”, and a clear violation of the First Amendment. If Khalil can be deprived of his basic rights in this way, then nobody's rights are secure. With luck, the bid to deport Khalil may fail in the courts, said Alex Shephard in [The New Republic](#). But it has already helped advance Trump's wider mission – to “create an environment where anyone who holds an opinion that is deemed threatening or simply contrary to the administration and its allies is terrified of speaking out”.

## Canada: a strange choice of enemy

It's a tradition for American celebrities to threaten to move to Canada if a Republican is elected president, said [National Review](#). But given the recent state of relations between the US and its northern neighbour, celebrities may now “have to look further afield”. Donald Trump's on-off tariff threats against Canadian imports and his repeated talk of pressuring the country into becoming our “cherished 51st state” have infuriated Canadians. Cafés north of the border are now serving “Canadianos” rather than Americanos; people there are boycotting bourbon and cancelling US holidays. The country is set to hold an election this year, and the candidates are now sure to seek to outdo each other with “tough-on-US rhetoric”. It was inevitable that Trump would face foreign crises as president, but who would have guessed that Canada would be among them?

Canada is the last nation with which the US should want to get involved in a trade war, said Ryan Cooper in [The American Prospect](#). The two countries are each other's largest trade partners, exchanging nearly \$1trn worth of goods and services a year. “Great swathes of the American economy have been built around access to the Canadian market.” Components for US vehicles cross the northern border half-a-dozen times during the manufacturing process. Even if the two sides resolve their current spat, it has badly undermined confidence in this cross-border trade. What makes it more absurd, said [The](#)



Boycotting bourbon, buying local and axing US trips

[Washington Post](#), is that Trump has been complaining about the terms of a trade deal – the US-Mexico-Canada Agreement – that he negotiated in his first term, and hailed at the time as “the best trade deal ever made”.

Acting like an unpredictable “madman... has much to recommend it when dealing with Hamas or the Houthis”, said Rich Lowry in [The New York Post](#). But those nice Canadians don't deserve this rough treatment. While they may be overly protective of politically sensitive sectors of their economy, notably dairy and lumber, we could have negotiated

over these respectfully, without making Canada's leaders and people “honestly fearful of the US”. There's certainly no justification for threatening to use economic coercion to induce Canada to submit to annexation – a threat that Trump may have advanced mischievously to begin with, but which he now appears to be deadly serious about. If Trump is serious, said Philip Klein in [National Review](#), it suggests he has failed to think this idea through. For the reality is that Canada joining the US as a 51st state would be “an absolute disaster for American conservatism”. The country has a state-run healthcare system that aids gender transitions. It has high taxes, and gun ownership is closely regulated. The US would be incorporating a nation “with a population slightly larger than California, only even more socialist, and without the wealth”. The Republicans would never win an election again. Is that what Trump wants?

## Duterte's arrest: a case of "white man's justice"?

For many years, Rodrigo Duterte projected an image of invincibility, said Antonio Contreras in [The Manila Times](#). The 79-year-old former president of the Philippines, notorious for his violent past, "shielded himself with bravado, political alliances and legal manoeuvring". But no longer is he "untouchable". Last week, he was arrested, forced onto a plane and taken to the International Criminal Court in The Hague, where he will go on trial for alleged extrajudicial killings committed during his war on drugs of 2016 and 2022.



"Answering to an international rules-based order"

It was a brazen "kidnapping" on home soil, said Rigoberto D. Tiglao in the same paper. The ICC has absolutely no authority in the Philippines: we withdrew from it in 2019 (tenuously, it claims jurisdiction over crimes allegedly committed before that). The only reason Duterte is languishing in "a cold Hague prison" is because of a "diabolical, desperate plot" by his rivals in the Marcos Jr government to remove one of our most beloved politicians. Beloved by some, maybe, said Pia Ranada on [Rappler \(Pasig\)](#), but Duterte was long due his moment of reckoning. I witnessed the "true horror" of the man at the height of his power. I saw him joke in front of young Boy and Girl Scouts about murder; I heard him openly making rape threats and vowing to "slap and kill" UN officials. Some 30,000 people were summarily executed on our streets in Duterte's war on drugs: "teenage boys, fathers, mothers, daughters, tricycle drivers, vendors". Being dragged to The Hague is a fitting ending: a man with complete disregard for the law must now "answer to an international rules-based order".

On the surface, this was a much-needed win for the ICC, said [The Economist \(London\)](#). Duterte was a "thug": he once told a campaign crowd "that he would kill so many people that the fish in Manila Bay would grow fat on their bodies". The fact he is now standing trial is proof the ICC still has the power to bring monsters to justice – "but only if politics allows". In reality, this case is only proceeding "because the political winds

in the Philippines have changed", after the former president's daughter, Sara Duterte, fell out with the Marcos Jr government. Without domestic cooperation, "the ICC has no powers of coercion" or arrest; its warrants are left blowing in the wind. It is why the implementation of ICC justice is "so troublingly uneven", said Sholto Byrnes in [The National \(Abu Dhabi\)](#). Almost all previous ICC defendants have come from the Global South – the vast majority of them from Africa. To be sure, the court has also issued arrest warrants for both Israel's

Benjamin Netanyahu and Russia's Vladimir Putin for alleged war crimes – but what's the likelihood that either "will see the inside of a courtroom in The Hague"? Ultimately, cases come down to politics, not justice. It's why when Duterte inevitably claims he has been "sent off to a faraway land to receive 'white man's justice', there'll be plenty who believe him".

A number of "calamitous" political mis-steps brought Duterte to The Hague, said John Nery on [Rappler](#). Killing his own constituents was one, but "declaring war on the Marcoses" was the clincher. The Dutertes and Marcoses had initially formed an all-powerful "UniTeam": in fact, Sara Duterte served as vice-president to "Bongbong" Marcos Jr when the latter succeeded her father to the presidency in 2022. But things turned sour when Marcos Jr decided to shift away from his predecessor's embrace of China: Duterte started openly deriding him as "Bangag" – that is, "stoned or high on drugs". And all hell broke loose when Sara was subsequently impeached for allegedly trying to arrange Marcos Jr's assassination. Shipping off Duterte to The Hague takes this feud to another level, said [The Straits Times \(Singapore\)](#), and it could ultimately backfire on the Marcos government. Despite all he has said and done, Duterte has enduring appeal in the Philippines, and his daughter tops the polls among presidential candidates for the next election. Until then, the country is locked in a clash for control "that threatens to derail one of Asia's economic growth stars".

### NEPAL

## God save us from the king

[The Himalayan Times \(Kathmandu\)](#)

Royal fever has taken over Nepal, says Jiba Raj Pokharel. Thousands lined the streets of Kathmandu last week to demand the reinstatement of King Gyanendra Shah, who was deposed in 2008 amid far-reaching protests against his rule. You can see why people are disenchanted with the republic, given the "alarming level of corruption" in our ruling elite and Nepal's "sagging economy". Other countries – England in the 1600s, for instance – have successfully reinstated the monarchy. But before Nepal's get carried away with pro-royalist enthusiasm, they should cast their minds back to the last time Gyanendra took power, in 2001, following the massacre in the royal palace of his brother, the king, and other members of the royal family. He went on to declare a state of emergency, disband parliament, jail politicians and journalists, and use the army to impose his orders. Seven years later he was forced to stand down, and Nepal was declared a republic. None of this exactly bodes well for his return. Things are bad right now, but under Gyanendra they could be – and have been – far worse.

### IRELAND

## Don't forget who our real friends are

[Irish Independent \(Dublin\)](#)

The Taoiseach made it through his Oval Office meeting with Donald Trump relatively unscathed, says Martina Devlin, but he may well come to regret his "utter failure to say anything positive about Ireland's relationship with the EU". Micheál Martin sat through the televised one-to-one with "a fixed grin on his face and his mouth shut tight", even as Trump "strafed" the EU for imposing counter-tariffs on US goods. As a short-term strategy, keeping mum may seem wise: Ukraine's President Zelensky can attest that it's best not to rile the thin-skinned president in his own home. But next time EU leaders run into the Taoiseach, they'll be entitled to remind him just how much Ireland owes to the bloc. "EU membership transformed Ireland, and laid the groundwork for our present prosperity." It was the EU who bailed us out during the financial collapse, and if Trump imposes further tariffs, it'll be Brussels that Dublin turns to for support, not Washington. And judging by the way Trump accused us at last week's meeting of "taking" America's pharmaceutical companies "away" – a clear signal of intent – that support will soon be needed. Punishment is coming, and Ireland will need its true friends more than ever. Let's hope our failure to defend them doesn't "come back to bite us".



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## What the scientists are saying...

### Songbirds cling to old favourites

Among humans, musical tastes evolve over generations; and it seems the same is true of birds. For a new study, a University of Oxford team spent three years recording the songs of great tits in Wytham Woods, Oxfordshire, to investigate how the movement, age and turnover of birds within the population influenced their songs. They did this by training an AI model to recognise individual birds based on their songs; they then used AI to analyse the recordings to look for shifts and patterns in their repertoires. This revealed that birds of a similar age were more likely to have a similar repertoire; that when individuals died or left, songs often went with them; that immigrants to the group adapted to the existing repertoire, but also sped up the adoption of new songs; and that older birds acted as a “cultural repository” – continuing to sing songs that were not sung by younger birds, much as older people might play music that is not listened to by their grandchildren’s generation. It’s “thrilling”, said Prof Ben Sheldon, to think that the birdsong we hear is the “result of the cumulative combination of individual movements and survival over many years”.

### Are microplastics harming plants?

In recent years, concern has been growing about the impact on human health of the microplastics that are accumulating in our bodies. Now, researchers have warned that the tiny shards also pose a threat to the plant kingdom. Scientists at Nanjing University in China analysed data from more than 150 existing studies on the impact of microplastics on everything from food crops to the algae that underpin the marine food chain. They concluded that by various means, including dissipating



*Older great tits act as a “cultural repository”*

sunlight, the presence of microplastics can reduce photosynthesis by between 7% and 12%. At the current rate of plastic production, and consequent microplastic exposure, they say that could equate to the yields of crops such as wheat and corn falling by 4% to 13.5% over the next 25 years – enough to have a significant impact on food supplies. Since plants draw in carbon dioxide as they photosynthesise, decreased photosynthesis could also hamper efforts to slow climate change.

### Fishfingers make children kinder

Children who eat fish tend to be kinder and more sociable than their peers, a study has found. Fish is a rich source of omega-3 fatty acids, iodine and selenium, which play a role in brain development. Parents are advised to give children two portions of fish a week, one of them oily (such as mackerel). To find out more about the link between fish and development, researchers

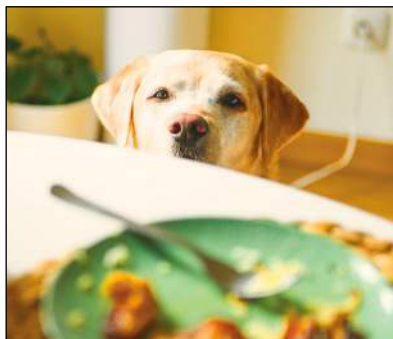
at Bristol University looked at long-term data on almost 6,000 children in England, and compared their diets at seven with assessments of their “pro-social” behaviour (friendliness, altruism and willingness to share). They found that 7% of the children ate no fish; 64% ate up to 190 grams per week; and 29% ate more than 190 grams – equivalent to two portions. Fish fingers and similar products made up almost half the fish consumed. Aged seven, the children who ate no fish were 35% more likely to display “suboptimal pro-social behaviour” than the ones who ate at least two portions a week; which increased to 43% among nine-year-olds. The team also looked for measurable differences in intelligence levels in eight-year-olds, but did not detect any.

### The pollution from gas hobs

Homes with gas hobs can contain higher levels of airborne pollution than are found on busy roads, a study by Which? has revealed. Researchers monitored levels of nitrogen dioxide (NO<sub>2</sub>) and fine particulate matter (PM<sub>2.5</sub>) in the kitchens of four homes with gas hobs, one with an induction hob, and beside the Marylebone Road in London. They found that using one gas ring for slow cooking (with doors and windows closed but an extractor fan on) led to a more than doubling in the levels of NO<sub>2</sub>, and they remained elevated for hours afterwards. By contrast, the home with an induction hob recorded only background levels. Three of the homes with gas hobs registered peak PM<sub>2.5</sub> readings that exceeded 100mg/m<sup>3</sup>, and one reached 650mg/m<sup>3</sup>. The World Health Organisation recommends a limit of 15mg/m<sup>3</sup>. The average measurement on the road was 14mg/m<sup>3</sup>. The study also found levels were much lower if doors and windows were kept open during cooking.

## For tubby labradors, it's all in the genes

Labradors have a reputation for being “food focused”, and it is fair to say that many of them are the tubby side. But it turns out that it's not their fault if they can't stop eating: it's in their genes. For a study designed to explore the effect of genes on weight, veterinary scientists at the University of Cambridge measured the levels of body fat carried by 241 labradors, and created a “greediness” score for each dog based on their owners' responses to questions about how often the dog pestered them for food and so on. By comparing this information with the dogs' DNA, they were able to identify a series of genes that predispose the breed to weight gain. Further research showed that five of these genes also play a role in obesity in humans. One of them, DENND1B, is involved in the release of leptin, a hormone that curbs appetite. Many of the labradors had a version of the gene that meant they kept feeling hungry; these dogs had about 8% more body fat than the others. The owners of slim dogs aren't necessarily superior, said Dr Eleanor Raffan, one of the researchers – it's just easier for them to keep their pets' weight in check.



*The breed is predisposed to gain weight*

### A test for deadly strokes

A finger-prick test for the deadliest type of stroke is being trialled by ambulance crews in Cambridgeshire. The test is designed to rapidly identify large vessel occlusions (LVOs), which occur when a clot blocks a major artery in the brain. LVOs are responsible for a third of strokes, but cause about 95% of stroke-related disabilities and deaths, largely owing to delays in treatment. About 1.9 million brain cells die every minute a stroke is untreated, but LVOs are hard to diagnose without a scan because they have the same symptoms as other conditions, and by the time patients are sent to a stroke unit, precious time has often been lost. To complicate matters, the most effective treatment for many is a thrombectomy, which is ideally carried out within six hours, but only 24 centres in England offer them. Previous studies have found that the test can spot LVOs in 15 minutes, with about 90% accuracy.

## Pick of the week's

## Gossip

The former Tory MP **Mark Field** has spilled the beans on his 18-month extramarital affair with **Liz Truss**. In a memoir, he describes his ex as "exhilarating", while conceding that her "manic" energy could be "disconcerting". The pair had started their affair in 2003, when she was trying to be selected as a Tory candidate. She had "limitless ambition and self-belief", he says, but he never thought she was fit to be PM. "Unfortunately, there was startlingly little to suggest that Liz had either the powers of inspirational leadership or the capacity to focus on the implementation of her policies."



**Elon Musk** has had a giant TV screen installed in his office in the White House, so that he can play video games in his downtime between running his six companies and slashing the US's federal workforce. The tech mogul is an avid gamer, and claims to be one of the world's best. But it seems he may cheat, by hiring others to play on his behalf. Eagle-eyed viewers of his *Path of Exile 2* livestream noticed that he was supposedly playing at a time when he was being shown live on TV at the US Capitol. "Elon, how are you there?" posted one.

After buying **Noël Coward's** former home in Kent, **Julian Clary** had to take a series of mediocre TV gigs to pay for repairs to the Grade II-listed farmhouse, says *The Times* Diary. He coped with the 24-hour intrusion of *Celebrity Big Brother*, which he won, by working out that as the footage would be edited down to an hour, the key was to "say something funny twice a day and then just sit in the corner".

## Facebook: an insider's shocking exposé

Shortly before he took his front-row seat at Donald Trump's inauguration, Mark Zuckerberg announced that he was making sweeping changes to Facebook's content moderation systems, to curb censorship and prioritise free speech. Yet it seems this "ethos goes only so far", said Michelle Goldberg in *The New York Times* – because Meta is now doing its best to silence the speech of a former senior Facebook staffer. Last week, its lawyers won an injunction to stop Sarah Wynn-Williams promoting her memoir of her years at the firm, citing the terms of her severance deal. Happily, though, this ham-fisted censorship effort has backfired: her publisher has declined to be cowed, and thanks to all the free publicity, *Careless People* (the title comes from a line about the destructive rich in *The Great Gatsby*) is now a bestseller.



Wynn-Williams: whistleblower

It makes for damning reading, said Steven Poole in *The Guardian*. A former New Zealand diplomat, Wynn-Williams joined the firm in 2011 as an idealist. But over time, she realised that Facebook had a toxic work culture. She claims that its COO, Sheryl Sandberg, invited her to share her bed on a private jet, and was miffed when she declined; and that a male executive told her off for not being "responsive" enough after the birth of her child – though she'd been

in a coma. Zuckerberg himself is depicted as a "giant man-baby" – an autocrat so thin-skinned his staff let him win at board games. More seriously, she claims Facebook offered to help advertisers target teenagers at their most vulnerable, by issuing an alert when they deleted a selfie or used the word "worthless". She says Zuckerberg misled Congress about the compromises he was willing to offer Beijing to get into China; and says he ignored warnings about the way Facebook was being used to whip up sectarian violence in Myanmar.

The book (which Meta says is full of lies and half-truths) is also revealing about Facebook's role in US politics, said Emma Duncan in *The Times*. In 2016, its staff helped the Trump campaign to use its data to micro-target voters with messaging and misinformation. Zuckerberg was cross when Facebook was held responsible for the election result; but then he realised the level of power it meant he had, and he started talking about making his own White House bid. Now, of course, there is no chance of the US reining in the tech giants, said John Naughton in *The Observer* – just as AI is making these firms more powerful than ever. Truly, it is time for the British Government to "grow some backbone", and treat this as a national security issue.

## NHS England: the end of a mega-quango

"Finally, some good news," said Karol Sikora in the *Daily Mail*: NHS England is to be scrapped, with immediate effect. As someone with 50 years' experience as a doctor, "I am well placed to testify to its utter lack of effectiveness". Formed in 2013 by the Tory health secretary Andrew Lansley, it was meant to "oversee the budget, planning, delivery and day-to-day operation of the NHS in England", and to "take the politics out of the health service" by working at arm's length from ministers. In reality, it became a "bureaucratic folly", the world's biggest quango, fatally disconnected from the hospitals it was meant to oversee. Lansley's reorganisation is now regarded as a disaster right across the political spectrum, said John Rentoul in *The Independent*. It led to the duplication of bureaucracy: NHS England and the Department of Health "did everything twice". And it failed to "depoliticise the NHS", because the health service is always an "intensely political subject". By abolishing it, Keir Starmer and the Health Secretary Wes Streeting can cut up to 10,000 jobs and divert the saved money to services. They are showing the "ruthlessness" needed to deliver good public services.

In principle, there's nothing wrong with merging NHS England with the Department of Health, said *The Guardian*. "The problem is that the

numbers don't add up." The quango's cost to the Treasury is £1.83bn, "a tiny fraction of the NHS's £192bn budget for 2025/26". Of that £1.83bn, about £400m goes on staff who work directly to provide local services; these roles are unlikely to go. So at best, scrapping NHS England "frees up a few hundred million pounds. At worst, it shifts costs elsewhere while causing months of upheaval in an already overstretched system." And it won't tackle the NHS's long-term problems, said *The Observer*: namely that we spend significantly less per capita on health than, say, Germany or France. At the same time, we have an ageing population, poor levels of public health and "higher-than-average obesity".

The real problem is the money, agreed Sally Gainsbury in the *FT*. Health spending is rising inexorably in developed nations: funding for the NHS in England for 2025/26 will be up 1.5% in real terms on last year, but that's less than half the long-term average; and it will leave a gaping £6.6bn deficit. The Government is "taking back control of the NHS", gambling that it can improve services and drive down waiting lists, said Lizzy Buchan in the *Daily Mirror*. That may work, but it carries "massive" political risk. Starmer and Streeting "know there will be no one else to blame if they fail".



## The Tories: abandoning net zero

One of the reasons the Tories chose Kemi Badenoch as their new leader last year, said James Heale in *The Spectator*, was her “willingness to break with the past”. And she certainly proved that this week when she formally abandoned the net zero target enshrined by Theresa May in 2019. In what amounted to her first big policy announcement, Badenoch dismissed as a “fiction” the idea that Britain, by 2050, will be able to remove as much carbon from the atmosphere as it produces. The emissions target had been pushed through Parliament in 90 minutes without a plan or a vote, she declared, and could not be achieved “without a serious drop in our living standards or by bankrupting us”. More flexibility was needed. With this speech, Badenoch has put some “clear blue water” between her party and Labour on energy policy.



Badenoch: a break with the past

The speech was really aimed at supporters of Reform UK, said Richard Alvin in *Business Matters*. Badenoch might win a few votes by pandering to their climate scepticism, but it’ll come at a big cost. “Investors crave certainty”, and the UK’s commitment to the 2050 net-zero target has been “one of the few constants in an otherwise chaotic political landscape”. By casting doubt on it, Badenoch is endangering our

leading role in green finance and clean energy investment. Given that only 4% of Reform voters back the party because of its environmental policies, and that most Labour and Lib Dem voters strongly support climate action, Badenoch’s stance is not an obvious vote-winner, said Oliver Wright in *The Times*. But she genuinely believes that the target is unachievable – she was one of the few who questioned the timing, back in 2022 – and she’s betting that, by the next election in 2030, voters will have turned decisively against it. “And she could be right.”

But that calculation assumes that Labour will stick rigidly to net-zero targets, even in the face of massive public opposition, said Stephen Bush in the FT. The Energy Secretary, Ed Miliband, might be prepared to do that, but it’s hard to see the Government as a whole doing so – just look at the way it’s now justifying a third runway at Heathrow with dubious claims about sustainable aviation fuels. A better political strategy for Badenoch would surely be to focus on the Government’s green targets for this Parliament. A world in which Labour fails to meet its benchmarks for electric vehicles and the like seems a more likely scenario than the one she imagines – “in which this Government becomes known for its climate radicalism”.

## Elon Musk: has he made Tesla toxic?

Elon Musk can either run Tesla, or he can carry on as President Trump’s first buddy. “But he can’t do both,” said Matthew Lynn in *The Daily Telegraph*. The tech billionaire’s controversial role as Doge’s slasher-in-chief is starting to inflict “real damage” on his electric car firm, with sales plummeting by more than 70% in Australia and Germany, and 45% in Europe overall compared with this time last year. Tesla’s share price has halved; showrooms are being picketed; and liberals are covering their Teslas with stickers reading “I bought this before we knew Elon was crazy”. The carmaker was already facing a “much more crowded market”, said Jim Norton in the same paper, because Chinese rivals have muscled their way in with cheaper alternatives. But Musk’s political antics – slashing federal jobs in the US, blasting European leaders, endorsing far-right parties – have turned one of the most coveted electric vehicle brands “toxic”.



A protester in London

This is not how oligarchy is meant to work, said Gaby Hinsliff in *The Guardian*. And both Musk and Trump seem to be “rattled”: just look at last week’s tragic Tesla sales pitch on the White

House lawn, where the US president tried to flog Musk’s electric vehicles to his gas-guzzler-pick-up-driving Maga faithful. Trump is all about winning, so he’ll hate the impression that being on Team Trump has the “reverse Midas touch”.

As for Musk, said Charlie Warzel in *The Atlantic*, I’ve never seen the poor centi-billionaire looking so “defeated”. It’s not just Tesla. European governments are also looking for alternatives to replace Musk’s Starlink satellites. His personal brand is crumbling under the weight of his brash political interventions – and that’s a big problem for the world’s richest man. Musk’s value rests on a certain “image”: that he, a brilliant “Tony Stark type”, can bend the world to his will through the force of his “singular ability”. That perception has fuelled confidence in his firms, even as the mogul took “wild business bets”. But “slashing” government services relied upon by millions of Americans, as he is doing at Doge, is a risk “orders of magnitude” larger than anything he’s done before. “Musk is playing a dangerous game, and he looks to be losing control of the narrative.”

## Wit & Wisdom

“Failure is simply the opportunity to begin again, this time more intelligently.”

Henry Ford, quoted in *The Daily Telegraph*

“No woman ever shot her husband while he was vacuuming.”

Kathy Lette, quoted on *The Knowledge*

“Whenever politics feels like it can’t be real and it must all be scripted, it’s worth remembering that most of the time, it is scripted.”

Tom Peck in *The Times*

“Nobody realises that some people expend tremendous energy merely to be normal.”

Albert Camus, quoted in *The Oldie*

“I have a new philosophy. I’m only going to dread one day at a time.”

Charlie Brown from *Peanuts*, *ibid.*

“The trouble with tariffs, to be succinct, is that they raise prices, slow economic growth, cut profits, increase unemployment, worsen inequality, diminish productivity and increase global tensions. Other than that, they’re fine.”

David Kelly of J.P. Morgan, quoted on *Morning Brew*

“There are only two or three human stories, and they go on repeating themselves as fiercely as if they had never happened before.”

Willa Cather, quoted in *Forbes*

“Politeness is fictitious benevolence.”

Samuel Johnson, *ibid.*

### Statistics of the week

In a reversal of pre-pandemic trends, more over-70s (5.4 million) paid income tax in 2022/23 than did under-30s (5.23 million). In total, the over-70s paid £19.1bn while the under-30s paid £18.3bn.

**The Independent**

The number of people on ADHD medication in England has trebled, from 81,000 in 2015 to 248,000 in 2024.

**NHS England/The Times**

## Football: Newcastle end 70 years of “purgatory”

The “fanatical” fans of Newcastle United are “one of the great tribes of the English game”, said Oliver Holt in the Daily Mail. And yet for the past seven decades, they’ve watched in agony as their club has endured one of the “great droughts in sporting history”. Newcastle’s victory in the 1955 FA Cup marked the last piece of domestic silverware won by the club; since then, “great players such as Chris Waddle, Kevin Keegan, Paul Gascoigne, Peter Beardsley and Alan Shearer have all come and gone”, but in terms of titles, there have only been “near misses”. Last Sunday, however, the Magpies finally brought their barren stretch to an end by beating Liverpool 2-1 in the final of the Carabao Cup. The match was less close than the scoreline suggests: against the team that leads the Premier League, and which is widely regarded as one of the best in the world, Newcastle dominated “from start to finish”. For a club that has spent so long in “purgatory”, this must have “felt like the most extraordinary release”.



Burn’s thundering header

The win was secured through goals either side of half-time by Dan Burn and Alexander Isak, said David Hytner in The Guardian. Burn’s goal, a “thundering epic of a header”, came just two days after the 32-year-old defender, a 6ft 7in giant, received his first England call-up. Isak scored with a “clinical half-volley”, after which the “result never truly felt in doubt”, despite Federico

Chiesa’s consolation goal for Liverpool in injury time. The victory means that Newcastle’s manager, Eddie Howe, becomes the “first Englishman since Harry Redknapp in 2008 to win a major trophy in this country”, said Paul Joyce in The Times. Since arriving on Tyneside in 2021, Howe has put every fibre of his being into “squeezing every last drop” from the talents in his squad. The 47-year-old, who must now be considered one of England’s finest coaches, fully “deserves his time in the sun”.

Yet there is a “less wholesome subtext” to this story, said Oliver Brown in The Daily Telegraph. While it’s tempting to present Newcastle’s triumph as a “tale of homegrown bliss”, the inescapable reality is that theirs was a victory “engineered in Riyadh”. Since being purchased in 2021 by an investment group led by Saudi Arabia’s sovereign wealth fund, Newcastle have been “buttressed by bottomless wealth” – even if the amount the new owners have actually been able to spend has been curbed by the Premier League’s profit and sustainability rules. As for Liverpool, they must be feeling grateful for their 12-point lead over Arsenal, said Martin Samuel in The Times. Also recently outplayed by Paris Saint-Germain in the Champions League, “Arne Slot’s team are looking leggy now”. They will almost certainly end the season as Premier League champions – but what lies beyond that is starting to look doubtful.

## Tennis: an Englishman “comes of age” in California

When he won the Vienna Open last autumn, Jack Draper revealed that his “ultimate objective” was to compete at the “very top of the game”, said Tumaini Carayol in The Guardian. Based on his “sublime performances” at Indian Wells last week, the 23-year-old is within touching distance of that goal. Not only did Draper win his first Masters 1000 title, but he did so with a run of victories over four top-15 opponents. Best of all was his “stellar semi-final” win in three sets over world No. 3 Carlos Alcaraz, the title-holder of the previous two years. In Sunday’s final, the British No. 1 dispatched Denmark’s Holger Rune 6-2, 6-2 without facing a single break point. The victory takes him to No. 7 in the ATP rankings, and positions him very much as a “top contender”.



Draper: “a top contender”

Draper, who grew up in Surrey, and is the son of former LTA chief executive Roger Draper, has in the past struggled with anxiety,

said Matthew Futterman and Charlie Eccleshare on The Athletic. In the biggest match of his career to date, his semi-final against Jannik Sinner at last September’s US Open, he suffered several “bouts of tension-induced vomiting”. And there were signs of nerves last week: against both Alcaraz and Taylor Fritz (in the round of 16), he “botched his first attempt to serve out the match”. But in general he “controlled his emotions and did not let his concentration waver”. Throughout the tournament, the bedrock of his game was his powerful, accurate serve: against Rune, seven of his first 12 serves were aces. But Draper has more to his game than a “mighty” serve, said Simon Briggs in The Daily Telegraph. “There were shades of Rafael Nadal”

in the way he used his powerful, heavily top-spun groundstrokes to “spread the court”. He described his victory as “a coming of age for me” – and few can doubt that he has “arrived in earnest”.

## England throw off shackles in Cardiff

During Steve Borthwick’s tenure as England coach, a sense of “connection between the team and their supporters” has often been missing, said Gavin Mairs in The Daily Telegraph. But in England’s final match of the Six Nations last Saturday, the relationship was “gloriously renewed and strengthened”. England’s ten-try, 68-14 trouncing of Wales was a wonderful spectacle for the team’s fans, and “categorical evidence” of the progress that has long been promised by Borthwick. Wales, it’s true, are a team on a 17-match losing streak, said Stuart Barnes in The Times. Yet their “ineptitude” should not detract from England’s achievement in Cardiff. What felt “glorious from an England fan’s point of view”



Borthwick: making a connection

was the “power and panache” of the display. There was a “precision in the passing, a finality of finishing” that few sides could have lived with.

England knew a bonus-point victory over Wales would only be enough to give them the title if Scotland beat France later the same day, said Andy Bull in The Observer. For a “brief, flickering moment” in the first half, with Scotland 16-13 down and appearing to have scored a try that would have given them a two-point advantage, that seemed a real possibility. But the try was disallowed, and a dominant second-half display by France gave them a 35-16 victory. The scoreline may have flattered Les Bleus, but over the balance of all five games, they “deserved to win this championship”.

## Sporting headlines

**F1** Britain’s Lando Norris won the opening Grand Prix of the season in Australia, beating Max Verstappen by 0.89 seconds.

**Golf** Rory McIlroy won the Players Championship for the second time, beating J.J. Spaun in a play-off.

**Tennis** Russia’s Mirra Andreieva became the youngest player since Serena Williams to win at Indian Wells. The 17-year-old beat world No. 2 Iga Świątek in the semi-final and world No. 1 Aryna Sabalenka in the final.

**Football** Arsenal beat Chelsea 1-0 in the Premier League.



# Pick of the week's correspondence

## Unsustainable policies

*To The Daily Telegraph*

The rural economy has been dealt yet another devastating blow, with the Government halting the Sustainable Farming Incentive, the mechanism it had to guarantee conservation work on farmland. I had assumed that, even if they hated the people of the countryside, they'd continue with it for the sake of wildlife.

Unfortunately (but predictably), this policy will result in an unintended consequence. The removal of payments for conservation works will force farmers and growers into maximising output from their land. This will mean an increase in intensification, more slurry, chemicals and ploughing, and fewer concessions to nature.

Steve Reed, the Environment Secretary, is unlikely to have learnt much about farming in his Croydon constituency, or his career in publishing. Until the ministers responsible, along with their staff and the staff of Defra, gain a proper understanding of the industry – by, for example, studying or working in it – we will continue to lurch from one disaster to another, always suffering the negative effects of ill-thought-out policies.

**Robert Bowyer, Lancaster**

## Meet you after work?

*To The Financial Times*

Some decades ago, I worked for a large US management consulting firm. I was there for close on ten years and loathed every minute. Andrew Jack's article "Retirement this way", noting that far too many contemplate their retirement with a mixture of gloom, denial and cabernet sauvignon, made me think more about "professional friendships".

In my experience, a lot of people come to the end of full-on, full-time work, look around and wonder who their friends really are. But what also fascinates me is the way people's relationships with colleagues change as they leave the workplace. Those people who kept interrupting you in that 8am team meeting turn out to be the people you meet to go round the V&A with.

**Jane Maitland, executive coach, Cheltenham**

## Exchange of the week

### Trump and Ukraine: the new reality

*To The Times*

Unsurprisingly, President Trump's approach to Ukraine is that of a businessman closing a deal, not a statesman securing peace. But by pausing military aid, forcing Kyiv to retreat before negotiations even began, and publicly signalling that Ukraine must cede land and abandon Nato aspirations, he has handed Putin the initiative and a path to victory.

History offers clear lessons here. For instance, as colonial secretary, Churchill forced the Irish Republic to negotiate by applying relentless military pressure, offering an honourable settlement only when the republicans had no choice but to take it. Churchill negotiated from strength. Trump has done the opposite, weakening his ally, relieving his enemy, and preemptively surrendering his strongest cards. The implications stretch far beyond Ukraine. Putin has been emboldened, Europe has been publicly exposed as strategically maladroit, and the Baltic states and Poland face heightened peril. This is not peace, or even appeasement, but something far worse.

**Richard Edwards, senior law lecturer, Exeter University**

*To the Financial Times*

Donald Trump has reached out to Russia's Vladimir Putin, not as a gift – but because Russia will inevitably again be a major power. When I was Bill Clinton's ambassador to Nato, everyone who wasn't denying Russia's inevitable future power and stature understood this. We had a high degree of success in working with Russia. Then, US neocons drove Nato enlargement beyond the point any nation could tolerate – just as the US couldn't tolerate the USSR-Cuba alliance, communists in Grenada, and now Trump on China in Panama.

[It is argued] that Trump gave away to Putin points that should have been reserved for peace talks. Yet what did Trump give away? It is clear to all that Ukraine can only regain total control of its lost territories through force of arms, which no ally will support. Also, Nato membership takes consensus – all 32 allies. Despite statements by some of Nato's leading powers, that consensus will never be achieved. If membership were possible, then Nato allies would have troops in Ukraine now!

Thus, in the absence of a US guarantee of Ukraine's security, which Trump has ruled out, it will continue to be vulnerable, despite other terms of a peace deal and what Europe is willing to do. It is necessary to begin with the facts of today's circumstances, not those of earlier periods of European history.

**Ambassador Robert E. Hunter, US**

## Permission to not build

*To The Times*

The number of sites remaining undeveloped after the grant of planning permission is indeed a concern. Merely owning a site with a valuable permission usually guarantees profitability. There is also the chance of obtaining permission for something "bigger and better" in the future.

A step in the right direction to halt this impasse would be for tighter limits on expiry dates and an end to the practice of allowing permissions to remain active and sites dormant if only a token start has been demonstrated.

**James Harbord, RIBA (ret'd), Cirencester**

## The politics of Covid

*To The Guardian*

The very title of Laura Spinney's piece is a sad reflection of how pandemic control preferences aligned along traditional political lines, to everybody's detriment ("Five years on... the Right's fake Covid narrative has been turbocharged into the mainstream"). If the Right has been guilty of undermining science and scientists, I also observed through the pandemic how the Left displayed a disturbing enthusiasm to restrict liberty, using fear and

guilt to encourage compliance with control measures.

School closures and enforced isolation have contributed hugely to the mental health problems and social isolation faced by all, but especially the young. While the vaccines saved many lives, in the NHS we witnessed a time-consuming and foolish attempt to coerce all staff into being vaccinated.

The general overreach of the state in the pandemic has sadly led many to be less trustful of official guidance, especially regarding vaccines. Rather than put the blame on political opponents, all of society needs to undergo some honest self-reflection and try to understand the views of those who disagree with us.

**Dr Aodhan Breathnach, consultant medical microbiologist, St George's Hospital, London**

## A local connection

*To The New Statesman*

In her analysis of the decline of mainstream media, Alison Phillips fails to use perhaps the most important word of all when explaining why the public doesn't trust journalism: connection. The industry has willingly severed the local connections that brought it the trust it now desperately needs. National media once benefitted from the connections of local journalists, built and nurtured through decades of focusing on issues that mattered to their audiences. That is gone, and yet stories of incompetence, greed and scandal are more plentiful than ever.

I appreciate the economics of local journalism are depressing, but its power to forge connections continues to be formidable.

**Grant Feller, London**



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# TRUST IN A STYLE TO LAST THROUGH THE AGES

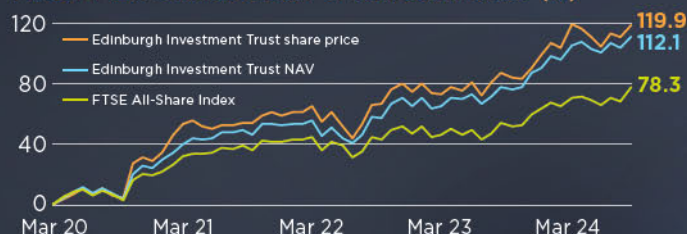


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#### TRUST PERFORMANCE AT 31 JANUARY 2025 (%)



#### DISCRETE PERFORMANCE\* 12 months performance to quarter ending (%)

	Dec-20	Dec-21	Dec-22	Dec-23	Dec-24
Edinburgh Investment Trust share price	-7.7	20.6	5.5	12.1	12.9
Edinburgh Investment Trust NAV	-11.9	22.0	2.5	13.3	14.8
FTSE All-Share Index	-9.8	18.3	0.3	7.9	9.5



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### Book of the week

#### The Age of Diagnosis

by Suzanne O'Sullivan

Hodder & Stoughton 320pp £22

The Week Bookshop £19.99

A “perplexing” feature of our age is that the more our society spends on healthcare, the “gloomier the statistics around ill health” become, said James Le Fanu in Literary Review. Funding for the NHS has grown sixfold in the past 50 years; and while there have been clear benefits – including better recovery rates from many life-threatening diseases – it’s notable that the increase in investment has not made us less sick overall. Quite the contrary, in fact: since 2010, the “number of people labelled as having a long-term health condition – whether physical or mental – has leapt by six million”. In her wide-ranging book, Suzanne O'Sullivan suggests that this glut of ill health has been driven by a culture of “overdiagnosis”. Rather than actually “getting sicker”, she writes, we are “attributing more to sickness”, so that millions who once would have been considered healthy are now classed as unwell. The costs are considerable – to individuals and to society – and O'Sullivan's assessment of how this situation came about is “masterful” and “immensely persuasive”.



A long Covid protest at the National Covid Inquiry

As O'Sullivan sees it, overdiagnosis most often occurs in two forms, said Hannah Barnes in *The New Statesman*. First, there's “over-detection” – where improvements in our ability to identify signs of disease lead to unnecessarily early interventions (this has happened, she claims, with certain cancers). Secondly, there's “expanded disease definitions” – an ever-greater number of symptoms being classed as evidence of a condition. O'Sullivan believes the latter is chiefly responsible for the dramatic recent rise in diagnoses for conditions such as autism and ADHD. Historically, these may have been underdiagnosed, but now the opposite is true, and “almost nobody is denied a diagnosis”. This, she argues, can do “more harm than good” – leading people to attribute all the problems in their life to their “condition”, when the actual solutions may lie elsewhere.

Long Covid is another contentious illness that O'Sullivan considers, said Adam Rutherford in *The Guardian*. Here, uniquely, diagnosis has “been led by the public, often via social media”. Exploring such areas is “incredibly difficult”, and it would have been easy to be “sneering or dismissive”. Thankfully, O'Sullivan is neither; her writing is “full of compassion, care and grace”. The central argument of this excellent book is that diagnosis is a tool that should be “wielded with the utmost caution”.

### Listen In

by Beaty Rubens

Bodleian Library 272pp £30

The Week Bookshop £26.99 (incl. p&p)

In the years after the First World War, “a wireless receiver set was something that men and schoolboys tinkered with in the garden shed”, said Kathryn Hughes in the *Daily Mail*. But over the next two decades, the radio went from being a niche gadget to a device listened to by millions. In this “brilliantly researched book”, Beaty Rubens, a former BBC producer, “delves deep into the archive” to produce a fascinating account of this “wireless revolution”. It's a work “full of gems” for those curious about this period, said Ysenda Maxtone Graham in *The Spectator*. We learn that the radio's forerunner was the “Electrophone” – a device for playing performances over headphones; that in the 1920s, a good wireless cost a teacher's annual salary; and that Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* made its British premiere on the radio in 1925.

In our “smartphone-dominated world”, this is a “striking” portrait of how another device became part of everyday life, said Jude Rogers in *The Guardian*. Rubens aims to “show how radio affected people's lives”; her book is full of “moving” testimony. A 1928 letter she quotes, from a provincial clerk, describes the wireless as a “real magic carpet”. A century on, that's something radio at its best “continues to be”.

### Novel of the week

#### Flesh

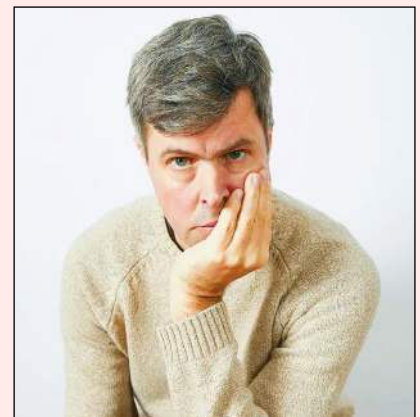
by David Szalay

Jonathan Cape 368pp £18.99

The Week Bookshop £16.99

In David Szalay's Booker-shortlisted 2016 novel *All That Man Is* – about nine European men at different stages of life – one of the best sections centred on a Hungarian former soldier working in security in London's sex industry, said Luke Brown in the *FT*. In his latest novel, *Flesh*, Szalay, who “grew up in Britain and is of Hungarian descent”, has “picked a similar man to examine at length”. We first meet István in Hungary as a 15-year-old, “isolated after moving to a new town” – where a relationship with a middle-aged woman “reaches a tragic conclusion”. Time in a young offender institution follows; then István joins the army and goes to fight in Iraq, where he is traumatised by seeing a “friend die in front of him”. He moves to London and becomes a security guard for a rich family – which leads to a “much greater rise and corresponding fall”. *Flesh* is spare, but strangely powerful; it feels “refreshing, illuminating and true”.

“Inarticulate, passive and emotionally numb, István is an unusual protagonist for a literary novel,” said Johanna Thomas-Corr in *The Sunday Times*. He has lots of sex, but the “couplings often feel arbitrary”; even when he (briefly) becomes wealthy, he is “still buffeted by outside events”. *Flesh*, however, utterly “ensnared me”: written in the “terse narrative style of a thriller”, it is “tense, unnerving and charged with a sense of the fragility of our lives”. Always a writer of “flinty” prose, Szalay here pares things back “even more brutally”, said Keiran Goddard in *The Guardian*. A work of “controlled, austere minimalism”, *Flesh* is a searching examination of the “numbing strangeness of being alive”.



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## Musical: Clueless

Trafalgar Theatre, London SW1 (0333-009 6690). Until 27 September Running time: 2hrs 20mins ★★★

"Being dead is no barrier to productivity these days – particularly if you are Jane Austen," said Sarah Hemming in the FT. Improvisation show *Austentatious* is playing in the West End and soon to go on tour; "ingenious comedy" *Pride & Prejudice\** (\*sort of) is already touring; and a new musical, *Austenland*, is waiting in the wings. Until then, we have *Clueless, The Musical*, based on the hit 1995 film. Inspired by Austen's *Emma* and starring Alicia Silverstone, it "wittily spliced Regency matchmaking and friendship angst with the hormone-fuelled politics of an LA high school drama". With "evocative" original songs by KT Tunstall and lyricist Glenn Slater, the musical is also "charming and fun", but alas, it "never quite wriggles free of its celluloid origins".



A "charming and fun" take on the beloved film

she commands the stage, and is "adorable enough to mitigate against most of Cher's more obnoxious characteristics".

Hers is one of several terrific performances, said Arifa Akbar in *The Guardian*, yet the production itself is a "paler version of the film", and has less "creativity and soul". And though there are two "belters" (*Reasonable Doubts* and *I'm Keeping an Eye on You*), most of the songs are a bit "flat-footed". Visually, too, the adaptation falls short, said Clive Davis in *The Times*. "If the

film is all Beverly Hills swank, the production values on display here are more Bicester Village." The young cast deserve plaudits for their fizzing, committed performances, but overall this is a serviceable spin-off from a much-loved film, not a must-see show.

It's by no means a great musical, said Alun Hood on *What's on Stage*, but its sense of fun is "irresistible" – and fans of the film will love it. Amy Heckerling, who wrote and directed the film, is behind the "laugh-out-loud funny" book; the musical numbers are clever and "infuriatingly catchy"; the staging has a "cinematic fluidity as scenes merge slickly into each other"; and the production features a star-making turn from newcomer Emma Flyn as the main character, Cher. A "scintillating comedienne",

## The week's other opening

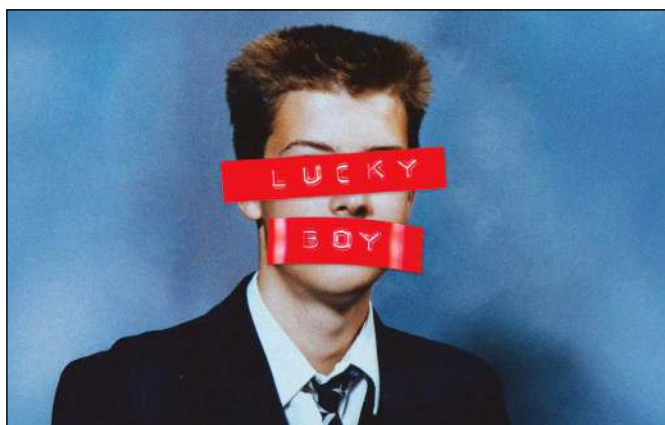
**Wild Rose** The Royal Lyceum, Edinburgh (0131-248 4848).

Until 19 April

Wittily adapted by Nicole Taylor from her 2018 film of the same name, and staged with élan by John Tiffany, this "vibrant" show – about Glaswegian ex-con Rose-Lynn Harlan, and her drive to become a country music star – is a big-hearted treat (*Guardian*).

## Podcasts... on abusive relationships, scams and parenting

"In that summer, it was me and her against the world. We were powerful, right?" That's how Gareth (not his real name) recalls his first love in Tortoise Media's "excellent" new podcast **Lucky Boy**. Gareth might have felt lucky at the time – nearly 40 years ago – but doesn't any more. He was a 14-year-old "misfit" schoolboy, while his secret lover was a 27-year-old teacher at his school in north London. I approached the podcast with a degree of unease, said Jude Rogers in *The Observer*, fearing that "the subject matter – an exploration of who is allowed to be a perpetrator and a victim in our society – was tricky", and that the podcast might tantalise, or even titillate, listeners. In fact, the former BBC reporter Chloe Hadjimatheou handles it "with exceptional due diligence, sensitivity and power".



A tricky subject, handled with "sensitivity and power"

up!), that it all comes together", and the true subject is revealed. Rita, it turns out, is "not a villain but another victim" – a Filipina who had flown to Thailand to take a job in a call centre, only to find herself trafficked to a massive criminal compound in Myanmar – and forced to work as a scammer by a Chinese crime syndicate. What unfolds is a grim but gripping tale, about what *The Economist* calls "the most significant change in transnational organised crime in decades".

**Scam Inc.**, a new series from *The Economist*, tells an "extraordinary story" – albeit one that starts slowly, said James Marriott in *The Times*. The series kicks off with an account of a Kansas banker who got sucked into a crypto scam that destroyed his bank and his career. We hear about Karina, a middle-aged American woman who was catfished into giving away tens of thousands of dollars. We meet a chap called Edgar who was similarly scammed. All of these are "sad tales", of course, but familiar ones. "It is when we meet Edgar's scammer, Rita (keep

Finding parenting tough going? You're not alone, said Patricia Nicol in *The Sunday Times*. The British psychologist Maryhan Munt believes "parenting has got a whole load harder" in recent years, and in **How Not to Screw Up Your Kids** she offers calm, clear, no-nonsense wisdom. There are more than 300 episodes available, exploring "sibling rivalry, revision tips, tech management and divorce, among other things". The shorter "bucket-emptying" episodes are particularly handy. Similarly relatable and non-judgemental is **Teenagers Untangled**, a winner at the 2024 Independent Podcast Awards. The lead presenter is Rachel Richards, a journalist and parenting coach with children and stepchildren of her own, and the 100 episodes range widely in terms of subject matter. "As a mother letting her post-GCSE son go to Reading this summer, I was grateful for a segment on festival tips, straight from the mouths of teenagers."

Stars reflect the overall quality of reviews and our own independent assessment (5 stars=don't miss; 1 star=don't bother)





## The Rule of Jenny Pen

1hr 44mins (15)

Care-home-set  
psychological horror

★★★

This “care-home thriller” from the New Zealand director James Ashcroft is an unusual affair, said Tim Robey in *The Daily Telegraph*. Ten minutes into the film, a judge, Stefan (Geoffrey Rush), suffers a stroke mid-trial and is confined to a nursing facility, where he almost immediately sees a patient accidentally incinerate himself. It sets the tone for what follows: it turns out that patients at the home are being terrorised behind the staff’s back by one of its long-term residents, a “sadistic maniac” called Dave (John Lithgow). Bearing a therapeutic hand puppet he calls “Jenny Pen”, its eyes plucked out “for added menace”, he creeps into his fellow patients’ rooms at night and forces them “to pay obeisance to her in the most demeaning ways”. It’s a terrific premise – and to an extent a plausible one – but the film falls flat, owing largely to a “leaky script” that drains it of the necessary suspense.

Of course, the upright Stefan and the deranged Dave clash, said Nick Howells in *The London Standard*. As a result, their final showdown doesn’t come as much of a shock. Still, the “sadistic relish with which we get there” is worth the ticket price, as are the two star turns: Lithgow is “balls-to-the-wall bonkers” as Dave, while Rush plays the arrogant retired judge with “erudite gravitas”. The film is reminiscent of the ventriloquist section in the classic 1940s horror *Dead of Night*, said Peter Bradshaw in *The Guardian*; it also reminded me of Patrick Hamilton’s depictions of toxic pettiness and bullying in grim boarding houses: the intolerable boredom of afternoons in the “featureless blankness” of the facility’s association room “is shown to encourage mental decay and catatonia”. The film’s denouement is flawed, but “pure choking horror fills the screen like poison gas”.



## Last Breath

1hr 33mins (12A)

Tense deep-sea  
rescue drama

★★

Based on a real-life accident that took place off the coast of Scotland in 2012, this tense undersea survival drama sticks closely to the facts – and in so doing, “makes you realise how larded with theatrical devices most movies really are”, said Owen Gleiberman in *Variety*. *Last Breath* follows three “saturation” divers whose job it is to repair and maintain a section of a gas pipeline that runs along the bottom of the North Sea. When the position of their support ship shifts owing to a power failure, one of the “umbilical” tubes that supplies them with oxygen, warmth and power snaps, leaving the rookie on the team, Chris Lemons (Finn Cole), alone in the dark on the seabed with only a few minutes of oxygen left. As the seconds tick down, the ship’s crew and the other two men on his team – veteran deep-sea divers David Yuasa (Simu Liu) and Duncan Allcock (played by Woody Harrelson with a “wildcat grin and saintly irascibility”) – must race against time to rescue him.

The filmmakers know their stuff, said Robbie Collin in *The Daily Telegraph*. Director Alex Parkinson has already made a documentary about this incident. But while this remarkable story was certainly a “worthy” subject for a factual film, Parkinson’s film adaptation “lacks almost everything that drama needs”: there’s “no conflict” and remarkably little real suspense. Nor are we given much “sense of who these people are outside their dive suits”, said Jeannette Catsoulis in *The New York Times*. Harrelson plays closely to type as a “mildly eccentric, extremely chill old-timer”, while the other two characters are “barely sketched”. Despite its terrifying true-life premise, *Last Breath* is “disappointingly shallow and fatally lethargic”.



## Opus

1hr 43mins (15)

Showbiz satire starring  
John Malkovich

★★

Ayo Edebiri is on typically “charismatic form” in this horror-inflected celebrity satire, said Kevin Maher in *The Times*, but alas, she cannot rescue this “empty non-story”. Edebiri, best known for *The Bear*, plays Ariel, a young journalist working at “a glamorous and wildly successful music magazine” of a sort that hasn’t existed in decades. For reasons that are unclear, she is invited with her boss (*The White Lotus*’s Murray Bartlett) and various VIPs to a “desert-based listening party” where they will be the first people to hear a new album by Moretti (John Malkovich), a pop megastar who has not been heard of since the 1990s. However, at the compound, she senses something is off; he lives among followers who call themselves “Levellists”, and she realises that his real plans do not involve music.

This plot – “unwitting protagonist visits a cult-like retreat, only to discover satirically sinister intentions” – is “well-trodden”, said John Nugent in *Empire*. Still, the film is quite fun. In particular, it is a treat to see Malkovich deliver the pretentious, bejewelled Moretti’s lines in his “uniquely theatrical diction” and perform songs by Nile Rodgers. Director Mark Anthony Green, a former *GQ* writer, is good at creating atmosphere, said Ben Kenigsberg in *The New York Times*. He even “shows off the occasional inspired formal touch”, notably a brawl taking place behind a closed door that is heard but not seen by the audience. Yet the precise target of the satire is never clear, and the film “bets far too much” on its dramatic twists. Green wants to “say something trenchant about fame while cementing his reputation as a sleek new horror auteur”. Unfortunately, he has managed neither.

## Adolescence: outstanding drama about a 13-year-old accused of murder

I’ve watched a lot of TV over the years, but I’m rarely “as blown away” as I was by Netflix’s new drama *Adolescence*, said Deborah Ross in *The Daily Mail*. With each episode shot “in one continuous take with no edits”, the series “puts you right in the middle of the action” – and makes for “shattering” viewing. It begins with a sequence in which armed police, led by two detectives (Ashley Walters and Faye Marsay), storm into a family home at 6am to arrest a 13-year-old boy who is suspected of murder. Jamie’s family “reel with shock”, convinced the police have made a mistake.

The audience, too, is bewildered: could this “sweet-looking boy with dark, tousled hair” have committed a terrible crime, or is it a case of mistaken identity? We follow as Jamie (Owen



Owen Cooper as the accused

Cooper) is driven to the local nick, processed and put in a cell, said Nick Hilton in *The Independent*. His desperate parents (Christine Tremarco, and Stephen Graham, who created the drama with Jack Thorne) arrive as this nightmarish scenario is unfolding. The one-shot technique works superbly in this episode: the confusion, tension and sorrow are palpable. But it makes less sense in later episodes, which cover the next 18 months of the investigation, and in which we learn more about the crime’s context (including the influence of the “manosphere”). It’s a pity that we don’t hear from the family of the victim, said Carol Midgley in *The Times*. But that is a niggle. *Adolescence* is an “outstanding” drama that “tells us something about what it is to be a teenager in 2025”.

## Exhibition of the week **Turner: In Light and Shade**

Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester (0161-275 7450, [whitworth.manchester.ac.uk](http://whitworth.manchester.ac.uk)). Until 2 November

From Remainers to Reform UK voters, from Mike Leigh to the Bank of England's note-makers, everyone seems to agree that Joseph Mallord William Turner "was our greatest artist", said Jonathan Jones in *The Guardian*. And his many admirers are in for a treat this year. This spring marks the 250th anniversary of Turner's birth, and the first of several events commemorating the milestone is this "enlightening" exhibition in Manchester. Fans shouldn't go expecting the dramatic oil paintings for which Turner is best known: the display is first and foremost a showcase for the Whitworth Art Gallery's "superb collection" of the painter's works on paper, notably an "electric" series of 71 "sepia-toned" landscape prints entitled the *Liber Studiorum*, or book of studies, published between 1807 and 1819. The show's title refers to Ruskin's comment: "He paints in colour, but thinks in light and shade." Throughout, Turner astonishes with his "eye for the complex truth of space", capturing ruined abbeys, pastoral scenes and stormy skies in images that fuse "precise drawing" with "poetic ecstasy", revealing "what a thoughtful, patient" observer of the world he was. It is a fine birthday tribute to "Britain's favourite painter".

Turner took printmaking especially seriously, said Gabrielle Schwarz in *The Daily Telegraph*. Often dismissed as merely a means of rendering an existing image "infinitely reproducible"



*Upnor Castle, Kent (1831-32): fusing precise drawing with "poetic ecstasy"*

– and thus a lesser art form – the medium still demands an immense amount of skill. Turner's chosen technique, mezzotint printing, was particularly difficult and "time-consuming", requiring careful preparation of the copper plates onto which images were engraved. Unusually, only a handful of the prints that make up his *Liber Studiorum* are based on completed paintings; the rest are original compositions. He was also unusual in doing much of the engraving himself, rather than delegating the task to a professional. The

results are often "astonishing": it's extraordinary that the "roiling seascape" of *Ships in a Breeze* (1808) consists "of nothing more than dots of brown ink held in the grooves of a copper plate".

The little details in these prints are lovely, said Nancy Durrant in *The Times*. In a view of Mount St Gothard in the Alps, for instance, Turner captures a tired donkey dwarfed by the vast misty peaks in the distance. Yet it's his handling of light and atmospheric conditions – "the clouds and the foam and the fine sea spray, the shadows and reflections, the puffs of smoke and bursts of flame" – that "take your breath away". You emerge from all this into a gallery of watercolours, showing "a golden evening glow" inside a cathedral and "purple moonlight on Lake Lucerne". The colour comes as a pleasant shock "after half-an-hour luxuriating in the warm brown depths of the mezzotints next door". What a "gorgeous display" this is.

## Where to buy...

*The Week reviews an exhibition in a private gallery*

### Roger Hilton

*at Jonathan Clark Fine Art*

This show, entitled *Fifty Years Gone*, marks the 50th anniversary of the death of the protean British abstract artist Roger Hilton. That this body of work exists at all is remarkable in itself: in the early 1970s, Hilton suffered a debilitating stroke and lost the use of his right hand, thereafter working from his bed. The pictures, however, are delirious, elemental things, which have in common a personal visual language of swirls, splatters, spindly pencil lines and often intensely bright colour. Representational forms – animals, furniture and especially nude figures – emerge from the abstract cacophony with increasing regularity as the end approaches. Throughout, the artist keeps cycling back to the idioms of prehistoric cave painting, rejoicing in humanity's capacity



*Doodlebug, 15.2cm x 10.2cm, gouache*

to distil the world around it into graphic form. It's a display to persuade you that Hilton might have been British art's answer to a Brâncuși or a Miró. Prices on request.

17 Crescent Grove, London SW4 (020-7351 3555). Until April, by appointment only.

## The Madonna and the widow

A 16th century painting stolen from an Italian museum more than half a century ago has resurfaced – in Norfolk, says Daniel Cassidy in *ArtNews*. *Madonna and Child* by Antonio Solario, worth around £70,000, was stolen in 1973 from a small museum in Belluno, northern Italy, and found its way to a 16th century manor house in Fakenham owned by the late Baron de Dozza. When his widow, Barbara de Dozza – who had divorced the baron just before his death – tried to sell it in 2017, officials from the Belluno museum had the sale halted, and the work was returned to her. Christopher Marinello, a specialist art lawyer, then tried to convince her that she should return it to the museum, but she insisted that the baron had bought it in good faith, and that the 1980 Limitation Act made it clear that in some circumstances purchasers of stolen goods can be recognised as the rightful owner. She believes, therefore, that the picture belongs to her – even though she doesn't like it as "it reminds her of her ex-husband".







## Best books... Anne Sebba

The biographer and journalist chooses her favourite works about women in war. Her latest book is *The Women's Orchestra of Auschwitz: A Story of Survival* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson £22), which is published this week

**A Train in Winter** by Caroline Moorehead, 2011 (Vintage £10.99). A hugely important book documenting female suffering during WWII and the solidarity that helped some of them survive in the most brutal conditions. The particular train refers to the Convoi des 31000, which left Paris in January 1943 with 230 French women resisters, sent to Auschwitz. Only 49 survived.

**If This Is a Woman** by Sarah Helm, 2015 (Little, Brown £14.99). Helm writes with uncompromising clarity and detail about a horrific, all-female camp established one hour outside Berlin. Nothing I have ever read has had a more chilling effect on

me in understanding the Nazi contempt for human life.

**Avenging Angels: Soviet Women Snipers on the Eastern Front** by Lyuba Vinogradova, 2017 (Quercus £12.99). The Soviet Union employed more women in combat than any other nation before or since. The female soldiers Vinogradova writes about were mostly teenagers, with little or no experience of life, conscripted but still eager to play a role and often inspired by revenge for the killing of a brother or father.

**The Women** by Kristin Hannah, 2024 (Pan Macmillan £9.99). It was after reading this brilliantly researched and

engaging novel that I decided I had to visit Vietnam. It's not simply about the ravages of the Vietnam War, but about how the role of female veterans was erased by the establishment in subsequent years.

**A Diary Without Dates** by Enid Bagnold, 1918 (Legare Street £13.95). She is best known for *National Velvet*, yet before she married, Bagnold was a journalist, and this novel – and a second, *The Happy Foreigner* – is based on her experiences as a nurse and ambulance driver in WWI. Although fiction, their interest lies chiefly in the realistic picture they paint of life for women eager to be part of the war effort.

Titles in print are available from The Week Bookshop on 020-3176 3835. For out-of-print books visit [biblio.co.uk](http://biblio.co.uk)

## The Week's guide to what's worth seeing

### Showing now

Following his lacklustre production of *The Tempest*, Jamie Lloyd returns to form with this "bonkers but brilliantly inventive" **Much Ado About Nothing**, starring Tom Hiddleston and Hayley Atwell (Daily Telegraph). Until 5 April, Theatre Royal Drury Lane, London WC2 ([lwtheatres.co.uk](http://lwtheatres.co.uk)).

Northern Ballet revives its acclaimed 2016 adaptation of **Jane Eyre**, choreographed and directed by Cathy Marston, "one of the best ballet storytellers in the business" (Guardian). Touring until 24 May ([northernballet.com](http://northernballet.com)).

**Women In Revolt! Art and Activism in the UK 1970-1990**, an exploration of feminist art and protest featuring work by more than 100 female artists, arrives in Manchester after successful runs in London and Edinburgh. Until 1 June, The Whitworth, Manchester ([whitworth.manchester.ac.uk](http://whitworth.manchester.ac.uk)).

### Book now

Booking is now open for **Opera Holland Park's** 2025 Season, with productions of Wagner's *The*



*Linda and Snake* (1983) at *Women In Revolt!*

*Flying Dutchman* and a "riotous" Gilbert and Sullivan double-bill of *Trial by Jury/A Matter of Misconduct!*. 27 May-2 August, Holland Park, London W8 ([operahollandpark.com](http://operahollandpark.com)).

Booking is open for another highlight of London's summer music season, the **Somerset House Summer Series**, with the likes of St. Vincent and Aussie folk-rockers The Paper Kites performing over 11 nights. 10-20 July, Somerset House, London WC2 ([somersethouse.org.uk](http://somersethouse.org.uk)).

## Television

### Programmes

**This City Is Ours** New crime drama with Sean Bean. The stakes get higher for a Liverpool criminal when he falls in love and starts a family. Sun 23 Mar, BBC1 21:00 (60mins).

**Love and Loss: The Pandemic, Five Years On** A deeply personal and emotionally charged film looking back at the pandemic through the eyes of the bereaved. Mon 24 Mar, BBC1 20:30 (90mins).

**Rose Ayling-Ellis: Old Hands, New Tricks** The deaf actress sets about teaching British Sign Language to a group of retirees in six weeks, with surprising results. Wed 26 Mar, BBC1 21:00 (60mins).

**Kill List: Hunted by Putin's Spies** Two-part documentary filmed over three years, as investigative journalist Christo Grozev and Russian dissenters are targeted by a Bulgarian spy ring. Thur 27 Mar, C4 22:00 and 23:05 (65 and 60mins respectively).

**My Brain: After the Rupture** The story of broadcaster Clemency Burton-Hill's recovery from a brain haemorrhage. Fri 28 Mar, BBC2 21:00 (85mins).

### Films

**The Big Sleep** (1946) Classic Raymond Chandler adaptation. An LA detective (Humphrey Bogart) investigates a blackmail scheme, and gets involved with the daughter (Lauren Bacall) of his boss. Sat 22 Mar, BBC2 14:40 (110mins).

**Selma** (2014) David Oyelowo stars as Martin Luther King Jr, in this dramatisation of the lead-up to the historic 1965 Civil Rights march. Tue 25 Mar, BBC2 23:05 (120mins).

### New to streaming TV

**The Studio** Seth Rogen writes and stars in this ten-part comedy parodying the venality of Hollywood, featuring a roster of celebrity cameos. From 26 March on Apple TV+.

**The Outrun** Film adaptation of Amy Liptrot's 2015 memoir about her recovery from addiction, starring Saoirse Ronan. On Netflix.

## The Archers: what happened last week

As well as trying to impress at work, a stressed Freddie is now cricket club captain, as Tom has dropped out. Helen gets the all-clear for The Dairy to reopen, to Clarrie and Susan's delight. Emma and Pat dress up to protest at Borsetshire Water's shareholder meeting. Haunted by memories of John's death, Tony thinks Henry is too young to drive the tractor. Henry and Khalil bunk off school to join the demo, but Pat calls their parents. Akram takes Khalil to his oncology appointment; Khalil says he's scared his childhood cancer will come back. As Helen tries to rebuild the business, Tony comes round to the idea of teaching Henry to drive. Visiting George in prison, Brad confesses he can't run his business anymore; George is surprisingly relaxed, saying he has bigger plans. Realising Brad can't play, Freddie persuades Jim to take him on as apprentice scorer. Emma is thrilled when she gets a letter saying George wants to see her. With no new business and the accounts in a bad way, Helen has a choice: she has to lose either Susan or Clarrie from the Dairy.



## Little gems



▲ **Fife:** West Shore, Pittenweem. This charming and traditional end-terraced cottage is just a few steps from the beach. 2 beds, family bath, kitchen, recep, garden. OIEO £295,000; Rollos (01334-477774).



▼ **Somerset:** Bramble Cottage, Barrington. A fine cottage overlooking the parish church. 5 beds, 2 baths, shower, kitchen, 4 receps, outbuildings, garden. £650,000; Symonds & Sampson (01460-200790).



▲ **London:** Peel Street, Notting Hill Gate. London's second-narrowest home is cleverly arranged over three floors. Built in the 1930s, the property offers easy access to Kensington High Street and Holland Park. 2 beds, family bath, shower, kitchen, recep, terrace. £1.25m; Unique Property (020-3987 1739).



► **Buckinghamshire:** Horn House, Winslow. A picturesque 16th century, timber-framed, brick under tile cottage boasting many original features. 4 beds, family bath, kitchen, 2 receps, garden. £400,000; Michael Graham (01280-441895).



► **Cornwall:** The Shrimp, Port Isaac. A Grade II fisherman's cottage located close to the harbour in the heart of this popular Cornish village. Main suite, open-plan kitchen/living room. £280,000; John Bray Estates (01208-862601).







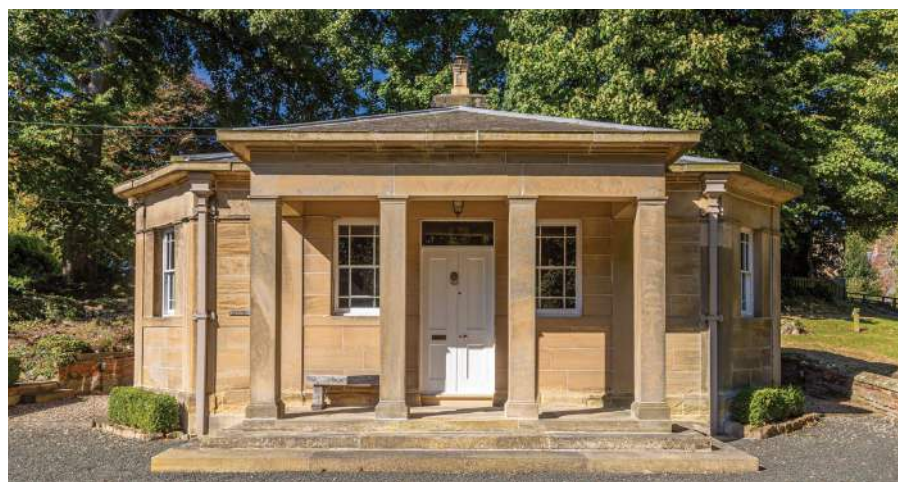
▲ **Cambridgeshire:** The Dolls House, Caxton. Delightful Grade II thatched cottage built in the 1700s. 3 beds, family bath, shower, kitchen/dining room, 2 receps, garden, garage. £575,000; Fine & Country (0330-333 1060).

◀ **Kent:** Lyndhurst Drive, Sevenoaks. An eye-catching octagonal ragstone house built in 1830. Main suite, 1 further bed, shower, kitchen/dining room, 2 receps, garden, garage. £860,000; Savills (01732-789700).



◀ **London:** Railway Side, Barnes. A cosy Victorian cottage in the heart of Little Chelsea, overlooking allotments. 2 beds, family bath, kitchen/dining room, recep, garden. £935,000; Savills (020-8939 6900).

► **Hampshire:** Bickton, Fordingbridge. This chocolate-box thatched cottage is located between the New Forest and Cranborne Chase. 2 beds, family bath, shower, kitchen, 2 receps, garden, garage. OIEO £600,000; Spencers (01425-462600).



▲ **Northumberland:** South Lodge, Belford. A stylish Palladian former gatekeeper's lodge, built in 1818 by the renowned neo-classical architect John Dobson. Main suite, kitchen, recep, garden, parking. £250,000; Finest Properties (01434-622234).



I wanted to  
*maximise the  
value* of my  
home.



He trusted the  
agent that *sold  
40% more homes\**  
over £1m than  
anyone else.

savills

\*Source: TwentyCi UK exchanged data 2024



### In praise of Gentleman's Relish

The anchovy paste Patum Peperium – Latin for “peppered paste” – isn’t for everyone, says Ameer Kotecha in *The Spectator*. It is “brown and sludgy” in appearance, and has a “pongy odour”. Yet for nearly 200 years, its “savoury piquancy” and air of refinement have earned it “legions of fans”. Launched in 1828, it first “found favour” in the gentlemen’s clubs of Pall Mall, and acquired the moniker “Gentleman’s Relish”. Today, it “still offers proper English cachet”, but its fan base has widened: Nigella is an enthusiast, as was the late Rose Gray of the River Cafe. Classically, Gentlemen’s Relish is spread on hot buttered toast, but its umami character makes it useful in cooking. Add a small teaspoon to a shepherd’s pie (as you might Worcestershire sauce), melt it into scrambled eggs, or scrape it onto a rosti or pommes Anna. While I have noticed it “popping up” recently in a few trendy spots, the good news is that it hasn’t yet “experienced Instagram inflation” – and so a pot at Sainsbury’s or Waitrose will only set you back around £3.

### Tips for a perfect steak

Steak, for many, is already an indulgence, says Tony Turnbull in *The Times*. And it’s becoming even costlier. In the UK, beef production is projected to fall by 5% this year, while demand is set to rise by 1% – which means “prices are only heading in one direction”. Already, a fillet steak at the



*Gentleman's Relish: an umami punch*

Côte Brasserie chain costs £32.50. Given that it could soon cost more, some may feel that it’s time to “stock up on oven chips” and perfect their grilling techniques at home. There’s no definitive method for cooking steak, but most chefs would agree on a few basics. Aim to get a steak that is between 2cm and 4cm thick: this allows you to create a “flavour-enhancing char” without overcooking the centre. If possible, avoid supermarket steaks, which are “stewed in vacuum packs”, and instead get them from a butcher, or a good online supplier. As for cuts, bear in mind that there’s a trade-off between tenderness and flavour. For most connoisseurs, ribeye steak “delivers the best balance of the

two”. Bring your steak up to room temperature before cooking, add it to a very hot pan, and “sear it for one to two minutes on one side, without moving, then flip and repeat”. Next, “add a crushed unpeeled garlic clove and some thyme plus lots of butter and baste the steak while turning it a couple more times”. Test it with a temperature probe: rare is 50°C, and medium rare 55°C. Finally, rest the steak “for as long as you cooked it”.

### A new threat to restaurants

In recent years, the restaurant industry has faced a series of blows, from Covid lockdowns to sharply rising food and labour costs, says Hannah Twigg in *The Independent*. Now, it has a new challenge, in the form of weight-loss drugs such as Wegovy, which work by dramatically reducing people’s appetite, and which also suppress alcohol cravings. In the US, some restaurants in New York and Los Angeles have adjusted to a wave of appetite-less diners by introducing half-portion, smaller plates and “luxury bites”. Now, there are signs that the British restaurant scene is starting to feel the Wegovy effect too. “More customers are coming in just for drinks, or ordering a couple of starters to share,” says Nima Safaei, who owns two restaurants in Soho. They are also, he adds, drinking less, making it a double blow. It’s clear that with the food no longer the “main event” for many diners, restaurants will need to get creative to keep afloat.

## Recipe of the week: Erica’s harira soup

This dish is a real winner, says Leon’s director of food, Erica Molyneux. My version of a warming, gently spiced Moroccan soup-stew, finished with a swirl of harissa, it’s perfect for a simple weeknight supper or for when you have friends over.

*Serves 4*

2 tbsp olive oil 1 large onion, finely chopped 3 cloves of garlic, finely chopped 3 carrots, finely chopped  
2 celery sticks, finely chopped 2cm piece of ginger, finely chopped 3 sprigs of flat-leaf parsley, leaves picked, stalks finely chopped  
600g boneless leg or boneless shoulder of lamb 1 tbsp ground cumin 1 tbsp ground turmeric  
1 heaped tsp ground cinnamon 1 heaped tsp ground coriander 3 bay leaves 1 tbsp tomato purée  
700ml hot vegetable stock 1 x 400g can good-quality chopped tomatoes 1 x 400g can chickpeas, plus their liquid  
salt and freshly ground black pepper

*To serve: plain live yoghurt 2 tbsp harissa warmed flatbreads*

- Drizzle the olive oil into a large pan over a low-medium heat and sauté the chopped vegetables, ginger and parsley stalks for 10 minutes, until softened.
- Meanwhile, trim the lamb of excess fat and cut the meat into 2-3cm pieces.
- Season the softened vegetables with salt and pepper, then add the lamb. Turn up the heat to brown the lamb, and cook for 5-7 minutes, stirring often.
- Add the ground spices, the bay leaves and tomato purée, stir well and cook for a further 3 minutes. Add the stock,



tomatoes, chickpeas and their liquid, stir well and bring to the boil. Lower the heat, cover with a lid and simmer for 1 hour.

- Remove the lid and cook for a further 30 minutes, or until the meat is tender. (You can add a bit of water if it gets a little too thick.)
- Season to taste and portion into wide bowls. Serve with a dollop of the yoghurt, a swirl of harissa, a sprinkling of finely chopped parsley leaves and a warmed flatbread.

*Taken from Leon Big Flavours by Rebecca Seal, published by Conran at £22. Photography by Steven Joyce.  
To buy from The Week Bookshop for £19.99, call 020-3176 3835 or visit theweekbookshop.co.uk.*

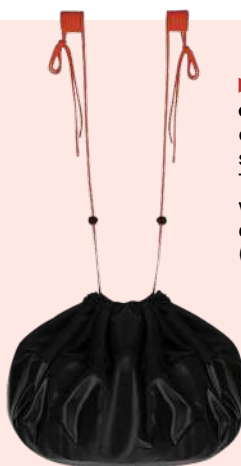
## The best... wild swimming kit



► **Wild Moose Caribou waterproof backpack**

Designed specifically for wild swimmers, this roomy 45-litre backpack is made from tough tarpaulin with heat-welded seams. It has a roll-top to keep your stuff dry, various pockets, and a separate waterproof bag for your wet things (£65; wild-moose.co.uk).

◀ Visibility is better with a mask than goggles, says year-round swimmer Ella Foote. The low-profile **Aquasphere Defy Ultra swim mask** offers brilliant vision, laterally and vertically, and the silicone skirt is soft and snug (£115; uk.aquasphereswim.com).



► **Lomo Neoprene swimming cap** A bright hat is key in open water, so you can be seen by other water users. This one is double lined for warmth, while the Velcro chin strap keeps it secure (£18; decathlon.co.uk).



◀ A **Zone3 wetsuit changing mat** is great for keeping your feet off muddy, wet ground and protecting your clothes as you change. This mat doubles up as a drawstring bag for your wet gear (£20; zone3.com).

► **Stanley Milestones thermal bottle** With "4D Thermology" insulation, this one-litre bottle will keep drinks hot for hours. It comes with its own cup and it can go in the dishwasher (£100; uk.stanley1913.com).



► **Zoggs Brave crossback swimsuit** This has a thermal silver lining, which helps retain body heat. The outer fabric is made from recycled plastic and the neon design helps with visibility (£65; zoggs.com).



▼ These **Fourth Element 3mm Neoprene gloves** are warm, robust and grippy (£58; fourthelement.com). **Two Bare Feet** sells **7mm Neoprene wetsuit socks** with a textured sole (£16; twobarefeet.co.uk). Look for a snug fit for both, to keep extremities warm.



◀ **Voited 3-in-1 Wearever jacket** This versatile windproof and water-repellent jacket can be worn as a coat, a reversible vest – or both, for extra warmth. It has an adjustable hood, protected pockets and storm flaps, plus a padded outer shell and "CloudTouch" lining for insulation (£199; voited.co.uk).



◀ **Dippy Wild Swim tow float** Tow floats (which you tow behind you) make you more visible to people on boats and elsewhere. This vibrant safety buoy has strong handles and an adjustable belt (£22; dippy.store).



## Tips... when and how to book your holiday

- If you are going away at a peak time, book as early as possible. And always book car hire early (ideally with free cancellation).
- If you're planning a villa holiday in the high but not peak season, you may get a good deal a few weeks before departure, when owners are getting anxious to fill the slots. Size matters: it will be easier to find a better selection of bigger houses outside of the school holidays.
- The best escorted and specialist tours sell out first, so book early. Aito (aito.co.uk) is invaluable for finding specialist operators.
- Cottages and villas are best booked via a reputable agent, whereas with hotels, you'll usually do better to book direct.
- Book short-haul flights on the airline's website. You're unlikely to find a better deal elsewhere, and it will be harder to cancel or change flights. For long haul, it's worth trying an expert agent such as Trailfinders.
- Eurostar prices tend to rise sharply about three months before departure.

SOURCE: THE DAILY TELEGRAPH

THE WEEK 22 March 2025

## And for those who have everything...



The perfect present from the book lover with everything: the gifting of a mobile library, designed and made in Rwanda, to spread the joy of literacy. Good Gifts has been funding donkey-drawn libraries in sub-Saharan Africa for years; these new models are electric-powered.

**£6,000; goodgifts.org**

SOURCE: THE TIMES

## The internet... glasses and contact lenses deals

**Glasses Direct** sells glasses and sunglasses, including designer brands, plus contact lenses, and offers free returns and a home trial service (glassesdirect.co.uk).

**Vision Express** also has a wide selection of frames and good offers, such as 50% off a second pair, plus contacts. It has free lifetime servicing, and offers monthly payment options (visionexpress.com).

**Boots Opticians** also offers the second pair half price for prescription glasses and sunglasses, and it has a Contact Lens Rewards Plan, too (boots.com/opticians).

Contact lens specialist **Vision Direct** is based in Europe, so won't need to see your prescription, and has a Live Chat to help you order online. It offers two free trial packs of its own-brand lenses (visiondirect.co.uk).

**Specscart** has free next-day delivery, even at weekends, and a try-at-home service for up to four frames. It also sells ski goggles (specscart.co.uk).

SOURCE: THE LONDON STANDARD



## This week's dream: a horseback safari in the wilds of Zambia

The sight of lions “lurking” in the grass lends a certain edge to most African riding safaris – but there are places where you can take in the continent’s magnificent landscapes on horseback “without feeling like prey”. One such is Simalaha, says Sophy Roberts in the FT. This roadless, 18,000sq km community conservancy on the banks of the Zambezi River in Zambia was founded in 2012 by two local Lozi chieftains, in collaboration with the Peace Parks Foundation, which works to rewild ecosystems stretching across national borders in southern Africa. Many species have been reintroduced, including roan antelope, eland, sable and giraffe. So far, however, there are no big cats, and recently a Zambian couple, Gail Kleinschmidt and Doug Evans, launched riding safaris here – the only tourism operation in the area.

Most guests of Zambian Horseback Safaris fly into Livingstone, next to the Victoria Falls, and travel to Simalaha by boat – a glorious journey along the “colossal, swirling” Zambezi, past



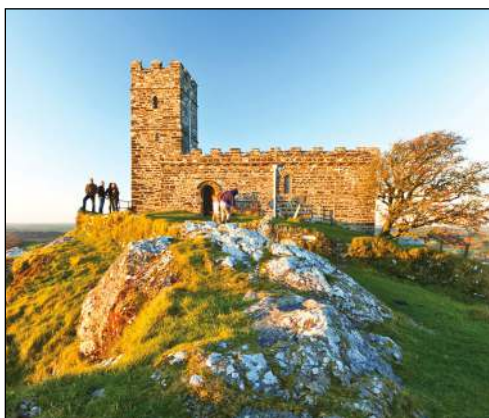
*The horses graze freely as a herd and guests ride out twice a day*

There was lots of wildlife to see, including galloping herds of wildebeest; and plenty of time to chat with local villagers and cattle herders, or just to take in the heart-stopping views across the landscape, punctuated with “islands of waxen baobabs” and “lines of grazing game”. *Safarious (safarious.com) has a seven-night trip from £3,270pp, excluding flights.*

“belching” hippos and “fat” crocodiles “basking on bone-white sands”. The accommodation consists of four tented guest rooms on wooden stilts, each with a terrace facing a waterhole, and a kitchen hidden in a copse, where a Lozi chef, Henry Mununga, cooks up “spectacularly good” food (including flame-seared steaks, nasturtium and green leaf salads, and homemade ice cream). The 25 horses graze freely as a herd, and guests ride out twice a day – morning and evening – to beat the “sizzling” midday heat.

Simalaha is on the Zambezi’s flood plain – this is “big sky country” – and when I was there, shortly before the rains, the light was often magical.

## Getting the flavour of...



### Exploring Andalusia by train

A luxury train used by British royalty in the 1930s, Al-Andalus was acquired by the Spanish state railway company in 1985. Forty years on, its week-long trips from Granada to Cádiz remain a wonderfully “romantic” way to explore Andalusia, says Sarah Gordon in *The Sunday Times*. With its “oak panelling, brass details and royal-red furnishings”, the train feels like a “boutique hotel on wheels”, and it has comfortable en-suite cabins and a dining car that serves excellent food rooted in local culinary traditions. The views along the way – of snow-capped mountains, rolling hills and whitewashed villages – are marvellous, as are the places where it stops (which include Baeza, Úbeda, Córdoba, Seville, Jerez and Ronda). Guided tours, lunches at “charming” restaurants, and activities such as a sherry tasting and a visit to an olive oil cooperative are included in the price. *The seven-night trip costs from £4,984pp (eltrenalandalus.com).*

### The peaceful appeal of Pune

Their “crowds and hectic pace” can make India’s biggest cities “overwhelming”. Pune, however, offers a similar “buzz”, but on a more human scale, says Olivia Greenway in *The Times*. With seven million people to Mumbai’s 22 million, Pune has long been a popular weekend getaway from the larger city, 95 miles to its northwest. Although it was the seat of the *peshwas*, the prime ministers of the vast Maratha Empire, in the 18th century, it has relatively few grand historical monuments, but it does have a wonderfully atmospheric old town – a labyrinth of streets packed with colourful shops, independent cafés, and palatial old wooden houses known as *wadas*. And as one of India’s main tech hubs today, Pune has no shortage of “smart” hotels and “hip” new restaurants that have only enhanced its long-standing reputation for excellent food.

### A pilgrimage across Dartmoor

Perched “dramatically” on one of Dartmoor’s outlying western tors, St Michael de Rupe is said to be the highest church in southern England, says Oliver Smith in *The Guardian*. And this gloriously rugged medieval building (pictured) marks the start of a 38-mile pilgrimage path created by the diocese of Exeter in 2021. The Archangel’s Way winds through the “remote” northern reaches of the national park to another St Michael’s church, in Chagford. Walking it in winter, I was glad to find charming villages with welcoming pubs along the way. But it is the “desolate” beauty of the wild places that has stayed with me, as well as the prehistoric sites – stone circles and “cryptic megaliths” – I passed, and the dark local folklore that brings the landscape and its mysterious past to life.

## Hotel of the week



### Blackberry Farm Tennessee, US

Set beside Tennessee’s Great Smoky Mountains National Park, Blackberry Farm is a “Southern sanctuary”, of “storybook perfection”, says Jesse Ashlock in *Condé Nast Traveller*. It has 68 rooms, including cottages, which balance “rustic country style” with “functional modernity”. Inventive but comforting dishes are served in a 200-year-old timber-framed barn that was moved here from Pennsylvania Dutch Country. There’s a spa and pool, activities for children (including petting the Italian truffle-hunting dogs bred on site), and “adventure guides” are on hand to take you fishing, hiking and riding.

*Doubles from about £900; blackberryfarm.com.*

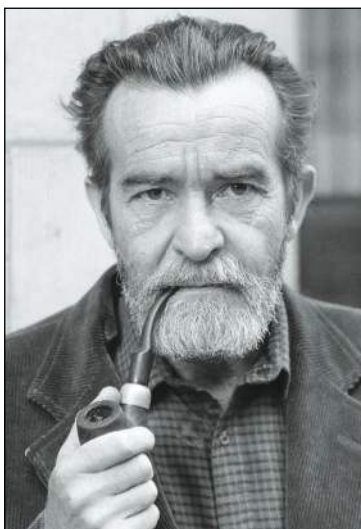
## Dissident playwright who shone a light on Apartheid

**Athol Fugard**  
1932-2025

In 1967, after his first major play was televised in Britain, Athol Fugard was told that he had a choice: to leave South Africa and never return, or to stay and have his passport confiscated. He opted to stay, said *The Times*. Fugard, who came to be regarded as South Africa's greatest playwright, felt that he had to write about the cruel psychological impact of the Apartheid regime in the country where it was taking place. And though he was unable to leave for several years, his work travelled: as well as to desegregated audiences at home, it was performed at the Royal Court in London, in the West End and on Broadway, and did much to draw the world's attention to Apartheid's injustices and absurdities.

His plays, which tended to focus on the experiences of his black compatriots, were not overtly political, said *The New York Times*. He described himself as "a storyteller", not a "pamphleteer". But he acknowledged that it was impossible to "tell a South African story accurately and truthfully and for it not to have a political spin-off", and his work was "viscerally powerful". In *Blood Knot*, two half-brothers, one of whom can pass for white, are divided by their skin colour; *The Island* centres on a pair of cell-mates rehearsing a production of *Antigone* on Robben Island. In *Sizwe Banzi is Dead*, a man steals a dead person's identity to get the pass book he needs to survive. Fugard spoke of a need for writers to bear witness; he was determined, however, to produce art not agitprop, and so his plays resonated widely, and continued to be performed after Apartheid had ended.

The son of a jazz musician of Irish descent and an Afrikaner mother who ran a lodging house and tea room, Athol Fugard was brought up in Port Elizabeth. In his journals, he would recall an incident in his teens that haunted him for years afterwards, and which featured in his play "*Master Harold*"... and the Boys (1982). He had befriended one of his parents' black employees, a man who became almost a surrogate father to him. But one day, after they'd had a rare quarrel, he saw the man in the street –



Fugard: favoured art over agitprop

and spat in his face. "I don't suppose I will ever deal with the shame that overwhelmed me the second after I had done that."

He studied philosophy at the University of Cape Town, but he dropped out to hitchhike across the continent, then found work on a tramp steamer. He wanted to be a novelist, but back in Cape Town he fell in love with an actress, Sheila Meiring, who became his first wife, and with whom he started putting on plays. Later, they moved to Johannesburg, where he worked as a court clerk, processing violations of the racist pass laws. "We sent an African to jail once every two minutes," he said of the experience, which he detested, and which inspired his early plays. He then travelled to London, hoping to find theatre work there. He had no luck, but it was in London that he wrote *Blood Knot*. Following the Sharpeville Massacre of 1960, when many white liberals decided to leave South Africa to escape the crackdown on political activity, he and his wife felt compelled to go home.

Fugard was determined to collaborate with the "wronged community", said Mark Lawson in *The Guardian*, rather than write about the evils of Apartheid alone in his study in a white neighbourhood. This was not easy: police raided their rehearsals; performances were at secret locations, by invitation. Still, as a white man who'd run a largely black theatre cooperative, and used his black actors' experiences in his work, he was bound to attract attention when people started to worry about "appropriation". Fugard, however, had been alert to this: the black actors John Kani and Winston Ntshona were credited as the co-creators of two of his major plays, *The Island* and *Sizwe Banzi...*, with royalties split three ways. They were jailed for performing them in South Africa; and he'd have been the first to acknowledge that they and others were the "theatrical Mandelas of free South Africa". He called himself a "classic example of the impotent, white liberal"; though in fact, he was "an epitome of the good people who, in Hannah Arendt's formulation, must act if evil is not to prevail".

## The world's oldest known Holocaust survivor

**Rose Girone**  
1912-2025

Rose Girone, who has died aged 113, attributed her longevity to eating a lot of dark chocolate, said *The Times*. She may have been right to do so. But her passion for knitting had also helped. She had knitted clothes to keep herself and her family alive after they'd fled the Nazis in 1939; she had used her knitting to smuggle her paltry savings to the US after the War, and her knitting paid the rent in the decades that followed. By the time of her death, she was the oldest resident of New York; the fifth-oldest person in America; the 28th-oldest person in the world, and the world's oldest known Holocaust survivor.



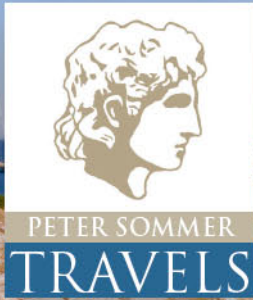
Girone: taught until she was 105

Rose Raubvogel was born in 1912 in a town that was then in Poland, now Ukraine. When she was six, her parents moved to Hamburg, where they opened a theatrical costume business. In 1938, she entered an arranged marriage to a German Jew, Julius Mannheim. They were living in Breslau – now Wrocław, in Poland – at the time of Kristallnacht. Her husband was arrested and sent to Buchenwald; a Nazi officer spared her because she was heavily pregnant. Then, a few months

later, a cousin who'd got to Britain sent her a safe transit visa for Shanghai, one of the few ports still open to Jews. Mannheim was allowed to leave Buchenwald on condition that he forfeited their possessions, and the couple set sail with their baby daughter. In Shanghai, he drove a cab for a while, but in 1941 Jews were forced into a ghetto. They spent the next six years living in a former bathroom in a rat- and cockroach-infested building; food was scarce, but Rose, who'd taken up knitting as a child, sold her knitwear to a fashionable local shop, which kept them going. After the War, they moved again, to the US. To evade currency restrictions, she folded the cash she'd saved (\$80) very small, then knitted it into buttons.

Despite not speaking English, she found work and an outlet for her knitwear. Later, she opened her own shop and knitting studio. She divorced Mannheim, and married Jack Girone (who predeceased her). She was still teaching knitting at 105. "Her theories were always, 'Don't sweat the small stuff', and 'Anything you can fix with money is not a problem'," said her daughter. Also, have a plan – wake up with a sense of purpose. And she never stopped saying: "Aren't we lucky?"





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# Companies in the news ...and how they were assessed



## Seven days in the Square Mile

The latest Bank of America survey of fund managers found that investors made their "biggest ever" cut to their **US equity allocations** in March. Stagflation fears, trade wars and an end to US exceptionalism were cited as drivers of a "bull crash" in sentiment. Allocations to eurozone stocks registered the sharpest shift out of the US into Europe since BoA's records began in 1999; the UK allocation also jumped. The OECD warned the trade war is taking a "significant toll" on the global economy and cut **growth forecasts** for a dozen G20 countries. The US Fed and the Bank of England met to set **interest rates**: both were expected to keep them on hold.

The German carmaker **Audi**, owned by VW, announced plans to axe 7,500 jobs amid "increasingly tougher" economic conditions. In a sign of the times, the country's largest defence contractor, **Rheinmetall**, is looking to take over redundant VW plants to expand capacity.

The value of Elon Musk's social media site **X** was reported to have soared back to \$44bn – the price at which Musk bought the former Twitter. Swiss bank **UBS** pushed back its net-zero targets by a decade, echoing a similar plan by **HSBC**. **Santander** became the latest bank to announce UK branch cuts: it will shutter 95 branches, putting 750 jobs at risk. Hedge fund manager **Crispin Odey** was banned from the City and handed a £1.8m fine by the FCA, for deliberately frustrating an investigation into sex misconduct allegations. He will appeal.

## John Lewis Partnership: turning a corner

There are some British retailers "we really want to succeed", said Alex Brummer in the Daily Mail: "legacy firms with a strong heritage" that have fallen on hard times. Although one in this category, M&S, has been gloriously revived, its old rival, the John Lewis Partnership, has lagged behind. Fortunately, "a corner has been turned". Pre-tax profits climbed by 73% to £97m in the year to January 2025 – though the decision to withhold staff bonuses for the third year running shows "full recovery is some way off". The sales uplift largely came from the Waitrose supermarket arm, "driven by increased volume and a new trendy partnership with Ottolenghi". Doubtless the partnership's new chairman – Tesco émigré Jason Tarry – will claim some credit for the recuperation, but sales across John Lewis stores remain flat. Tarry said he plans "to prioritise investment" over the bonus, said Lex in the FT. Still, its continued non-appearance "sends a 'glum message' to staff about the state of UK retail – partly because the employee-owned group used to make such a big song and dance about it. Given rising employment costs, one can understand the need to economise. But there is "a fine balance". Happy shop-floor staff "are vital to delivering the improvements and the customer service required to drive sales". Tarry would be "unwise to ditch the tradition for good".

## Alphabet/Wiz: securing cloudland

If at first you don't succeed, come back with an extra \$10bn in the saddlebag. The strategy appears to have worked for Google-owner Alphabet, which has finally snared Wiz – the Israeli cloud-computing cybersecurity expert – for \$32bn in cash, said Andrew Martin on Bloomberg. The startup turned down a \$23bn offer last year. The deal, the biggest in Alphabet's history, would fill an important gap in the tech giant's armoury as it "works to catch up with" Microsoft and Amazon in the competitive cloud-computing market. Wiz, founded in 2020, offers cybersecurity tools that identify and prioritise threats in often-complex cloud environments. One reason the deal struggled to get over the line last year was competition concerns, said DealBook in The New York Times. "Has the calculus changed under the Trump administration?" Alphabet clearly thinks so.

## Thames Water: as seen on TV

Another week, another trip through the courts for Thames Water as it battles its way towards some kind of "renaissance", said Robert Lea in The Times. The Court of Appeal has backed an earlier legal ruling that would allow a £3bn rescue refinancing – enabling the vexed utility to avoid nationalisation, and remain "firmly in the hands of a bunch of hedge funds who have been gaming the debt markets". The bubbling question remains, said Nils Pratley in The Guardian: how did Britain's biggest water company get into this mess? Now we can really wallow in it, thanks to a fly-on-the-wall documentary from BBC Two: *Thames Water: Inside the Crisis*, which follows the company's rising debts (£19bn and counting) and its dance with regulator Ofwat over bill hikes. It's unclear why Thames agreed to the programme. Perhaps it hopes that shots of frustrated front-line staff will persuade the public that higher bills are needed to pay for new infrastructure. "Nobody comes to work to put shit in rivers," says the company's communications director. "At the end of the day, it is about helping people not to totally hate us."

## US legal firms: Trump's chilling Big Law crackdown

In the two months since he took office, President Trump has "signed through a blitzkrieg of executive orders", said Louis Goss in The Daily Telegraph. But his use of edicts to target legal firms he considers hostile is particularly unsettling. This month, Trump unleashed an executive order effectively blocking the Seattle law firm Perkins Coie (which has acted for Hillary Clinton and financier George Soros) from US government work, by taking the "highly unusual step" of removing its lawyers' security clearances. It follows a similar action in February against the prestigious Washington "white-shoe" firm Covington & Burling. Now Trump has issued "a third order" targeting one of America's most profitable corporate law firms, Paul Weiss.



"Either you're my friend or not"

Prof Daniel Richman of Columbia Law School told the FT. It's an "either you're my friend or not" approach that "transcends law ethics and any other constraints that normally bind governments". The moves are "likely illegal" and could violate the First Amendment, which guarantees the freedom of association.

The measures are already hurting the earnings of those blacklisted, said DealBook in The New York Times: Perkins Coie reports a "significant" loss of revenues. The firm has fought back – a judge has temporarily barred the Trump administration "from carrying out punishments" – but fear and uncertainty stalk the sector. Paul Weiss, for instance, appears to have been targeted because Mark Pomerantz, a lawyer who left the firm in 2012, later tried to build a criminal case against Trump. No wonder other big firms are "scrambling" to assess past work, "to see if they might be vulnerable" too.

"These are extraordinary moves... intended to chill law firms in their choice of clients and in the positions they take for clients,"

## Issue of the week: the Mar-a-Lago accord

*A Maga economic blueprint proposes upending the global financial system. Could it fly?*

Indices of economic uncertainty have skyrocketed above even the 2020 pandemic or the 2008 global financial crisis, as Donald Trump intensifies his trade war, said Gillian Tett in the FT. It could yet get worse. Amid all the tariff shocks, there is another question hovering. “Could Trump’s assault on free trade lead to attacks on free capital flows too?” Put another way, “might tariffs on goods be a prelude to tariffs on money?” Until recently, the notion would have seemed crazy. After all, foreign capital inflows benefit both US companies and the public purse, helping to fund America’s \$36trn national debt. But an opposite theory, advanced by the maverick economist Michael Pettis, has gained traction among “a trio” of influential Trump advisers. A new plan dubbed the “Mar-a-Lago accord”, after Trump’s Florida resort – and reportedly supported by Vice-President J.D. Vance, treasury secretary Scott Bessent and the chair of the Council of Economic Advisers, Stephen Miran – wouldn’t just upend US economic policy, but completely “reset global trade and finance”.

The basic problem, as proponents see it, is that the US dollar is too expensive, said John Rapley in The Globe and Mail (Canada). Having risen by some 40% against other major currencies since the 2008 crisis, it has made US exports expensive for foreigners



*A trio of advisers met at Trump’s Florida resort*

and imports cheap for Americans. “Put it all together and you have a rising trade deficit that now exceeds \$1trn a year.” Supporters of devaluation cite a 1985 precedent, when the Reagan administration negotiated the Plaza Accord with Britain, Japan, France and West Germany to strengthen their currencies against the dollar. But this is a completely different beast. For a start, it is unlikely to be consensual: China would resist, and probably the Europeans too. And while the 1985 deal merely weakened the dollar, the Mar-a-Lago plan includes a possible US debt restructuring too – potentially forcing foreign governments to swap some of their reserve dollars for long-term bonds, using Trump’s favourite “carrot-and-stick” tactics.

The accord is riven with contradictions. It advises weakening the dollar, yet keeping it strong enough to remain the world’s reserve currency; and raising import prices, yet reducing inflation. Even Miran, its author, concedes the risks are “substantial”, said Ruth Sunderland in the Daily Mail. The plan may become “a blueprint for Maga” – or may never see the light of day. But even if other nations agree on the need for such a fundamental rebalancing, is a mercurial president who thinks “he can bully, abuse and alienate friends and foes with impunity” really “the man to carry it out”?

## China’s renaissance: what the experts think

### ● AI-powered boom

Ever since DeepSeek, China’s hottest AI startup, shook the world with its “whizzy model” in January, “the effect on Chinese markets has been staggering”, said The Economist. “Stocks are experiencing their best start to the year on record, leaving American ones in the dust.” The Hang Seng Tech Index, which tracks the biggest Chinese tech companies listed in Hong Kong, is up by more than 40%, while the Nasdaq has fallen by 9%. Hundreds of large Chinese enterprises – from carmakers and energy companies, to banks and food providers – are gearing up to deploy the technology, “triggering a surge of capital spending through the supply chain”. This week, tech giant Baidu joined the throng: launching Ernie X1 as a rival to DeepSeek, said Kimberley Kao in The Wall Street Journal. Meanwhile, news that China’s answer to Tesla, BYD, has developed an EV system that it says cuts charging times to just five minutes sent the carmaker’s shares to an all-time high.

### ● The “Xi put”

Although the Chinese surge has so far been driven by tech, other sectors are getting stuck in, said Bloomberg. Investment



*DeepSeek: boosting Chinese markets*

strategist Christy Tan, of Franklin Templeton, thinks the belief that Beijing will deploy market-friendly measures to achieve its 5% growth target are fostering a “Xi put” – heralding a “notable shift” just as belief in a “Trump put” is fading fast. Foreign investors are already lining up.

The broad MSCI China Index has soared almost 20% this year and is “on course” for its biggest quarterly outperformance since 2007. Fresh government measures to “boost consumption” and raise birthrates are also having a positive impact, said the FT. Shares in drinks company Kweichow Moutai are up sharply. Ditto baby milk companies Feihe, Beingmate and Aiyingshi.

### ● Bullish momentum

Will the boom last? Plenty of things could derail it, said The Economist. Harsher US restrictions on semiconductors could bring “China’s AI euphoria to an abrupt end”. And, as Morningstar analyst Kai Wang argues, the broader rally could fade if “government support for the economy” fails to materialise. Investors have been led up the garden path before. It’s clear, though, that “bullish momentum” is building, said Bloomberg. China looks to be back in play.

## Golden year

“The furnaces are roaring 24 hours a day at the Argor-Heraeus refinery in southern Switzerland,” said Leslie Hook in the FT. The foundry has been “working around the clock since December” to keep up with massive demand for 1kg gold bars in New York, where fears that President Trump “could slap tariffs on gold imports have upended the market”.

It’s a global up-tick. Bullion has been “among the world’s best-performing assets” since Trump took office in January, surging by 14% to a new record high above \$3,000 per troy ounce. Institutional and private investors are piling into the “safe haven metal” to hedge “against economic turbulence”, said Heraeus metals trader Alexander Zumpfe. The price has risen “nearly tenfold” since 2000, outperforming big stock indices.

After breaking through \$3,000, gold extended its “historic rally” this week, said Reuters. It looks set to continue. Tensions in the Middle East “add to the litany of drivers pushing gold higher”, said Kyle Rodda of Capital.com. The World Gold Council thinks that if the price holds above \$3,000, “it could trigger additional buying”. Forecasters at Melbourne-based ANZ have raised their three-month forecast to \$3,100 and their six-month forecast to \$3,200, citing “escalating geopolitical and trade tensions, easing monetary policy and central bank buying”.



## US stocks are in falling knife territory

**Katie Martin**

*Financial Times*

“US stocks are being monstered,” says Katie Martin: they were already 5% down by the middle of the month. One of the notable things about this battering is that government bonds aren’t really picking up the slack. This is not a good sign. “Treasures are typically the yin to stocks’ yang” – they generally jump as investors flock to safer shores. That this hasn’t happened speaks volumes about the nature of the current rout. “It’s not the economy, stupid” – the economic data is wobbly but not terrible – but “a sentiment shock”. It’s “the tariffs, the geopolitics” and the “uncertainty” doing the damage. That makes it harder to fix. The mood out there is dreadful. Big investors, still “all-in on American exceptionalism” at the start of the year, are ditching US assets. The US Fed, which rode to the rescue after the Covid crisis five years ago, is powerless to help in this scenario, leaving “no short-term catalyst” to turn around the situation. “Barring a personality transplant for the US president, an intervention from an adult in the room, or a sudden crash in the real economy that sparks massive Fed cuts, there’s nothing to stop the rot.”

## A wake-up call for the Billionaire Raj

**Andy Mukherjee**

*Bloomberg*

Donald Trump has promised to impose tit-for-tat tariffs on Indian imports to the US on 2 April – and New Delhi is in “damage-control mode”, says Andy Mukherjee. Last week, two of India’s largest wireless carriers – whose billionaire owners were hitherto staunchly opposed to giving Elon Musk free access to their market – announced partnerships with his Starlink satellite operation. Narendra Modi’s government is making noises about slashing the 110% duty it currently places on Tesla car imports. Over the past decade, Modi’s economic strategy has “relied heavily on a small team of national champions”, run by oligarchs, which are larded with government contracts and shielded from foreign competition by some of the world’s highest tariffs. Trump is poking holes in that model. Given the choice between lowering agricultural tariffs – “politically expensive” when nearly half of India’s workforce are in farming – or making concessions elsewhere, it looks “safer to push the burden of Trump’s tantrums to local billionaires”. The sudden enthusiasm for Musk’s companies sends a clear message to India’s “coddled” tycoons: “they’re being cut loose”.

## Close Brothers: friends in high places

**Patrick Hosking**

*The Times*

The big hit taken by Close Brothers’ shares this week was, for once, not directly related to the bank’s “huge exposure to the car finance mis-selling affair”, says Patrick Hosking. Instead, analysts were focused on the net interest margin. Even so, the 21% drop reveals just how vulnerable Close is to adverse news. “Banks are intrinsically unstable businesses, built on confidence”, and corporate and council treasurers are already voting with their feet: they pulled a net £700m out of Close last year. Unlike personal depositors, these clients aren’t covered by government guarantees. “Close may not look like it’s going to fail, but why, they may be thinking, take even a small risk?” No one knows how the Supreme Court will rule on car finance commissions next month, but the financial projections now look less dire than they did; Moody’s recent suggestion that the bill could top £30bn now looks “overdone”. Either way, Close can count on a useful ally in No. 11. No growth-focused Chancellor would want a major lender to small businesses “getting into serious trouble on her watch”.

## The worst deal in British history?

**Jeremy Warner**

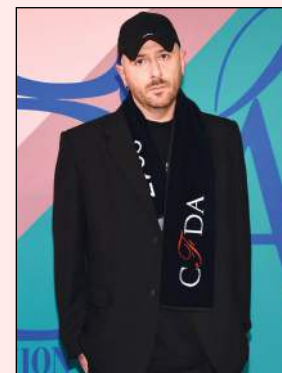
*The Daily Telegraph*

Gordon Brown’s lengthy stint as chancellor now “seems like a golden age of above-trend growth, tame inflation and relative stability in the public finances”, says Jeremy Warner. He was instrumental in keeping the UK out of the euro and, later, as PM, played a key role in galvanising a global response to the 2008 financial crisis. Yet the one thing this mighty Labour chancellor will for ever be remembered for was his “unfathomable” decision to sell off “nearly half the nation’s gold reserves” when prices were at historic lows. Between 1999 and 2002, the UK sold 395 tonnes at an average price of \$275/ounce to realise a grand total of £3.5bn. As gold hits new records, those reserves would now be worth \$38.5bn. Various conspiracy stories have been advanced to explain this, but the real explanation is simple: Brown wanted to diversify the UK’s reserves away from what John Maynard Keynes called the “barbaric relic” into assets with higher returns. How wrong can you be? “By any measure, this must count as one of the worst investment decisions in British economic history.”

## City profile

### Demna Gvasalia

During his ten years at Balenciaga, the Georgian designer known simply as Demna enjoyed phenomenal success and was hailed as “an era-defining fashion provocateur”, said The Business of Fashion. But his appointment as creative director of stablemate Gucci has so far proved a runaway flop. Shares in its parent group Kering, which has been flailing in the luxury downturn, slumped a further 12% on the news, reported Reuters. The feeling among analysts is that Demna, 43, is too risky a pick to lead a “much larger label” with a “reputation for timeless elegance”. “Overall we would give this appointment a 5/10,” said Bernstein’s Luca Solca – not least because Demna’s “bread and butter” street style appears to have fallen out of style.



Given Kering’s reliance on Gucci, which accounts for about half of group sales and two-thirds of profits, it’s certainly “a bold decision”, said Jo Ellison in the FT. True, Balenciaga became the fastest-growing brand in the portfolio under Demna: among his bestsellers were the giant platform Triple S trainers, which sell for £825. But in 2022, the label “became engulfed in a social media scandal” because of an ad campaign that appeared to endorse “child abuse and pornography”. The fallout was especially acute in the US, one of its biggest markets. But there are very few designers with a “proven ability” to “shape the fashion zeitgeist”, said Imran Amed on the Business of Fashion. Demna is one. He has learnt from the Balenciaga PR crisis, and could take Gucci to new heights if he can “move his creativity forward”. Let’s see what he does.

## Who's tipping what

## The week's best shares

**Breedon Group***The Times*

The buildings materials group is focused on cash generation in the UK, while it expands in the US via acquisitions. Revenues rose 6%, with profits up 11%. Long-term growth prospects look strong. Buy. 487p.

**EasyJet***The Daily Telegraph*

The low-cost airline's near-term prospects are "highly uncertain" amid a weak economic background. Nevertheless, solid finances, its budget status and a growing package holidays arm bode well. Buy. 484.8p.

**Expedia Group***The Daily Telegraph*

The online travel group – a Microsoft spin-off – has restructured to drive margins and growth. A tech overhaul and marketing has boosted bookings on its Expedia, Hotels.com and Vrbo brands. The low valuation compensates for risk. Buy. \$162.11.

**Pan African Resources***The Mail on Sunday*

Pan African operates a highly productive gold mine in South Africa. It has expanded into Australia and is developing its "tailings" business. Production is rising amid a heightened gold price. Buy. 38p.

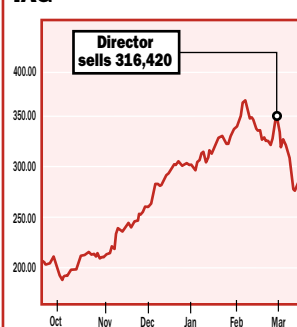
**Rheinmetall***The Times*

The giant German munitions and armoured vehicle maker is expanding its production site, and launching facilities and partnerships with others, including BAE. Strong growth prospects as Europe re-arms. Buy. €12.88.

**Wheaton Precious Metals***The Mail on Sunday*

Wheaton lends money to 18 gold and silver miners in return for a "cut-price" share of the bounty. There are a further 29 miners in the pipeline. Rising production has driven profits up 20%. Buy. £56.37.

## Directors' dealings

**IAG**

The BA owner, which also operates Iberia, Vueling and Aer Lingus, has been a post-pandemic travel winner, driven by its transatlantic offering. The chair and CEO of Vueling, Carolina Martinoli, has taken advantage by selling £1.1m-worth of shares.

SOURCE: INVESTORS' CHRONICLE

## ...and some to hold, avoid or sell

**B&M European Value Retail***The Times*

The longlife groceries, homewares, toys and DIY tools seller has had a torrid start to the year. Growth has faltered, it has issued a profit warning and the CEO is leaving. A strong brand in a weak market. Hold. 271.3p.

**Macfarlane Group***The Times*

The "extended producer responsibility" (EPR) – a policy designed to encourage sustainable practice – should be a boon for this packaging provider, which employs 1,000 people at 43 sites. Yields 9.8%. Hold. 102.5p.

**PageGroup***Investors' Chronicle*

Economic and geopolitical uncertainty has hit confidence in the recruitment sector, and Page may need to cut costs further to combat falling profits. Yields 5.2%, but it has opted out of the special dividend. Hold. 332p.

**Inspeks Group***The Daily Telegraph*

Although the eyewear-maker's revenue expectations have fallen, margins have grown thanks to "relatively strong" US performance, and it only uses a "modest amount of leverage". A low valuation offsets high risk. Hold. 47.5p.

**Nichols***Investors' Chronicle*

The Vimto maker is moving away from shipping products to Africa, to local partnerships and factories instead. This should boost margins. Profits are up, despite a pricey IT upgrade. Improvements are priced in. Hold. £13.11.

**Sanderson Design Group***The Daily Telegraph*

A weak consumer environment in the UK has hit the interior design firm. Profits are expected to fall from £12.2m to £4-£4.8m. Still, its "relatively sound balance sheet" should help it ride out weakness. Hold. 48p.

## Form guide

Shares tipped 12 weeks ago

**Best tip****Cranswick**

*Investors' Chronicle*  
down 0.82% to £48.30

**Worst tip****Clarkson**

*The Times*  
down 10.56% to £35.15

## Market view

"It's not surprising to see fund managers moving away from the US market. It's priced for perfection, and the policy coming out of the White House ain't that."

**Trevor Greetham of Royal London Asset Management.**  
**Quoted on This Is Money**

## Market summary

## Key numbers for investors

	18 Mar 2025	Week before	Change (%)
<b>FTSE 100</b>	8705.23	8495.99	2.46%
<b>FTSE All-share UK</b>	4699.07	4590.97	2.35%
<b>Dow Jones</b>	41473.44	41473.48	0.00%
<b>NASDAQ</b>	17484.64	17449.24	0.20%
<b>Nikkei 225</b>	37845.42	36793.11	2.86%
<b>Hang Seng</b>	24740.57	23782.14	4.03%
<b>Gold</b>	2996.50	2910.20	2.97%
<b>Brent Crude Oil</b>	70.40	69.65	1.08%
<b>DIVIDEND YIELD (FTSE 100)</b>	3.51%	3.60%	
<b>UK 10-year gilts yield</b>	4.70	4.73	
<b>US 10-year Treasuries</b>	4.29	4.24	
<b>UK ECONOMIC DATA</b>			
<b>Latest CPI (yoy)</b>	3.0% (Jan)	2.5% (Dec)	
<b>Latest RPI (yoy)</b>	3.6% (Jan)	3.5% (Dec)	
<b>Halifax house price (yoy)</b>	2.9% (Feb)	3.0% (Jan)	

**£1 STERLING:** \$1.298 €1.190 ¥194.061 Bitcoin \$82,039.20

## Best and worst performing shares

## WEEK'S CHANGE, FTSE 100 STOCKS

RISES	Price	% change
<b>Phoenix Holdings</b>	587.00	+15.10
<b>Fresnillo</b>	954.00	+11.70
<b>Antofagasta</b>	1946.50	+11.30
<b>Airtel Africa</b>	159.40	+10.50
<b>Melrose Industries</b>	530.00	+8.90
<b>FALLS</b>		
<b>Tesco</b>	326.10	-11.90
<b>Sainsbury (J)</b>	236.40	-8.40
<b>Marks and Spencer</b>	332.20	-6.60
<b>Pershing Square</b>	3670.00	-3.20
<b>Smith &amp; Nephew</b>	1105.00	-3.20

## FTSE 250 RISER &amp; FALLER

<b>Hochschild Mining</b>	250.50	+30.60
<b>QinetiQ</b>	395.40	-23.20

Source: FT (not adjusted for dividends). Prices on 18 Mar (pm)

## Following the Footsie



6-month movement in the FTSE 100 index



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# Can tiny Moldova show the world how to stand up to Putin?

*The former Soviet republic's determination not to be cowed by the Kremlin could provide a template for the West on how to hold back the tide of subversion and corruption. By Peter Pomerantsev*

How can a democracy defend itself from an attacker who does not respect any democratic rules? When your assailant uses corruption, blackmail, economic war, cyberattacks, covert campaigns and street violence – while all you have are inefficient courts and even slower international institutions – can you lose your sovereignty by being too soft? If you respond with censorship or even cancelling elections, don't you lose your values? It's a challenge for any country as the “international rules-based order”, for what it was ever worth, disintegrates. But it is perhaps sharpest in Moldova.

Nestled between Ukraine and Romania, the nation of 2.4 million is being targeted with relentless Russian malign influence operations

– a small country made into a vast laboratory of subversion. As the president, Maia Sandu, put it when I met her earlier: “Our democratic processes were not designed for these kind of dangers to democracy.” But Moldova can also be the place where democracies can learn to fight back against such attacks, while remaining true to themselves. If the US does retreat from supporting a secure and democratic Europe, Vladimir Putin will become ever more emboldened. Britain and EU countries need to reinvent how we keep ourselves free.

And it's desperately important to get this right in Moldova, which once formed part of the Soviet Union and is now in the queue to join the EU. Moscow's ultimate aim, Sandu argues, is to help bring its allies to power in Moldova, and then use Moldova to threaten Ukraine from the west and the EU from the east. In the short term, Moscow wants to show that it can use all measures short of outright invasion to keep nations it sees in its “zone of influence” chronically destabilised. The more it can pull off such acts of malign influence, the more its status as a reborn superpower is enhanced, and the weaker the hopes for liberal democracies surviving in a dog-eat-dog world will seem.

Sandu, 52, appears a personification of such hopes. A slight figure in the spare, high building of the presidential palace, she comes across as principled, neat, precise. She has won two presidential elections on a platform of EU integration, institutional reforms, rule of law, transparency and anti-corruption: the bouquet of concepts that were meant to denote membership of “developed” countries. While so many of these terms have become hollowed out with hypocrisy, Sandu has a reputation for actually living them. Her father was a vet and the director of a cooperative farm



*President Maia Sandu: an anti-corruption champion*

in Soviet Moldova, where he was known for clamping down on workers stealing from the farm. Sandu studied management, attended Harvard, then spent two years as an adviser to the head of the World Bank. As minister for education she made her name introducing CCTV cameras in school exam rooms to stop bribes and cheating – it was unpopular at first, but worked.

In a country where people have often become politicians to either grow rich or protect their wealth, Sandu lives in a regular apartment. She's unmarried, which has brought much misogyny from her rivals, who accuse her of not being “interested in what is happening in the country because she has no children here”; betraying “family

values”; and of being a “laughing stock, the sin and the national disgrace of Moldova”. She once tartly replied: “I never thought being a single woman is a shame. Maybe it is a sin even to be a woman?” Sandu won re-election last year with 55%, but her referendum that committed Moldova to EU entry only squeaked through: 50% to 49%. As Sandu reels off the list of active measures taken by Moscow and its proxies over the election, worth an estimated \$200m – 1% of the country's GDP – the scale and scope is startling.

*“About 10% of the electorate were paid to vote a certain way in elections and the referendum that committed Moldova to EU entry”*

Perhaps most audacious was a vote-buying scheme run by an oligarch, Ilan Shor, who has been indicted for stealing \$1bn from Moldovan banks, and is now based in Moscow. It involved

organising often poor, elderly people to register online accounts with a sanctioned Russian bank. They then downloaded a chatbot on the messaging app Telegram that told them how to vote, protest against Sandu or come to the pro-Russian party rallies. People would only get paid once they had completed all the tasks, and would often need to photograph themselves completing them. The plot was foiled by the Moldovan police and undercover journalists at Ziarul de Garda newspaper. A total of 138,000 bank accounts were identified – out of some 1.5 million voters. So about 10% of the electorate were paid to vote a certain way. But that could just be the tip of the vote-buying scheme: crypto payments and hard cash incentives were also used, with customs identifying a sudden wave of men travelling in from Moscow with hard cash totalling many millions in the run-up to the vote. Shor boasted that he had many more people on his payroll.

And the question remains: what can be done in response? The courts, the Ziarul de Garda editor Alina Radu explains to me,



cannot deal with this amount of cases. So far a couple of thousand people are coming to trial. Going after the grannies who were paid to vote can look unseemly, but the higher-ups are well protected with lawyers. “There are not many instruments that you have to protect yourself from these external influences,” admits Sandu. Such vote-buying operations have a particular impact in a small country, but they can be used in a targeted way in a larger country too – similar ones are already being reported in Bulgaria.

One possible response would be to just cancel elections – as Romania did in late 2024 when the authorities discovered a supposed Russian scheme to fund a pro-Moscow presidential candidate. But such radical steps make people deeply suspicious of democratic processes, and the cancellation of the Romanian vote was criticised by the new US government. That’s the dilemma of facing such interference: ignore it at your peril, but if you react in a clunky way you only increase the division Russia wants to fuel.

Moldovan policymakers, for their part, decided to expose the operation publicly, hope the evidence would alert people to the danger and inspire them to vote and counterbalance the fraud. It just about worked. “When the society saw the danger, we had such a mobilisation that we managed to out-vote it,” explains Sandu. The vote-buying scheme was just one example of the relentless subversion. Some operations play out in the military sphere. Moldova is home to the Transnistria region, a breakaway slice of the country that is de facto controlled by Moscow, which stations some 1,400 Russian troops there. In the run-up to the election, Russia organised exercises in the area, while its proxies pushed propaganda campaigns that Moldova would risk invasion if Sandu won. Moldova may be particularly vulnerable to such intimidation, but it’s echoed in Kremlin policy across the Caucasus and central Europe.

Other operations are economic. Russia recently cut off gas supplies to Moldova and then blamed it on Sandu. Moscow has also been accused of cultivating priests who preach sermons denouncing the EU. Fake letters and posters that look as if they are from the EU or Moldovan authorities, but which discredit EU integration, have been distributed. One fake EU Commission letter claimed that all Moldovan officials who don’t speak English will be fired once the country has joined Brussels. Meanwhile, there have been many cyberattacks on official institutions. The police’s website was attacked 2,800 times in one night. Moldovan men were trained in Russia and the Balkans to prepare for street violence. ATMs have been disabled, followed by rumours that the banking system is collapsing. And then there are the ever-increasing array of propaganda campaigns, on TV as well as online. In 2024, Shor used Facebook to run hundreds of ads that were viewed 155 million times – in a country of one million Facebook users. Anonymous Telegram groups and other social media platforms have pumped out lies and conspiracy theories: that the EU will ban the words “father” and “mother” and replace them with “parent number one” and “parent number two”, for instance.

In an ideal world the tech companies would set up war rooms to deal with the subversion, promptly and publicly show who is behind cover campaigns and give researchers access to data. The alternative is the chaos we see in Romania, where the lack of transparency from tech companies means no one can tell who exactly boosted the pro-Russian candidate’s campaign. Moldova has a law on broadcast media to mitigate disinformation that can



Moldovans were paid to attend opposition rallies

harm “national security”. It took a year to define this law with the Council of Europe so that it wouldn’t infringe on freedom of speech, and it still involves a slow process where TV channels are first warned, then fined for strategic, consistent campaigns. It might help to curb some long-term Russian efforts, but it’s no magic bullet. You can never regulate your way out of stopping subversive campaigns in a democracy – you need to learn how to engage audiences better too, argues Valeriu Pasha, the head of the WatchDog.md think-tank. “We need to engage the audiences Russian propaganda reaches. They are often primarily Russian speakers, and there is little content for them from regular media.” Such audiences can have a romanticised view of life in “Great Russia”, and about the supposed injustices in what Russian propaganda calls “Gayeuropa”.

At the heart of the challenge is to engage the deeper emotional needs and fears that the Kremlin preys on. Simply debunking fibs about the EU won’t be enough, just “countering disinformation” misses the point. You need to engage the alienation and lack of community the Kremlin propaganda taps into so effectively. That means investing in non-news content too, from entertainment through to town halls. But by the time you are pushing back against subversion, however, it is often too late. To pre-empt the types of operations Shor has become known for, one needs international investigations that disrupt the networks that support them. That means collaborating with security

agencies across the continent on financial crime, and the growing use of crypto especially.

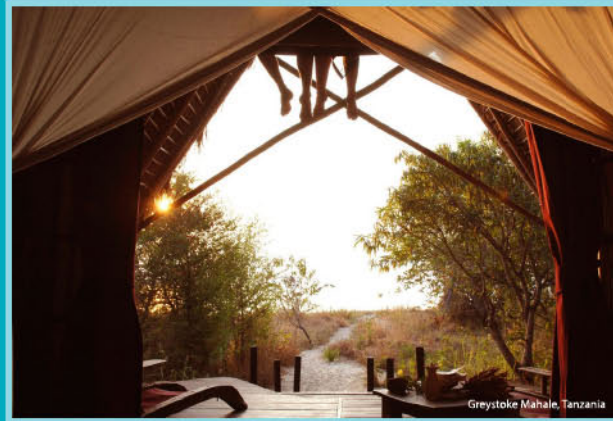
There are other steps Moldova’s partners need to take. Working together on cyber defences is

a common priority – Russian hackers are hitting UK hospitals as well as Moldovan institutions. The domain server attacks on Moldova happen from inside the EU. Another step is to undermine the Russian propaganda narrative that Moldova risks invasion if it dares disobey Moscow. That can only really be achieved if the EU and Britain finally step up their defence capabilities – a need that is all the sharper with America’s clear signals it has minimal interest in standing up to Putin. Moldova is the perfect place to show we can.

The level of collective messaging to show political resolve, the amount of coordination between allies and support to democratic processes are not unfathomable. What it does take, however, is a new mindset. It means treating this challenge like the battle that it is. But the impact if we can prevail is high. By fending off Putin here, we make a clear statement that America leaving does not mean European security is lost.

In the current geopolitical situation, Moldova’s vulnerability seems less atypical but rather the norm for a Europe and Britain that will be left increasingly to fend for itself. And, in that sense, Moldova is well ahead of working through the fraught challenge of finding a democratic way to defend from undemocratic enemies. Despite relentless pressure from the Kremlin, Moldova has, Sandu says, managed to “take down a corrupt government; hold free elections and a peaceful transitions of power”. Sandu might belong to the generation of politicians who were committed to an idea of progress where countries try to learn from and become more like “the West”. But now it’s we who need to learn from her. We are all more Moldovan now.

A longer version of this article appeared in *The Observer*  
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Two Connell Guides and three Week-branded items will be given to the sender of the first correct solution to the crossword and the clue of the week opened on Monday 31 March. Send it to The Week Crossword 1457, 121-141 Westbourne Terrace, London W2 6JR, or email the completed grid/listed solutions to [crossword@theweek.co.uk](mailto:crossword@theweek.co.uk). By **Tim Moorey** ([timmoorey.com](http://timmoorey.com))



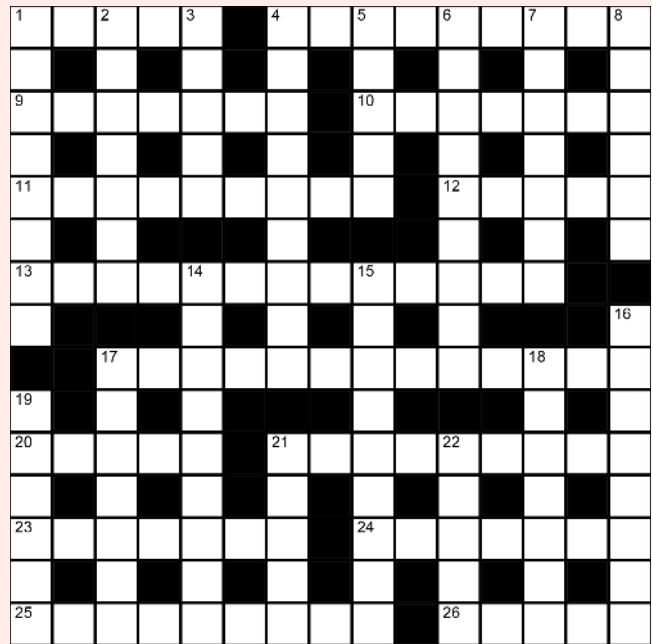
This week's winner will receive Week-branded items, as well as two Connell Guides ([connellguides.com](http://connellguides.com)).

### ACROSS

- 1 Small bay in which it's shining right away (5)
- 4 Children's game needing endless optimism and spirit (9)
- 9 Public school at the cutting edge? (7)
- 10 Alpinist flying with no hint of security – duck! (7)
- 11 How band begins when industrial action's over (7,2)
- 12 Love fantastic Cher's earthy colour (5)
- 13 Work assistant returned in the end with clean copy surprisingly (13)
- 17 Hilarious comic lisped badly in session (4-9)
- 20 I've no change for this musical stanza (5)
- 21 Romanians reformed the republic (3,6)
- 23 Attacks after wrongly being included in Nazi corps (7)
- 24 Endless staccatos orchestrated in overture (7)
- 25 Eastern type is a layman maybe (9)
- 26 Expert from one part of the organisation (5)

### DOWN

- 1 Sledging Stokes and Buttler worked catching Australia? Only one time (8)
- 2 Info on Morecambe not specific (7)
- 3 Moment about right for deception (5)
- 4 Most enjoyable times in the Alps? (4,5)
- 5 Dad finished window with advertising (3-2)
- 6 Doctor can order religious pact (9)
- 7 Tube ultra cheap? Only part of it (7)
- 8 Detective taking leave going around Middle East (6)
- 14 Insect is fine left in kitchen container (6,3)
- 15 English town dropping Democrat in US city (9)
- 16 Crude ranting about nothing is discourteous (8)
- 17 Some cut a line (7)
- 18 Leaders missing, check overdue copy (7)
- 19 Unwanted material springs forth in the morning (6)
- 21 This food partly gives us hiccups? (5)
- 22 Capital account taken by army corps (5)



Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

Tel no \_\_\_\_\_

Clue of the week answer: \_\_\_\_\_

Clue of the week: Sadly unloved, me: is no one ever to be in my arms? (5,2,4) *The Times*

### Solution to Crossword 1455

**ACROSS:** 1 Eye-watering 7 Swami 8 Inelegant 10 Reproduce 11 Triad 12 Needier 14 Sitwell 16 Ale 17 Flatlet 19 Sparrow 21 Exact 23 Obsession 25 Desperado 26 Obits 27 Space heater

**DOWN:** 1 Example 2 Editorial 3 Adieu 4 Elevesens 5 Inept 6 Granite 7 Springfield 9 Tiddlywinks 13 Rationale 15 Transport 18 Amasses 20 Rainier 22 Theta 24 Scone

Clue of the week: White lies? Seemingly not! (2,4,7)  
Solution: IN VINO VERITAS

The winner of 1455 is **Sophie Clissold-Lesser from London**

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### Sudoku 999 (easy)

Fill in all the squares so that each row, column and each of the 3x3 squares contains all the digits from 1 to 9

### Solution to Sudoku 998

8	1	5	4	9	2	7	6	3
4	7	3	6	5	8	9	1	2
2	6	9	7	1	3	5	4	8
5	4	6	9	2	7	3	8	1
1	2	7	3	8	4	6	9	5
9	3	8	1	6	5	2	7	4
7	5	4	8	3	9	1	2	6
6	8	2	5	7	1	4	3	9
3	9	1	2	4	6	8	5	7

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