

The future of Bitcoin

Simon Chapman The progressive case for cryptocurrencies, the new digital gold

Simon Jenkins

The return of the Celtic nations and the end of the UK

Sarah Manavis on Britain unlocked

Louise Perry on the battle of the sexes

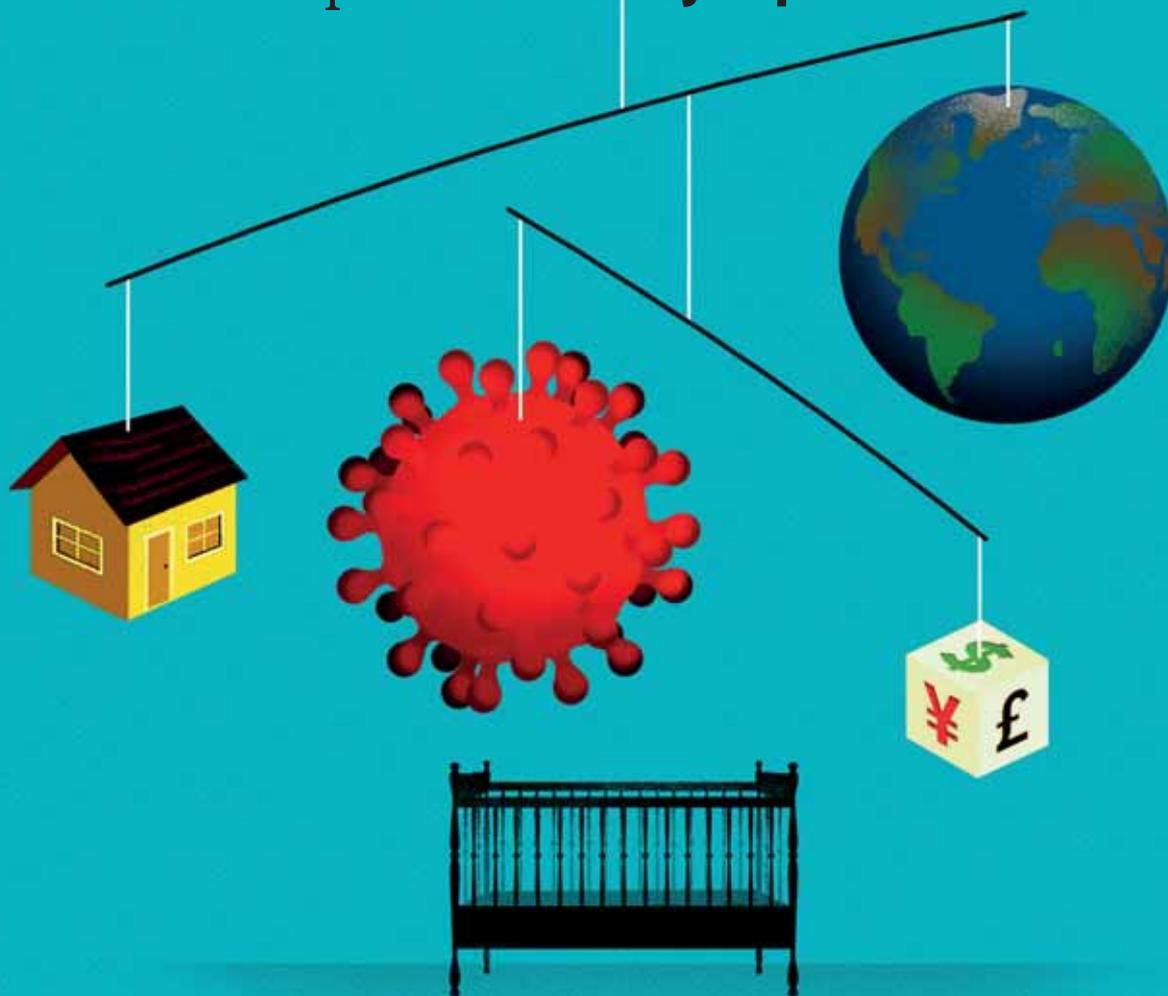
NewStatesman

Enlightened thinking in dark times

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The baby bust

How a declining birth rate will reshape the world **By Sophie McBain**





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Living with Covid

Like many other coronaviruses, Covid-19 has become endemic. The question is not whether we choose to live with the virus but how we choose to do so.

For the UK and other states, vaccines are the principal defence against the virus, which has killed as many as four million people worldwide (the unofficial figure is thought to be much higher). Britain's roll-out, a model of mission-led, public-private innovation, has dramatically reduced deaths and hospitalisations. At the equivalent point in the second wave, more than 400 people were dying from Covid-19 each day, but daily deaths in this wave are now less than a tenth of that. Hospital admissions have fallen from nearly 2,000 a day last November to around 300 now.

The Johnson government is pursuing the unlocking plan that was delayed by the spread of the Delta variant, which originated in India. The reopening of parts of the economy that have been shuttered for 15 months, such as live music, is both justified and welcome. But other measures, such as the abandonment of mandatory mask-wearing on public transport and in shops, are dubious.

The threat of viral transmission is far higher indoors than outside and face coverings are a simple and effective means of protection. Just as smoking is banned or regulated in public areas to prevent the effects of passive smoking, so it makes sense for the state to limit the risk of mass infection. Although vaccines mean far fewer people will die or be hospitalised as a result of Covid-19, other risks remain: more transmissible or harmful new variants, as well as "long Covid" – the debilitating and enduring symptoms suffered by some.

By treating mask-wearing as a choice rather than a civic duty, the government has revived the mixed messaging that undermined public health in the early weeks of the pandemic. Most voters know someone who has been ill with or died from Covid-19. They crave clear, consistent guidance; a YouGov poll found that 71 per cent believe face masks should continue to be mandatory on public transport and that 66 per cent believe they should be worn in shops. Boris Johnson purports to be a freedom-loving libertarian but he is not averse to government intervention in other areas: his first act as mayor of

London was to ban alcohol consumption on public transport.

Rather than trying to wish Covid-19 out of existence, the British state should respond pragmatically to the risks that remain. Borders should be carefully controlled to limit the spread of new variants. Had the government not equivocated for so long before adding India to the "red list" of countries from which travel is strictly controlled, the planned 21 June reopening might not have been delayed.

The increasing number who will be forced to self-isolate should be offered greater financial support as an insurance against lost business. Faced with the threat of a new flu epidemic this winter, sick pay should be increased from £96.35 a

week (the lowest mandatory rate in the OECD) and employers should continue to encourage remote working.

The state will need to provide a permanent infrastructure of vaccines, tests and personal protective equipment, which will necessitate either higher government borrowing or higher taxes (as Chancellor Rishi Sunak has indicated by pledging to increase



corporation tax from 19 per cent to 25 per cent).

National resilience, rather than openness to globalisation, will become the defining test of a country's strength in this new era. Britain needs an active, strategic state and should not so readily allow the sale of essential firms such as Newport Wafer Fab – the country's largest producer of silicon chips – to the highest bidder (in this instance the Chinese-owned Nexperia), as it did on 5 July.

By exposing the fragility of nation states in an interconnected age, the pandemic has accelerated change and forced a long overdue reckoning. As countries unlock, we should not disregard the lessons learned during the crisis. Covid-19 is not an aberration but a portent of the threats that will define this century. ●

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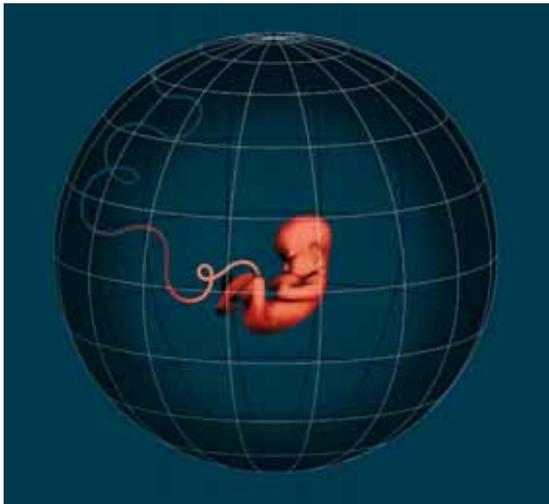
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Stephen Bush Politics

Keir Starmer has a second chance to assert his leadership. Can he find the direction he has lacked?



Labour's win in the Batley and Spen by-election hasn't changed Keir Starmer's position, but it has changed how his allies feel about it. The relief at Kim Leadbeater's victory on 1 July, in the constituency formerly held by her sister Jo Cox, indicates that Starmer now has a second chance to assert his leadership.

However, the reality is that, even if 162 voters had backed the Conservative candidate Ryan Stephenson instead of Leadbeater, there would have been no serious prospect of a challenge to Starmer's leadership or of his resignation. None of Labour's warring tribes have an alternative candidate or the numbers to make a challenge.

Starmer's deputy, Angela Rayner, is not trusted by the party's left, who worry that swapping Rayner for Starmer would mean, in the words of one, "the same problem with a different accent". The party's right doesn't have a candidate of its own, and in any case, it fears that to bring the Starmer leadership to an early end is to invite a Corbynite counter-revolution, with the Leeds East MP and former shadow cabinet minister Richard Burgon at its head. As for Labour's middle, from where Starmer springs, they believe that if his leadership ends in failure they could lose control of the party, just as the left did after the electoral defeat of 2019 and the right did after the loss of 2010.

Starmer still faces the same immediate challenges: to provide the strategic direction that will restore the faith of Labour MPs; to reconstruct his inner team; and to have a successful Labour Party conference in the autumn. If he falls short on any of those, his chances of surviving past the end of 2022 will be in doubt. If he fails on all three measures, he'll be doomed.

His hopes rest on six people. Three of those work in his office. They are Deborah Mattinson, his new director of strategy, Matthew Doyle, his interim communications director, and Luke Sullivan, his new political director. Doyle is a sufficiently committed Blairite that his personal email address references New Labour's heroics,

and his appointment, even as an interim communications director, has been taken by the party's left as proof that the Starmer project is really about moving the Labour Party to the right. The reality, however, is more mundane: because Starmer's long-term prospects are still considered to be poor, the Labour leader's hires are restricted to the ranks of, as one ally put it, "people who have big enough reputations to walk away unscathed and employable if this collapses after the Labour Party conference".

Doyle has the job of steering Labour through the summer, usually a difficult time for opposition parties. As a veteran of David Cameron's opposition team once observed to me: "There are plenty of bored hacks wandering around the place, looking for stories, and usually the only story on hand is 'trouble in the opposition party'".

Starmer's hopes rest on six people connected by institutional memory

whether it's true or not." Doyle will either go down in history as the person who took Labour through a period of transition, or as Starmer's final appointment.

Mattinson, whose pedigree in Labour politics goes back to the party's last prolonged stay in opposition (she advised Neil Kinnock and John Smith as well as Tony Blair), is the author of a much-discussed analysis of the 2019 election, *Beyond the Red Wall*, and has a big reputation at Westminster. Mattinson came to Starmer's attention when she was invited to address shadow cabinet ministers at a series of away days over Zoom throughout the past year – an exercise that was partly about "making the grandees feel included so they didn't create bad headlines", as one Labour aide put it. Starmer was impressed by her presentations, and she was offered the job.

Sullivan is one of Labour's great survivors – a long-time aide to the chief whip in

both government and opposition, and the only one of the three with a record of continuous service. Importantly, he is very well connected and liked in the Parliamentary Labour Party, a quality that Starmer has until recently neglected.

The second trio are members of Starmer's shadow cabinet. Described by one of the leader's closest allies as "the three who matter", they are his new and former shadow chancellors Rachel Reeves and Anneliese Dodds, and Shabana Mahmood, the party's national campaign coordinator. Reeves has been more willing to sign off big spending announcements, whereas Dodds had quarrelled with the leader's office over her desire to prioritise repairing the party's reputation for economic competence. Dodds now has two roles: in the first, as party chair, she is an all-purpose opposition politician. Her second task is leading the party's policy review, which will shape the programme Labour puts to the country at the next election.

Mahmood is the Birmingham Ladywood MP credited with behind-the-scenes improvements in how the Labour Party conducts itself. An observant British Muslim, she has proved valuable to a leader and office which, as one MP despaired to me, "struggles to understand that most black Britons are committed Christians, and that most British Muslims don't just see it as a cultural heritage, but a religious one". Like Starmer, she regards one of her immediate priorities as making the party battle-ready again.

What connects all six is institutional memory: a commodity that Starmer believes has been gradually driven out of the Labour Party by factional warfare, first between Blairites and Brownites and then between Corbynites and Corbyn-sceptics. But what these six key players cannot provide is, as one of them put it to me, "the politics: the big-picture stuff that has to come from the leader". Starmer may have succeeded in giving a necessary transfusion of institutional memory to the party. His next challenge is to inject a sense of direction into a leadership that has sorely lacked it. ●

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Emily Tamkin World View

The American withdrawal from Afghanistan is advancing quickly. But so is the Taliban



For nearly 20 years the Bagram airfield in Afghanistan has been the epicentre of the American-led war against the Taliban. But on Friday 2 July, US troops shut off the electricity, plunging the base into darkness, and slipped away before dawn. It would be another two hours before the new Afghan commander, General Mir Asadullah Kohistani, discovered they had left. Even before the Afghan army could take control of the airfield, looters had raided the barracks and storage tents – a fitting symbol of the US’s inglorious exit.

Vacating Bagram, which is about an hour’s drive north from the capital Kabul, was a milestone in the wider US withdrawal from the embattled country. In April this year, as part of his efforts to end America’s “forever wars” and focus on domestic issues, the US president, Joe Biden, announced that the country’s 3,500 troops would leave by 11 September 2021, the 20th anniversary of al-Qaeda’s attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. “We cannot continue the cycle of extending or expanding our presence in Afghanistan hoping to create the ideal conditions for our withdrawal, expecting a different result,” he said at the time.

With that promised departure now almost complete ahead of schedule, the Biden administration is focusing on reassuring Afghans of continued economic and humanitarian support. Speaking to Afghanistan’s president, Ashraf Ghani, in the White House on 25 June, Biden promised, “We’re going to stick with you.” This, he pledged, would be a “new chapter” in the relationship between the two countries. Some 650 troops are expected to remain to protect the US embassy in Kabul, which reminded the world via Twitter that it will continue to have a diplomatic presence. But the task of fighting the Taliban – which was removed from power in 2001 but has remained a significant force – will now fall to Afghanistan’s military leadership.

Indeed, the swift withdrawal and ensuing Panglossian assurances barely conceal a darker outlook. When reporters recently

asked Biden about the state of Afghanistan, he deflected the question, saying, “I want to talk about happy things.”

That is because if the US withdrawal is happening faster than expected, so, too, is the advance of Taliban forces throughout the country. The group holds nearly twice as much territory as it did two months ago, and according to US intelligence it could overpower Ghani’s government within six months of US forces departing. The United States went to Afghanistan in part to eradicate the Taliban. Twenty years later, the group is undefeated and is trying to dictate the terms of US withdrawal, warning that any foreign troops left after September will be considered occupiers and in violation of the peace agreement signed between the US and the Taliban in Doha last year.

Biden is focused on reassuring Afghans of continued US support

There is also no realistic plan for the future of the US’s diplomatic mission in Afghanistan. In March, before Biden’s announcement, Ghani insisted elections be held before he steps aside, saying he wants to hand over power to a democratically elected successor. The Taliban, too, rejected the US proposal of participating in an interim government, albeit for different reasons: it has since said it wanted to install a “genuine Islamic system”.

The US defence secretary, Lloyd Austin, has reportedly taken several steps to slow the US military departure. He has ordered the leading US commander in the country, General Austin Miller, to stay there for a few more weeks (exactly how long has not been specified). It has been reported by the *New York Times* that Miller is then expected to turn over his command to General Kenneth McKenzie Jr, who will be authorised to deploy an extra 300 troops to Afghanistan

until the end of the summer in case of an emergency.

The US cannot offer the same degree of protection and security as it was able to with thousands of troops in the country. Biden’s critics, including the Senate minority leader Mitch McConnell and much of the Republican Party, have denounced the withdrawal. They will point to the imminent collapse of the Afghan government and military, and argue that Biden has abandoned Afghanistan. In this regard, they have a point.

The most humane thing that the US can now do is to avoid giving any impression that it is committed to large-scale military engagement in Afghanistan. Rather, it should admit that it has lost the war to occupy and rebuild the country, and that it is leaving a people to the alarming prospect of the Taliban returning to power.

Those Afghans who risked their lives helping the US military should be given a way out of the country as soon as possible. The House of Representatives was right to pass a bill on 29 June that will accelerate the visa application process for the 18,000 Afghans who worked for the US as interpreters, drivers, clerks and security guards.

There are thousands more who worked for human rights groups and democracy-building NGOs. They will also be at risk, despite Taliban assurances. The US should offer them a safe haven too.

After the failed US invasion of Cuba in 1961, President John F Kennedy said that victory has a hundred fathers, but defeat is an orphan. This time, Biden can soften the blow to his country’s pride, and its military presence in central Asia, by owning up to a failure induced by American hubris. If the US believes, as it claimed when it invaded Afghanistan in 2001, in the importance of human rights, the rule of law and confronting terror, it should at least provide refuge to those who believe in those same ideals, those who seek to follow their US patrons out of the Graveyard of Empires. ●

Emily Tamkin is the New Statesman’s US editor

BioTechnology Conference

15 July 2021 14:00 - 17:30 BST

The biotech sector has been at the forefront of fighting the pandemic, from underpinning strategic research to its application in pharmaceuticals and drug production. In this virtual event, New Statesman Spotlight will convene leaders from politics, business, and academia to discuss the future of biotechnology in Britain.

This ambitious online series will examine the challenges and issues facing sector leaders, as well as the policy decisions that can support a thriving industry in post-Covid Britain.

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Local power

I was interested to read Stephen Bush's interview with Andy Burnham (Cover Story, 2 July): it pointed out something Labour should consider as part of its future strategy. It is a paradox that this government was elected on the boast of taking back power from the EU, yet within the UK it seeks to centralise power in Westminster. A progressive government should ensure that decisions are taken close to the people they affect. It is also time to consider a replacement for the House of Lords: perhaps a senate composed of representatives from the different regions of the UK, answering some of the concerns of the nationalists who feel their interests have been neglected.

*Richard Dargan
Coulston, Surrey*

Medieval myth

In her review of Michael Pollan's latest book ("Natural highs and lows", 30 June) Sophie McBain unwittingly perpetuates the stereotype of "the permanently sozzled intellectuals of the Middle Ages". The "small beer" of the

LETTER OF THE WEEK

The not-so-magic money tree

Christopher Gasson's article ("The people's money tree", 2 July) raises some important points about the deficit financing that this Conservative government has been engaging in. However, he neglects one inconvenient truth that few economists are willing to acknowledge.

Yes, financial assets and house prices have – apart from a liquidity shock in March 2020 – continued to grow in nominal terms, but how does central bank balance sheet expansion contribute to this? Quantitative easing is the Bank of England creating

base money and swapping that base money for an asset – in this case a gilt.

With central banks around the developed world simultaneously engaging in deficit financing, one might argue that what appears to be a rise in the value of these financial assets is actually a fall in the fiat currency denominator.

As Keynes famously stated, "there is no subtler, no surer means of overturning the existing basis of society than to debauch the currency".

*Scott Wijayatilake
Sunbury-on-Thames, Surrey*

Middle Ages had less than 3 per cent alcohol, and was typically drunk with a meal or simply for its calories. The process of boiling water was widely known at the time, as was the necessity of seeking clean water – which was by most accounts plentiful and often the centrepiece of a town or village.

*Chris Lamb
Cambridge*

Less is more

The answer to "From over the border" in last week's NS Word Game (2 July) is "Scottish". That speaks louder than all the carefully worded articles on an independent Scotland.

*Alison Simpson
Falkirk, Stirlingshire*

● We reserve the right to edit letters

NS writers win at BSME Talent Awards

Two *New Statesman* writers celebrated success at the British Society of Magazine Editors (BSME) Talent Awards ceremony on 1 July, gaining recognition in two of the new categories introduced in 2021, both of which required "exceptional flair and originality". Special correspondent Sophie McBain won the **Best Specialist Writer – Print** category for her work on "The Science of Us" long reads. The judges commented: "The winning writer displayed an impressive ability to generate relevant, topical, engaging ideas and make authoritative and well researched health content a delight to read."

In addition, senior writer Sarah Manavis was highly commended in the **Best Specialist Writer – Digital** category, with the judges commenting: "Sarah Manavis has carved out a distinctive and increasingly relevant specialism, writing about digital culture with flair and originality." ●

OUTSIDE THE BOX BY BECKY BARNICOAT



BECKY BARNICOAT FOR NEW STATESMAN '21

Observations



NOAH BERGER/AP

IN THE PICTURE

Fire retardant coats a vehicle in the Lakehead-Lakeshore area of Shasta County,

California, on 2 July 2021, as firefighters battle devastating wildfires. Blazes have raged across the northern part of

the US state, burning nearly 48,000 acres in Siskiyou and Shasta counties, and prompting evacuations.



COMMENT

The politics of unlocking

No 10 has chosen simple over safe

By Sarah Manavis

As mask-wearing was becoming the norm last summer, an infographic went viral on Instagram. It demonstrated the risk of Covid-19 transmission when one person was infected and another wasn't – depending on mask use. When neither individual wore a mask, the graphic showed transmission was almost a certainty. When the healthy person wore one, transmission was quite likely if the infected person went without. The only way to make the risk effectively non-existent, the graphic showed, was for both parties to wear some form of face covering.

This has been the common message on masks for nearly a year: that we don't only wear them to protect ourselves, but also to protect others. We have known for months that mask-wearing by all parties – particularly indoors, where airborne transmission is most likely – can make transmission near-impossible, especially when combined with good ventilation. It is one of the most effective things individuals can do, and it doesn't require specialist equipment. A study published in September 2020 by researchers at the University of Edinburgh found masks can block 99.9 per cent of Covid-linked droplets.

As a public health measure it's cheap and unobtrusive in short stints such as sitting on a bus or shopping at the supermarket. So many were

surprised when Boris Johnson announced on 5 July that, if reopening goes ahead in England on 19 July, mask-wearing and social distancing will become a personal choice. In the same press conference, the chief scientific adviser Patrick Vallance warned that cases are doubling roughly every nine days.

Mask-wearing has become intensely politicised, perhaps more so than any other public health measure since the start of the pandemic. It is a beloved talking point among Covid sceptics and deniers, who believe the government wants us "yoked" or "muzzled" for no reason beyond control. The decision to make masks optional is political, too. And it is yet another example of the government choosing what is optically the simplest policy, rather than what is safe – only this time with no apparent electoral or economic benefit.

Throughout the pandemic, the government has pushed the message that the Covid-19 experience is a binary: you either feel a bit feverish for a week, or you end up in hospital and maybe die. The argument for dropping the mask mandate follows this same logic. The vulnerable are already protected by the vaccine rollout and the young people still waiting for their second jab won't become seriously ill. Deaths and hospitalisations remain low despite high

► case numbers, so why not allow people to experience their pre-2020 lives this summer? The problem is that this has never been the reality of catching Covid-19. The mask debate is more complicated than the government acknowledges.

In terms of health, it is not true that the vulnerable are all protected. Some people with blood cancer have no Covid antibodies even after two jabs. Some people are so immunocompromised they can't be vaccinated at all, meaning high prevalence of the virus limits their ability to go about their lives safely. Even for those who don't already suffer from any serious health issues, there is the risk of long Covid, a form of post-viral fatigue that affects people in all age groups, and continues to have extreme effects post-vaccination. Masks don't just limit transmission, they also lower the viral load we breathe in, which some evidence suggests can reduce the severity of resulting illness.

But it's not just health that is threatened by high case numbers. Social factors, such as the lack of adequate sick pay, make "living with the virus" an unrealistic option for those in precarious work. What is a gig economy worker supposed to do if they're cut off from any source of income for nearly half the month after being forced to isolate when they get sick? How is someone who suffers from long Covid – even in a white-collar job – supposed to earn when they can barely move from their bed?

Mask-wearing does not solve these problems outright, but reducing transmission makes an enormous difference – both by mitigating the number of people suffering from the long-term health impacts of Covid-19, and by helping others avoid reliance on the government's anaemic support system. And while some of the unvaccinated population may genuinely not care about any of these potential risks,

until now those who did care could live largely risk-free because when they went to buy food or get a bus, almost everyone was wearing a mask. With high case numbers and significantly reduced levels of mask-wearing, even indoor spaces considered essential will no longer be safe.

The desperation to make our lives appear normal has been an apparent factor in many of the government's Covid policies. Even schemes that proved risky, such as Eat Out To Help Out, were incredibly popular. But YouGov polling shows that 71 per cent of the public would rather keep the mask mandate in place on public transport.

Masks are a cheap and unobtrusive measure

Cases will continue to climb over the coming weeks until the adult population has been fully vaccinated, after which infection rates will begin to fall. Once we reach this point, we can be certain that life will be much safer for the unprotected than it is now. If second doses were sped up, it could even be sometime this summer. So why not maintain one of the most basic, affordable public health measures in order to keep people safe until then?

There is a valid question that opponents of the mask mandate raise: when does this all end? We cannot indefinitely continue with restrictions until we reach zero Covid – a scenario that realistically may never occur. Still, with daily case rates comparable to those during the winter lockdown, many epidemiologists would argue the answer should be "not right now". Relaxing Covid rules is a complex balancing act. But the government has once again opted to prioritise simplicity over the safety of millions – even when the latter is, for the first time in the pandemic, squarely in sight. ●

COMMONS CONFIDENTIAL

The Tories' blame game

Kevin Maguire

Parking-and-potholes MP

Kim Leadbeater's Batley and Spenningsdale success marked the Blairite band getting back together. Lance Price, a former No 10 spinner and Labour director of comms, was her consigliere throughout the campaign. With some Corbyn cheerleaders and MPs in the Socialist Campaign Group failing to hide disappointment at Labour holding the West Yorkshire seat, Keir Starmer's in a bind. He can't win a general election without the party's left and right yet struggles to unite the two. Harold Wilson, Starmer's favourite Labour leader, did bring both wings together in an uneasy peace to win four elections. One MP suggested he buy a pipe, pretend to like HP sauce, and hope.

The upside of the

Conservatives' by-election defeat, snarled a Tory MP, might be Amanda Milling's removal as co-chair after losing both Chesham and Amersham and Batley and Spenningsdale. "The by-election was also a referendum on her," he whined, a little harshly. Labour isn't the only party with personal enmities.

Shameless hypocrite Matt

Hancock's public humiliation is a goodbye gift for Simon Stevens, NHS England's outgoing CEO. The pair didn't get on, I'm told. Before the now ex-health secretary was filmed redefining hands-face-space rules with his aide Gina Coladangelo, Stevens squirmed silently on TV as he was asked whether Hancock was "hopeless". Relations were strained because he felt Hancock forever dumped on

the health service. Stevens' allies quipped that it was ironic that a man forever "covering his own arse" lost his job for covering a backside with his hands.

Rumours flew for months

about Michael Gove and *Daily Mail* columnist Sarah Vine, who have now announced they're to divorce. The Cabinet Office minister's shopping basket, which was filled with ready-cooked meals for one during a visit to a Victoria supermarket, was evidence all was not well. With a diet that unhealthy, Gove has a vested interest in banning TV junk food ads.

Growing legions of Scots

Nat MPs are escaping Nicola Sturgeon's tartan Covid cage to enjoy the relative freedom of Westminster. One of my snouts spotted the SNP's Angus MacNeil deep in comradely conversation in



New Palace Yard with former party colleague Neale Hanvey, a defector to Alex Salmond's ill-starred Alba. The First Minister might not have approved of such fraternising at Holyrood.

James Bond enjoyed fast

cars and martinis, yet the world of espionage isn't all glamour. Spare a thought for the MI5 operative tasked with discovering if other cabinet ministers' telephone numbers are on the internet after Boris Johnson and Dominic Raab's emerged. Googling Agent 118 could find more exciting employment in a call centre. ●
Kevin Maguire is the associate editor (politics) of the Daily Mirror



LIVING AND BREATHING SUSTAINABILITY



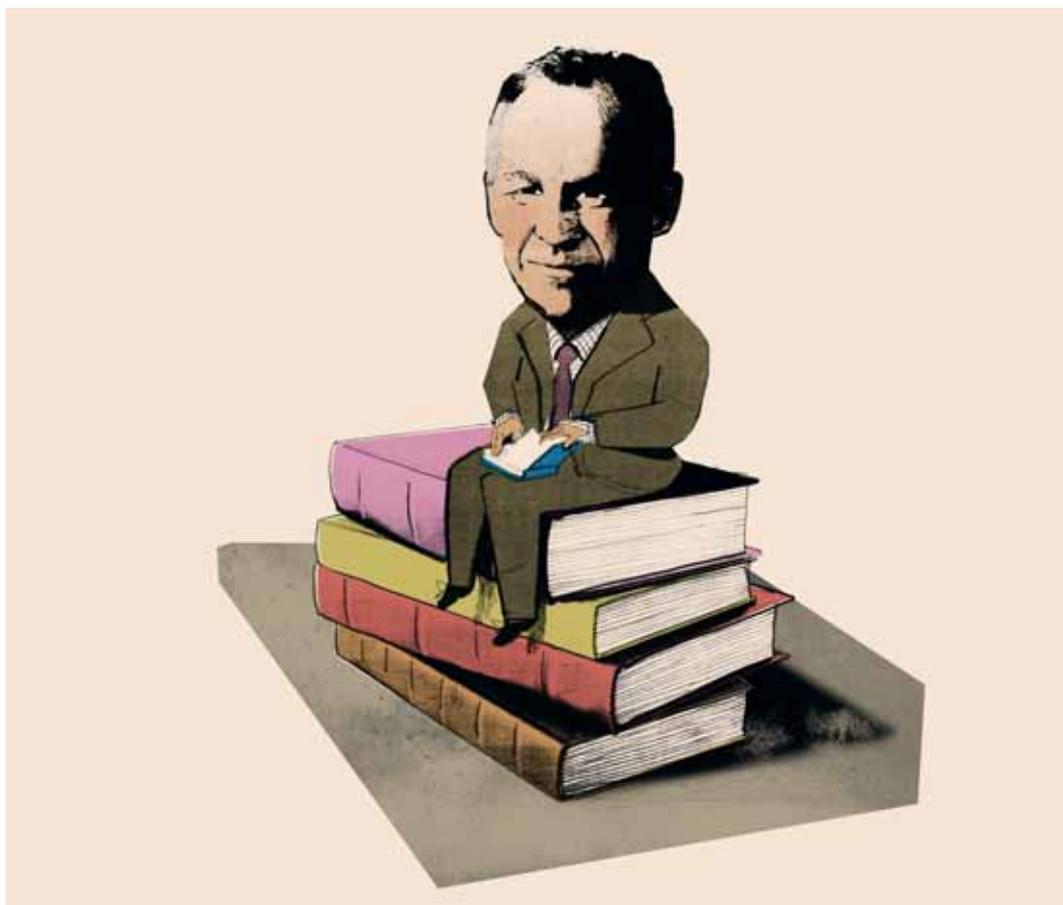
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ENCOUNTER

Can bookshops survive in the era of Amazon?

James Daunt on saving Waterstones

By Ellen Peirson-Hagger

At a midweek lunchtime in late June, a woman browsed the travel-writing shelves at Waterstones Piccadilly in central London. The shop, which claims to be Europe's largest bookstore, was otherwise quiet. James Daunt, Waterstones' managing director, gestured to the woman from the shop's café, where he was sipping a coffee opposite me. "We all know she is picking out a book that she can get from Amazon and it would save her a quid, or whatever it is," he said. "But as it pops through her letter box she will get only a fraction of the enjoyment that she would if she buys it here."

The curation of an inspiring browsing space is paramount to his business strategy. "A lot of it is visual – the attractiveness of books – and then it's how do you get the right titles, the right juxtaposition? How do you tease people? How do you amuse people? How do you get people into your shop, and how do you keep them there?" He nodded towards the woman again. "And in half an hour's time she'll probably still be there. Now, if we've done it well, she'll also walk out with something. Most importantly, she will have had a really nice time."

Daunt, 57, wore a checked

shirt and jeans, and sat below a poster of a vintage cover of Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*, having cycled in from Hampstead, where he lives with his wife and two daughters. He was remarkably soft spoken given his prominence as a businessman. After graduating from Cambridge University in 1984, he worked as a banker at JP Morgan before founding Daunt Books, an independent shop in Marylebone that now has nine branches and its own publishing imprint.

In 2011 he was brought in to "save" Waterstones from bankruptcy, as Amazon's

growing domination, bringing with it the rise of e-books, threatened the high-street retailer. He succeeded: in 2016 Waterstones made a profit for the first time since the 2008 financial crash.

As such Daunt has been heralded as "the man who saved Waterstones" (the description is "obviously ridiculous", he said) and has now been tasked with doing the same for Barnes & Noble, which has more than 600 stores in the US. His strategy there is "an exact parallel" to what he did in the UK: to break up the "homogeneous beast" of the brand, allowing managers to run their own shops – choosing which books to stock and how to display them. Each of the UK's 280 Waterstones branches, from Piccadilly to Middlesbrough, is different. Daunt is comfortable with "variance in execution", where most retailers are not. "We have to respond to our customers. And it's booksellers who drive what a shop is like: you have to let them do it."

For all the confidence he has entrusted in his booksellers, Daunt remains steadfast in his insistence that he cannot pay all Waterstones staff the living wage. A petition asking the company to pay employees £9 an hour (or £10.55 in Greater London) was signed by more than 9,000 people; a separate petition on the same matter had the backing of more than 2,500 authors, including Sally Rooney, whose novel *Normal People* won the shop's "book of the year" accolade in 2018.

Daunt insisted that the number of Waterstones employees currently earning less than the living wage is "relatively small". Whereas most retailers pay 80-90 per cent of their staff the living wage, with a small number of managers on higher pay, Daunt has built more increments into the Waterstones career structure, allowing what he called the "committed career people" who show "vocational aptitude" the opportunity

to work their way up beyond the living wage. It is these employees he cares for most. “I don’t think the living wage is remotely adequate for anyone trying to have a career,” he said in defence of his policy. Waterstones hires seasonal workers, particularly around Christmas. “Now, would I rather be paying them the living wage? Yes. But then I have to take money off the vast majority of my people. Should I do that? I’d get a lot less grief if I did. But is it right?”

Another decision Daunt “got grief” for was his attempt to keep Waterstones open early on in the pandemic. While other retailers voluntarily closed, Daunt fought to stay open, saying Waterstones was “no different to a supermarket or a pharmacy”. Staff complaints prompted a U-turn just before the first nationwide lockdown was announced. Covid-19 closures resulted in a “massive loss of sales”, and though Daunt said regional branches had recovered well, there were “clear difficulties in the metropolitan city centre shops”. Waterstones’ online offering (pre-pandemic, its website accounted for 8 per cent of its sales) won’t ever compare with Amazon, whose threat lingers.

That said, while Amazon has long been blamed for the demise of the high-street book trade, Daunt is sanguine. “I’ve always been very happy with the view that we co-exist with Amazon,” he said. “Some parts of what they do have been really welcome: we used to have, frankly, all the boring books in the shops; now we don’t have to because Amazon supplies those.”

Daunt sees the existence of books on Amazon as a positive for the wider book-buying ecosystem. “Amazon spreads readership and ownership of books. Ultimately, if you’re buying books and reading books, you will turn up in a bookshop at some point... As long as Waterstones has good shops, we’ll be fine.” ●

Lytton, the Canadian village that recorded a temperature of 49.6 °C this month before wildfire burned it to the ground, is on roughly the same latitude (50.2 degrees north) as the Cornish town Redruth. So Britons should not assume that what happens 4,500 miles away is no concern of theirs. Global warming deniers, having mostly given up claiming that the climate is nothing to worry about, have argued for the past decade or so that action should be delayed because greater wealth and improved technology will enable future generations to cope better than we can.

Now the future is here, somewhat earlier than predicted, and, with deaths in British Columbia during the heatwave at three times normal levels, we don’t seem to be coping well. Or rather, poorer people – who can’t afford air conditioning, and often work outdoors and live in areas that lack green spaces – aren’t coping. The rich manage fine and, if the worst happens, can probably flee to the Arctic and plant vines.

Shady subsidies

Since I lean to the left, you’d probably expect me to welcome ministers’ plans to offer state subsidies to promising industries, a policy previously associated with such reviled figures as Tony Benn and Edward Heath. I have concerns, however. First, given the government’s record on Covid-related contracts, what safeguards will prevent the subsidies going to ministers’ friends and party donors?

Second, will we be told

FIRST THOUGHTS

A warning from Canada, mask wars, and the loss of Ruskin College

Peter Wilby



which companies are getting how much? Nissan’s decision not only to invest further in its Sunderland car factory but also build a battery plant is celebrated as a vote of confidence in post-Brexit Britain. But how much is it costing taxpayers? Though there’s been no official announcement, ministers haven’t denied that a subsidy is involved. They refuse, however, to say how big it is.

RIP Ruskin

Read obituaries of trade union leaders and Labour MPs and you will often see mention of Ruskin College, Oxford. Founded in 1899 to provide degree-level opportunities for the working class, its teachers included Clement Attlee, its students John Prescott and Dennis Skinner. Though it was not a college of the university, Oxford validated its degrees.

Now, according to Ruskin’s latest accounts, its resources are inadequate “to continue in operational existence”. It no longer offers degrees such as its internationally famous course on labour and trade union studies. On the orders of the Further Education Commission, a quango, it is being absorbed this month into a consortium of local colleges. As one ex-member of its governing board puts it, “the college has to all intents and purposes died”.

Ruskin was one of the great

institutions of the British labour movement, alongside the unions, the Co-op, the friendly societies and the working men’s clubs. All are sadly diminished. Perhaps that was unavoidable, but I can’t help feeling that their decline is connected to so many taking refuge in the false comforts of identity politics.

Read all about it

Michael Gove and Sarah Vine are both journalists by trade. It seems curious therefore that they didn’t understand that, if you announce on a Monday morning that you are separating but nobody else is involved, people may believe you. But if you announce it on a Friday afternoon (as they did), everyone will assume you’ve been contacted by a Sunday newspaper which is about to break an embarrassing story. They will speculate wildly for 36 hours on social media. And they will then feel cheated to find nothing in the Sunday morning papers.

Behind the mask

Despite Boris Johnson’s promise to withdraw all Covid-related laws on 19 July, the *Daily Mail* continues to fight the mask wars. His call for “responsible” people to continue wearing face masks in enclosed spaces threatens to divide us into “hostile tribes”, it protests. The most pro-mask health academic, it points out, is a communist. I am reminded of a line from Paul Simon’s Bob Dylan parody, “A Simple Desultory Philippic” (1965): “I’ve been Ayn Randed, nearly branded/communist, ’cos I’m left-handed.” ●



JM

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Jess Phillips **The Diary**

What Batley and Spen means for Labour, Euros fever and how Gavin Williamson failed my kids



Nothing says “huge ego” like a larger-than-life-size photo poster of a politician posing as if he’s about to throw a punch in a boxing match. We get it, Mr Galloway: you’re a blokey bloke and the main feature of your politics is you. This was the image that greeted me and some intrepid Birmingham activists as we drove in to Batley to help knock on doors in the 1 July by-election. My favourite image of George Galloway during the campaign was of him in his boy-band phase, perched on a high stool as if about to leap to his feet and sing “You Raise Me Up”. He, of course, does the opposite and brings pretty much everyone down.

Election day was a slog of blazing heat, steep hills and voters tired out by some of the aggression that had been brought to their hometown. However, the slog was made much easier by the inspirational candidacy of Kim Leadbeater and the amazingly well-managed and cheery organisation of the campaign. I passed familiar faces from all over the country coming in and out of the campaign centre and was reminded of the Labour Party campaigning of my childhood. A determination and spirited enthusiasm had broken out and it felt good to be on the streets fighting for something and someone that we believed in.

Labour’s confidence boost

Since 1 July, I have read more column inches on what the Batley and Spen by-election means for the Labour Party than I have about Andy Murray’s metal hip. I think the political classes obsess too much about by-election results: voters don’t behave in the same way in them as they do in general elections for the sole reason that they are not electing a government.

I will however indulge myself with a brief analysis and say that the margin in an already marginal seat should give the party pause while also allowing us to feel hopeful that – against the backdrop of a vicious campaign that was, wrongly, nothing to do with the dreadful government of the past decade

and which became some kind of ridiculous proxy war for the so-called left – Labour still won. Not only that, it won with good organisation, an inspirational candidate and a lot of bloody hard graft.

The sense of relief I felt when I awoke on the morning of 2 July – my skin branded with the tan lines of a day in the hot sun in Batley – and learned that Kim had been elected was greater than I’d expected. Some of that was the hope that Kim, the sister of my dear, departed friend Jo Cox, brings with her, but some of it was relief for the Labour Party, which needed a boost. I hope it is reassured by that boost – the party lacks confidence too often. I’d like us to find a happy medium between constant morbid self-reflection and the arrogance of a larger-than-life sparring photo of a charlatan. There has got to be a sensible central ground.

Fair-weather fan

I am shamelessly a glory-supporting football fan. I do not support a specific local football team, I do not pretend to care about it when asked, although I definitely know the difference between Aston Villa and West Ham. I am, however, an absolute addict of England football fever. This week I will say phrases such as, “the lads showed real control in their game” and “you can rely on Jack Grealish to create opportunities”. I don’t know what I’m talking about. I have never been a purist in politics or in life so I don’t ask for people to qualify in order to join in, which is lucky because if I was pressed to explain the offside rule while in the pub, draped in a St George’s flag, I would come up blank. Come on England!

The pain of pandemic exams

There was a time when, if my phone display indicated that my son was calling me at 10am on a school day, I would have panicked that something terrible was happening. This week I knew that he was calling to tell me he had once again been isolated from school, just like hundreds of kids in

my constituency and thousands across the country. I get that we are living through a pandemic, and I understand that precautions have to be taken, but something must be done to make up for the time lost. The phone call from the school about provision of extra tuition or activities is one I and the majority of parents have yet to receive.

Both of my children have been failed in the pandemic. As I sat trying to prepare with my eldest for GCSE assessments that had been rescheduled three times due to bouts of isolation, it became very clear what a deficit he had in his learning. His school has done everything it could within its gift, but it was also left in the dark, never knowing what was happening from one week to the next. I wouldn’t put Gavin Williamson in charge of a pot plant – the fact that our Prime Minister left him in charge of my sons literally made me weep over practice exam papers on the Weimar Republic. I hope Williamson is ready for parents like me come exam results day because if he thinks I am tough politically, he’s never seen me defending my family.

Fear of freedom

This week marked a decade since I lost my mother to sarcoma, a cancer which, as was the case with her, is often missed, leaving too many people without the early diagnosis they need to survive. As the Prime Minister took to his podium this week to cry freedom and hope that we can all put the lockdown behind us, I can’t help but think of all of those cancer patients and other vulnerable people who will be very frightened of a society with no restrictions, and all of those who have had their treatments delayed and cancelled.

We might be able to throw off our masks, but the virus remains a threat and for hundreds of thousands of people the effects of the pandemic are still very real. ●

“Everything You Really Need to Know About Politics: My Life as an MP” by Jess Phillips is published on 22 July by Gallery UK

Hello, my name is John Griffin

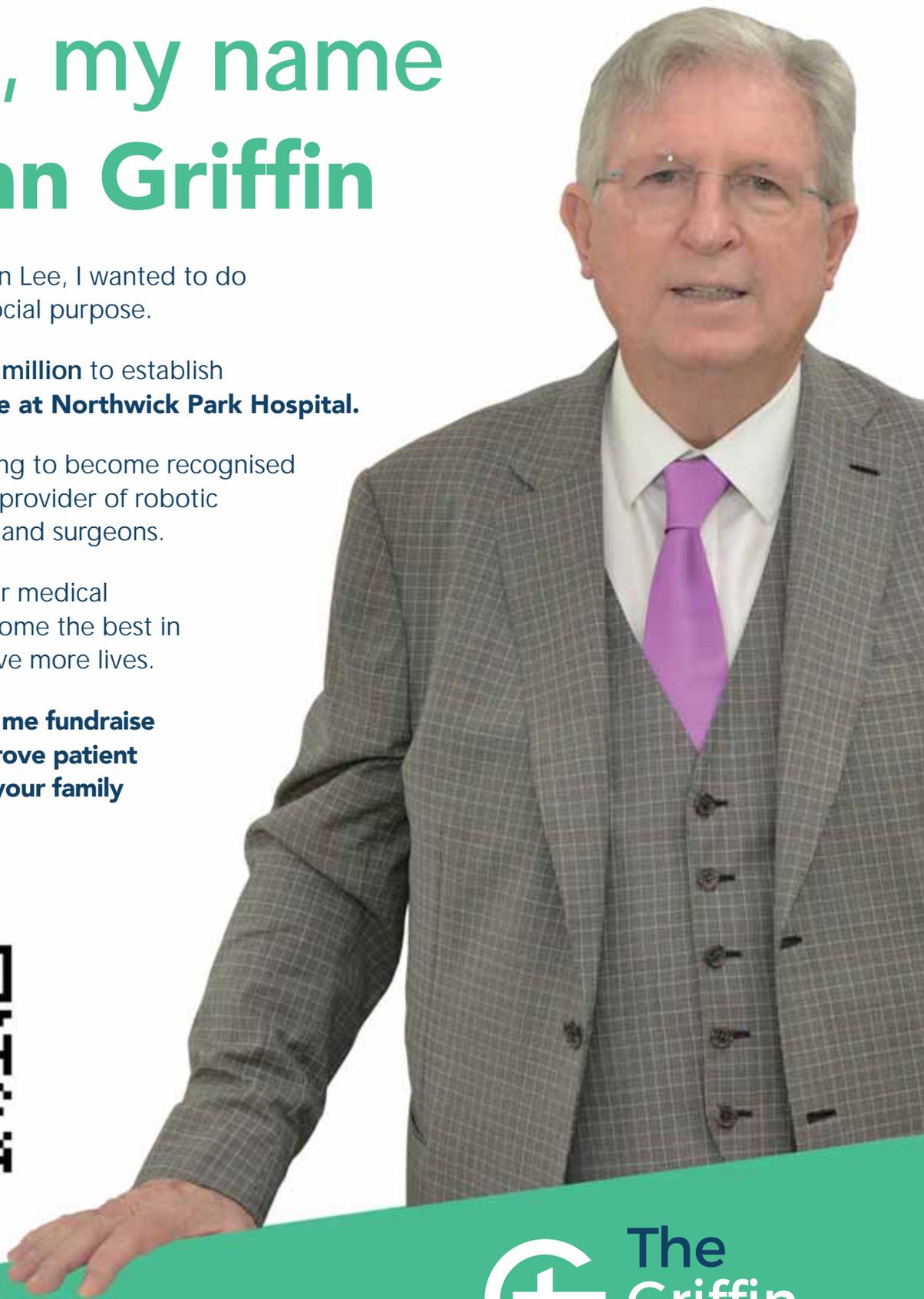
When I sold Addison Lee, I wanted to do something with a social purpose.

I donated over **£12 million** to establish
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Philip Collins **The Public Square**

We have blind faith in the NHS, but the system is broken. And it shouldn't be heretical to say so



On the occasion of its 73rd birthday, the Queen has given the National Health Service a present. The NHS has become the third collective body, after Malta and the Royal Ulster Constabulary, to receive the award of the George Cross. Established by King George VI in 1940, the George Cross is a recognition for civilian gallantry in the face of conspicuous danger. The pandemic has been a war, of sorts. We talk of health workers on the front line and the virus as an invisible enemy. The staff of the NHS have, indeed, been heroic in the fight – there we go again – against Covid-19.

I don't especially want to rain on this parade but it would surely have been better to grant the award officially to the past and present staff of the NHS rather than to the institution itself. It is a strange quirk of British life that we tend to attribute remedial healthcare to the system instead of the particular professionals who provide it. We make a fetish of the NHS, or to use Nigel Lawson's much-quoted remark, we make a religion of it.

The George Cross is a cost-free way of saying thank you, but gratitude won't be enough. Sajid Javid and Boris Johnson's stampede towards opening up society will, in all probability, increase the burden on the NHS in the autumn. The pandemic is not done with us yet, even if the link between Covid infection and the need for hospital admission has been weakened by the vaccination programme. Yet the end is dimly in sight and the NHS, George Cross and all, still has a hard road ahead.

The problem with the health service is in part about funding, as these things always are. Modern democracies are the oldest societies in human history and increased longevity has provided a series of problems never before encountered. In normal, pre-pandemic times, seven out of ten hospital beds in England were occupied by someone with a long-term condition of the sort patients might not have survived on the Appointed Day when the NHS came into

being in 1948. In 2015 there were three times as many people aged over 85 as there were in 1990. At the same time, scientific advances have created expensive new procedures which, in a system with no price mechanism, people quite understandably think they have paid for.

The method of NHS funding is, in fact, its glory. The shining moral appeal of the NHS is the simple fact that people are treated according to need, not according to their capacity to pay for treatment. That principle is protected by public funding, organised through a progressive tax system. This is why the debate about private healthcare provision, which consumes so much of the political argument, is misleading. It is

Who would like to join me in a campaign to close lots of hospitals?

not the particular method of provision that protects the valued principle; it is how the money flows.

There will have to be a lot more money too, once we can think again about the health of the nation beyond Covid. In the autumn of 2016, long before the pandemic struck, the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) calculated that unless productivity in the NHS improved, the cost of healthcare would push the national debt to more than 200 per cent of GDP by the 2060s. That was on a base that was stable by comparison with today's public finances.

As tempting as it will be to breathe a sigh of relief and let the NHS have a rest after the past year and a half, the option is sadly unavailable. It is a kind of heresy to say so, but the NHS isn't yet as good as it pleases us to think it is, or as good as we need it to be.

Change, though, in and of an institution that holds such sentimental value for so many of us, is difficult. Who would like to join me, for example, in a much-needed campaign to close lots of hospitals? In the

wake of a pandemic, it seems reckless as well as wildly unpopular but, in truth, hip replacements, heart attacks and strokes are better treated in specialist units than in district hospitals. Plenty of acute care can now be administered remotely, at home. The heyday of the all-purpose hospital passed long ago but, mentally, we haven't grasped that yet.

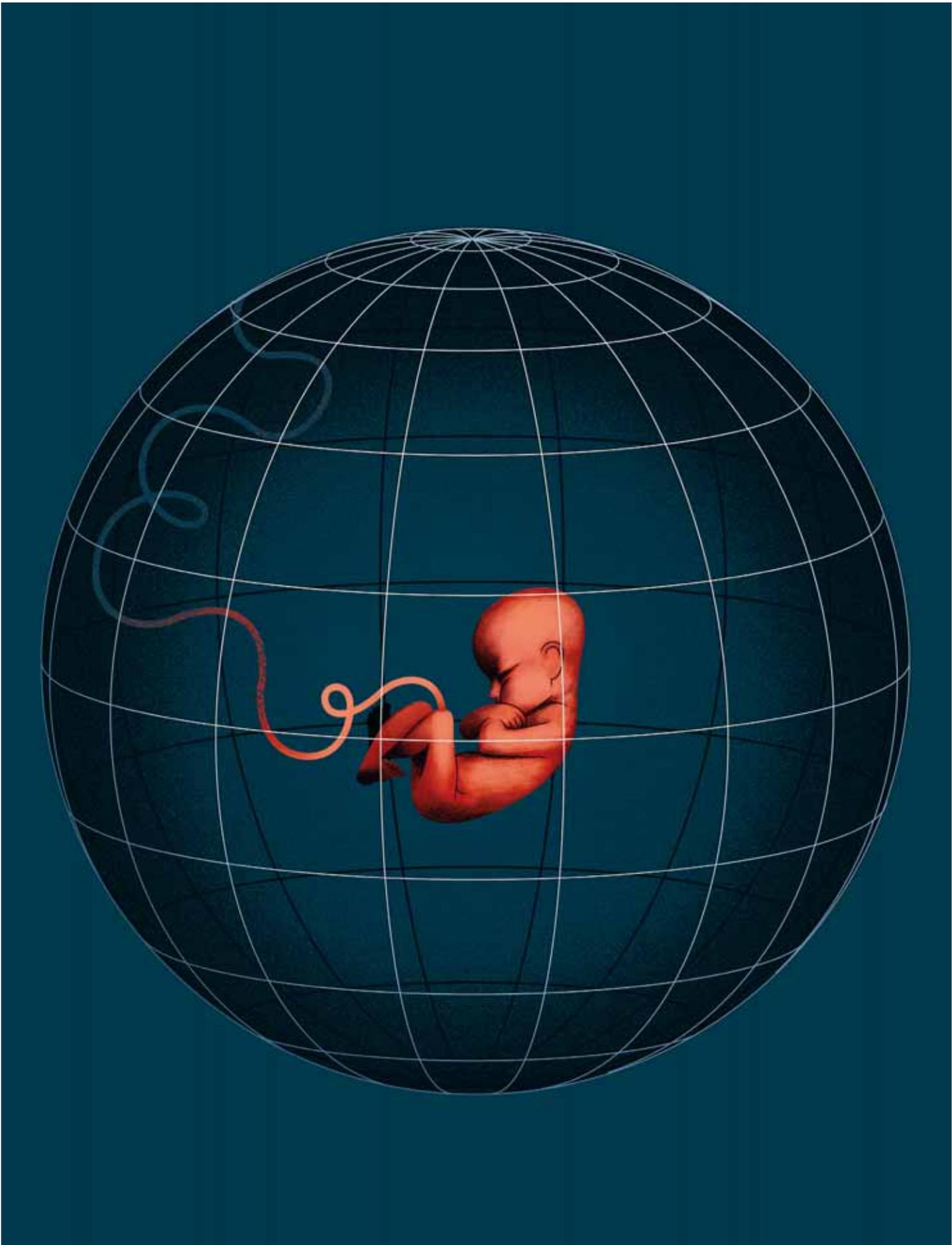
The NHS was designed as a system in which experts episodically cared for needy patients. Today, two-thirds of the NHS budget in England goes on the 15 million people who are living with a long-term condition. Patients with conditions such as dementia, diabetes, hypertension and arthritis account for around 60 per cent of all outpatient appointments. This is not treatment that should be carried out in hospitals. The patient needs to be in charge, but that has not been the prevailing model. The Personalised Care programme within the NHS is slowly changing this. This is a superb initiative that should be more prominent than it is, and should provide the start of a revolution in healthcare provision.

Then we have to take the OBR warning seriously. Before the pandemic, competition between providers had lowered costs for cataract procedures, MRI scans and knee replacements. If it works, politicians need to stop screaming that private providers are an affront to the NHS. Either that or find another way to get more out of the system from within the public provision.

Every letter of N-H-S isn't quite right. It is not national, because regional variations are large. It is not a health service, because it is concerned more with illness. And it is not so much a single service as a collection of separate bodies. Yet we like to think of it as one entity, a comfort blanket for sad times.

We are not wholly wrong about that; the NHS is an institution of which we can be proud. But we do not display that pride to its best effect if we turn our eyes away from what is about to go wrong. ●

Philip Collins is a New Statesman columnist and contributing writer



ANDRÉ CARRILHO

The baby bust

Birth rates, already in decline across the world, have fallen to new lows in the pandemic. We are now facing a demographic winter that will transform the way we live

By Sophie McBain

In the days when we were still disinfecting our groceries and stockpiling lo roll, there was speculation that lockdowns might produce a baby boom: couples were stuck at home – what else was there to do? Instead, as the pandemic has worn on, maternity wards have become quieter. Birth rates have plummeted across much of Europe, the US and Asia.

Provisional data for England and Wales suggests the number of births fell by 3.9 per cent in 2020 and the first quarter of 2021, which would put the fertility rate at an all-time low. It turns out – and it seems obvious now – that the horror and uncertainty of a pandemic has a dramatic contraceptive effect: the monthly fertility rate in England and Wales in December 2020 and January 2021, around nine months after Britain shut down, fell by 8.1 per cent and 10.2 per cent year-on-year respectively. A record number of women in England and Wales had abortions last year.

In the US, the fertility rate fell by 4 per cent in 2020, to the lowest on record. Italy's birth rate has dropped to its lowest level since unification in 1861; together with a high Covid-19 death toll, this has caused a drop in population equivalent to a city the size of Florence. In France birth numbers have dropped to their lowest since the Second World War; in Japan and South Korea there have been record lows. The number of births in China dropped 15 per cent in 2020; after decades of maintaining a one-child policy, replaced with an allowance for two in 2016, the government announced in May that women could now have three children.

These figures are striking taken in isolation, but represent an acceleration in a decades-long trend – one that will completely reconfigure the global economy, the international balance of power, and our intimate and personal lives. It will require fundamental social change to accommodate the diminishing size of the tax-paying,

economically productive population, as well as the rising number of older people requiring pensions and social care. Even before the pandemic, the UK birth rate had fallen to record lows. Across most of the Global North, the fertility rate has for decades remained below the replacement rate of 2.1 children per woman; were it not for immigration, the population of almost every rich country in the world would begin shrinking.

A paper published last year in the medical journal the *Lancet* predicted that the world's population will peak at 9.73 billion in 2064, and then decline. By the end of the century, this figure will stand at 8.79 billion (two billion fewer than the UN had previously forecast), while 23 countries can expect their populations to have halved. One of the report's authors, Christopher Murray of the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation at the University of Washington, described the findings as “jaw-dropping”. ▶

► Policymakers have long grasped the unsurprising and yet world-changing truth that, if you give women control over their bodies and opportunities beyond the home, and if they have the resources they need to ensure their children survive infancy, they will have fewer children. And so, as women are emancipated and economies develop, countries undergo a “demographic transition”, in which life expectancy rises and family sizes fall. The unexpected part is how few children most women then choose to have.

This is the “jaw-dropping” bit, Murray told me. “There’s been an article of faith

the world will become greener, healthier and more prosperous, with fewer mouths to feed and fewer people burning through our finite natural resources. The world will certainly become greyer, because if the *Lancet*’s projections are accurate, by 2100 the number of people aged over 65 will outnumber the under-twenties by 670 million. We are, several experts told me, entering the unknown.

Birth rates tend to fall in the immediate aftermath of crises – flu pandemics, recessions, natural disasters – but many features of the coronavirus pandemic are unique. Extended lockdowns have made it hard

her mid-twenties who said that witnessing these struggles second-hand had convinced her that she never wanted children: she didn’t want to take the risk that there would be another pandemic and that she’d end up as miserable as her friends with kids.

The pandemic is threatening to reverse decades of progress towards gender equality, and it has had a crushing effect on mothers, who have taken on the bulk of extra care responsibilities. When the pandemic first hit the UK in the spring of 2020, mothers were 1.5 times more likely than fathers to have lost their job, and many are suffering chronic stress and burnout. Covid has amplified an economic and cultural system that punishes women for having children and then deems them “selfish” if they don’t want them. Even before the pandemic, parents in Britain were burdened with the second highest childcare costs in the OECD. A punitive “motherhood penalty” means women can expect their earnings to have dropped by 40 per cent by the time their child reaches the age of ten, according to a study published last year by the American Economic Association.

Then there is the wider economic crisis. A government briefing published in June described the magnitude of the UK’s recession as “unprecedented in modern times”: GDP shrank by 9.8 per cent in 2020, having dropped 25 per cent between February and April. “In a pandemic that most affects the poorest people living in cities, to the point at which they are thinking, ‘How am I going to survive and carry on?’ – well, you do not plan to have a baby in those circumstances,” Danny Dorling, a professor of geography at the University of Oxford, told me. “If you

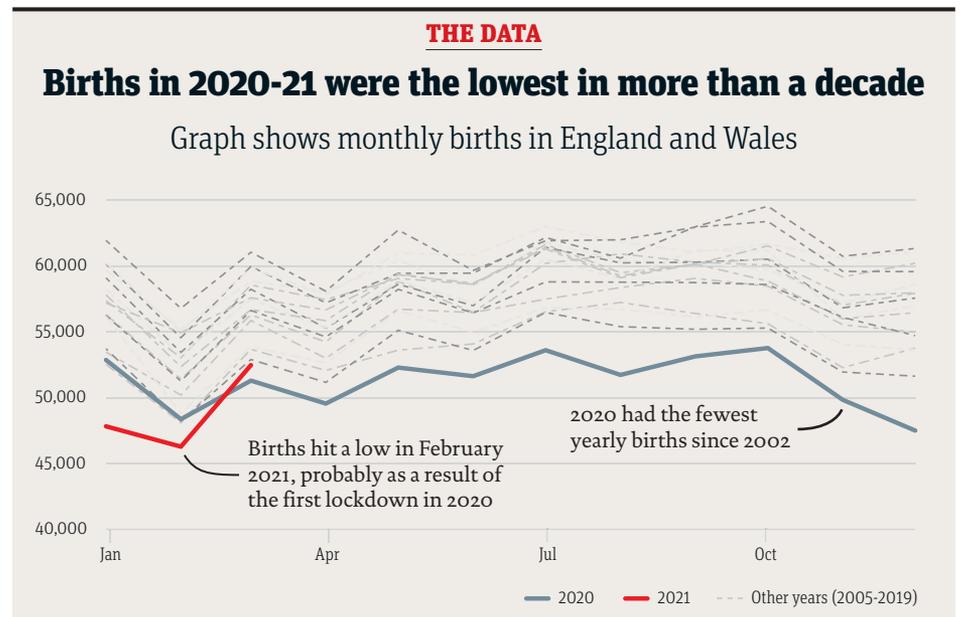
If you give women control over their bodies and opportunities beyond the home, they will have fewer children

in the demographic community, and it’s still largely there, that somehow women will end up choosing two children and that therefore low fertility is just a temporary phenomenon. But there’s never been any basis for that.” Instead, in wealthy countries, birth rates have stabilised at much lower rates than anyone anticipated. The fertility rates in the US, UK and Nordic countries are relatively high at between 1.5 and 1.7 children per woman. It is much lower across southern Europe, and parts of Asia. South Korea’s fertility rate is less than one, the lowest in the world.

Why have birth rates fallen this low? Demographers speak of a “fertility trap”, in which decline becomes self-perpetuating. This is partly a mathematical phenomenon: as populations age and shrink, so too does the number of people of childbearing age. It’s partly an economic one, because of the financial burden borne by taxpayers in a country with many pensioners. It’s partly sociological: most people have a similar number of children as their peers. And then there is an elusive element: our reasons for wanting children, or not wanting them, can be mysterious even to ourselves. Why would you start a family in the middle of a plague? Why wouldn’t you?

It’s hard to overstate how completely the world will be transformed if birth rates continue to decline. For now, immigration from lower-income countries with higher fertility rates can help wealthy countries rebalance – though, as Murray pointed out, fertility rates are eventually expected to fall almost everywhere. Some fear that falling fertility will bankrupt welfare states and depress economic growth. Others hope

for single people to find partners, or for long-distance couples to meet. The strain on working parents who have been home-schooling or looking after small children has been immense, making it more likely that these families will abandon or postpone plans to have another child. The harrowing experiences of pregnant women who have had to labour or miscarry alone, and the isolation experienced by new parents may have caused some onlookers to delay their plans to start a family – certainly, some have told me as much. Some will find that, by the time they feel ready, they are no longer able to conceive. Fertility treatments such as IVF have been delayed. The stress and unhappiness of pandemic parenting can have diffuse effects. I spoke to a woman in





Barren land: the climate crisis is causing widespread anxiety about the world our children will inherit

were deliberately economically targeting age groups most likely to give birth – the way we did lockdowns and so on did just that. We protected the old, but we damaged the young.” Even Dorling, who has studied inequality for decades, said that he had been “shocked” by just how badly the pandemic had impacted young people, particularly the poorest.

The exorbitant cost of housing has played a role, too: house prices rose by 10.2 per cent between March 2020 and March 2021. Data analysis by the *New Statesman* has shown that the average price is 65 times higher than in 1970, while average wages are only 36 times higher. “The government has done all it can to make housing as expensive as possible,” said Dorling. He cites the Chancellor Rishi Sunak’s relaunch of Help to Buy, in which the government underwrites the mortgages of first-time buyers who can scrape together a 5 per cent deposit. “Help to Buy is a policy not to help people to buy. It’s a policy to keep house prices really high by letting a few people buy so that house prices don’t go down,” Dorling said. You are less likely to start a family if you are living with your parents, or trying to save your way out of the costly rental sector.

Even more than poverty, precarity is a decisive factor. Eva Beaujouan of the Wittgenstein Centre for Demography and Global Human Capital in Vienna told me the word “uncertainty” comes up repeatedly in her research. “That’s something central, and it’s something that already came up before the pandemic. The way the economy is constructed today is creating lots of uncertainty, particularly for young people.” She pointed to rising youth unemployment

across Europe. According to EU figures, around 3.1 million EU citizens aged 15 to 24 are currently unable to find a job. European fertility rates have not recovered since the 2008 financial crash, and demographers have been studying the effects of perceived uncertainty: the less tangible ways in which young people’s confidence in the future is undermined by a deep recession.

Compounding this have been more pervasive, global uncertainties. When will the pandemic end? How much more will climate change impact our lives, whether through forest fires, extreme weather events, new zoonotic diseases, choking air or rising seas? Social media conversations around the decision to remain “child-free” reveal how individual fears can become entangled with bigger anxieties about the pandemic, the economy, the environment. “This global crisis has just made me more convinced that’s the right choice,” reads one such post on Reddit. “I really chose not to have kids over climate change because I couldn’t handle the pain of seeing them face an uncertain future and worrying about them in crisis.” Another post reads: “I think choosing parenthood requires a leap of faith that things will all work out OK... I know that if I was responsible for a tiny human and something devastating happened, my anxiety would be unbearable.”

Birth rates often recover quickly after dipping in the immediate aftermaths of crises, and a baby boom is not uncommon. Trent MacNamara, an assistant professor at Texas A&M University and the author of *Birth Control and American Modernity*, told me that this may be because such crises force people to re-evaluate their lives. After

a war, for instance, citizens might feel more closely bound to their country or community, which means they might decide to have a child knowing they have the support of strong social networks; they might feel that raising a child – a future citizen – is a patriotic or prosocial act. Yet MacNamara thought it unlikely that this would happen after the pandemic. The virus has, after all, acted as a social divider. It has kept people physically apart, and exposed and widened vast economic and political rifts: people have been living different pandemics, and some have not been living through a pandemic at all, as far as they are concerned, but in a great government hoax.

Other, broader cultural changes have occurred that make it less likely the pandemic will be followed by a baby boom, MacNamara argued. The longer-term trends all point in the direction of small family sizes. It has been suggested that low fertility is a product of what the *Atlantic* journalist Derek Thompson called “workism”, the transformation of work into “a kind of religion, promising identity, transcendence and community” – but this ignores the great many people in unfulfilling jobs who don’t feel this way.

Instead, MacNamara observed that people in Western industrialised countries tend to see themselves as a “finished product”: they don’t need children to feel “complete”, or to find meaning in their lives; they are less invested in the idea that they are merely one link in an unbroken ancestral chain. “Capitalism encourages us to think of ourselves as individual, detached units. Its spiritual trajectory is parallel to that of low fertility,” he said. Then again, MacNamara has four children – an unusually high number, he acknowledges, for a man who has described himself as an erstwhile “vegetable-blending free spirit” who is not “conventionally religious”.

I didn’t know how much I wanted children until I thought I couldn’t have any. After a year of trying and failing to conceive, I visited a fertility clinic in Cairo, where I was living at the time. In the waiting room I sat opposite two women, one older than the other – a mother and daughter perhaps. They both wore black robes and headscarves, suggesting they were from a conservative family, the kind that might expect a wife to produce children and would question her worth if she could not.

It is a great privilege to be a woman in a country, or a culture, where having children is a choice (of sorts) rather than an inevitability. The Egyptian government maintains a billboard-sized electronic counter in the capital that tracks the size ▶

► of the population. Last year it reached 100 million. The state has been trying for decades to keep population growth under control – around 40 per cent of the population is under 18, and there are not enough jobs – but because it has failed to fully emancipate women, its family planning efforts fail, too.

Even if I could never have children, I tried to remind myself in that Cairo clinic, I would travel the world, throw myself into a job I found enjoyable and rewarding, find meaning and love through my friendships and family. But I wanted a baby so badly that my life was starting to reorganise itself into monthly cycles of brittle hope and all-consuming disappointment. I was beginning to glimpse the desperation felt by couples who remortgage their homes and spend tens of thousands on fertility treatments. And still, in the months before I started trying for a baby, I had debated my options casually with friends. Was the timing right? How much would it hurt my career? Should I travel some more first?

It is hard to remember, now that I have two children, what I was expecting from motherhood. I could never have understood the universe-expanding love I would

feel for my daughters, or how completely they would reorient my life. Was it some deep-seated, evolutionary desire, or a socially acquired one?

When the *New York Times* ran a front-page story on the US pandemic baby bust in May, it referred glancingly to the costs of raising a child in a country where medical care, childcare and higher education are all eye-wateringly expensive, yet the women interviewed all framed their decision to postpone motherhood in terms of responsibility. “I’m far too young to be responsible for a child,” one 25-year-old health researcher said. “Everybody in my friend group is saying, ‘When is the right time to let go of that selfishness?’” a 29-year-old IT professional agreed. “We are all putting it off.” The article ignored how decisively these apparent choices are shaped by cultural, political and economic circumstances. No doubt young people are delaying parenthood partly for positive reasons: they want to enjoy their freedoms. But the “responsibility” of parenthood becomes much less daunting in countries with low-cost childcare, family-friendly work policies and strong social safety nets, and where there is not a culture of intensive parenting and maternal self-sacrifice. We have a tendency to privatise these problems, so that the blame remains on the woman who will not “let go of that selfishness”, rather than on the economic and social realities that make parenthood – and especially motherhood – unthinkable for so many.

There is another factor: people in wealthy countries are having fewer children than they say they want. This so-called fertility gap is small but not insignificant. It suggests that if people in the UK, the US and Europe had the number of children they wanted, the fertility rate would be just over two children per woman, or above the replacement rate. Perhaps, as the American journalist Anna Louie Sussman has argued, falling birth rates are “less a choice than the poignant consequence of a set of unsavoury circumstances”. “What we have come to think of as ‘late capitalism’ – that is, not just the economic system, but all its attendant inequalities, indignities, opportunities and absurdities – has become hostile to reproduction,” she observed.

Those in the wealthy, industrialised West have never had so much freedom to choose what their families will look like. We are no longer as burdened by the assumption that you simply must have children; the legalisation of gay adoption and advances in reproductive technologies have opened up more options for same-sex couples. And yet the flip-side of this freedom is that millennial and Gen-Z lives are characterised by

instability: insecure employment; expensive, short-term housing; impermanent relationships (they are more likely than previous generations to stay single).

Even the most economically secure will puzzle over how parenthood can fit into their lives. The world of work remains structured on the assumption that each worker is buttressed by a housewife who can deal with all the inconveniences of being a human being – the cooking and shopping and cleaning. This leaves working parents struggling to organise childcare, when every option costs so much and the short school day in no way maps on to a work day. It is rarely acknowledged that these are structural problems rather than evidence of some personal failing. I don’t feel ready, people say instead. Not yet.

The political right is the most likely to express – and weaponise – concern about falling birth rates, which can stir racist fears of white demographic decline, ethno-nationalist anxiety over dwindling power, and reactionary unease over the demise of “traditional family values”: all those young people too high on freedom, too scared of responsibility to become parents. Ironically, those on the right are also the least likely to support open immigration policies to offset falling birth rates, or to back pro-family policies such as subsidised childcare and enhanced parental leave and pay.

On the left, meanwhile, many will argue that shrinking populations are a marker of progress, that we should celebrate that people are living longer, that women have control over their reproduction, that everyone is free to have as many children as they want or to have none at all. Many environmentalists welcome falling birth rates as a means of reducing pressure on the world’s fast-depleting resources.

Does that mean it is selfish to have children? The discussion of fertility is often framed in these terms. “Is it OK to still have children?” the democratic socialist congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez asked her Instagram followers a few years ago. (She doesn’t answer the question – how could she tell parents that it is not OK? – but says it’s “legitimate” to question the morality of having children when they will suffer the effects of climate change.) “Given the state of the world, is it irresponsible to have kids?” pondered the *New York Times Style Magazine*’s ethics column (that question is unanswerable, it concluded wisely, “because only by some mysterious, variable quotient is the desire to have a child even rational”). “What is more selfish: having kids or not having kids?” one confused user



asked the website Quora. (More readers decided that having kids was selfish.)

To have a child, or not to have a child, is an intimate matter; it will alter the trajectory of a person's life, and for a woman it is a matter of bodily freedom. Yet these choices are vulnerable to political influence: when having children is framed either as a social obligation or an act of narcissism, women's choices are more easily undermined. Across the US and Europe reproductive freedoms have already been eroded, in both blatant and subtle ways. In May the US Supreme Court, now dominated by conservative judges, agreed to hear a challenge to American women's constitutional right to abortion – a warning of the reversibility of feminist gains. Earlier this year, Poland's right-wing government implemented a near-total ban on abortion. Some activists in Hungary fear its far-right, pro-natalist government will follow suit. "We want Hungarian children. Migration for us is surrender," Viktor Orbán, the Hungarian prime minister, has said. He has devoted around 5 per cent of GDP to boosting the birth rate, made obtaining an abortion more difficult and co-sponsored a pro-life declaration signed by more than 30 countries.

While right-wing populist movements may try to coerce women to have more children, other forces are acting, in less obvious ways, to place limits on family sizes. Families in the UK are hit with a two-child benefits cap, a policy that has pushed more children into poverty and stigmatised their parents. According to the British Pregnancy Advisory Service, more than half of women who had an abortion during the pandemic and were aware of and likely to be affected by the welfare limits cited them as an important factor in their decision. At the same time, rising awareness of the ecological cost of population growth has led eco-fascist, anti-natalist movements to proliferate online, where they speak with undisguised contempt and misogyny about "breeders", and aim for human extinction.

Where does this leave us? Some countries, such as Sweden, have sought to boost the birth rate in benign ways, by introducing better parental leave, state-provided childcare and stronger re-employment rights – but these policies tend to have a limited impact on fertility. This leaves wealthy countries that have low birth rates with two main options, Darrell Bricker and John Ibbitson argue in their 2019 book *Empty Planet: The Shock of Global Population Decline*. They can emulate Japan, which has tried and failed to boost the birth rate

through various non-coercive measures and yet maintains strict limits on migration, even as the dearth of young people drags down growth and reshapes society in momentous and hard-to-measure ways: an older country may become less innovative and creative, for instance. (It could be noted, however, that if Japan is your worst-case scenario, you're doing pretty well.) Or countries can open their borders to migration from low-income, high-fertility countries, and in effect import a working-age population (until, presumably, the Global South transitions to low-fertility, too) – in which case politicians ought to start talking more honestly about why immigration should be welcomed.

There are other choices, of course, if you're open to rethinking the economic model that chases growth above all else and

a campaign group that encourages people to have fewer children to protect the planet and combat poverty. "We know we are pushing all sorts of boundaries, the boundaries of our ecosystems, the climate, the oceans – and we're not really increasing the well-being of people generally." Population Matters opposes any coercive measures to reduce family sizes (this includes the UK's two-child welfare cap, which Maynard describes as "regressive" and "nasty"). He doesn't want to "tell people what to do", he explained; he wants to help others make informed decisions.

Maynard has two children, the youngest of whom is three, and he said it broke his heart to think about the world his daughter will inherit, that the animals that decorate her nursery may no longer exist in the wild when she grows up. "We're handing on

A low-fertility world could prompt a reassessment of the relationship between people, capital and the planet

is sustained only by an ever-expanding base of new consumers. The fall in family sizes has been linked to rising individualism, as people no longer feel connected to large kinship networks – but it could equally pave the way for new forms of social solidarity. A low-fertility world could prompt a reassessment of the relationship between people and capital, between people and the planet.

"This very strange thing about young people is they get old. And so, you can keep pouring young people into the furnace of consumerism, but they will get old too," Robin Maynard told me drily. Maynard is the director of Population Matters,

a world that's not in a better position than when we received it," he said.

His answer suggests a different, and not entirely contradictory, way of thinking about having a child in an age of crisis. Becoming a parent can be an optimistic act, a personal commitment to a brighter future. When you bring a baby into the world today, what the world might look like in 2100 is not an abstract thought-experiment, but a matter of urgent personal interest. There are many reasons to fear having a baby in the midst of a global pandemic, and many reasons to have one anyway. To have a baby is, after all, always a leap of faith.

This is no consolation if you want so much to have a child but do not see how you could support one, with the economy in tatters and your finances on the brink; if you are single and have spent one of your final reproductive years alone, desperate to meet someone; if your IVF has been delayed so long that it probably will no longer work; if you despair about the planet's future. You don't have to be worried about declining fertility itself to be worried by this widespread sense of precarity. You might find yourself believing that declining fertility is ultimately a good thing for this planet, and still feel some sadness for the unknowable, unacknowledged loss this might represent, all those serious, hushed bedroom discussions that end in similar ways: it would be wonderful to have a child – just not now, not yet. ●





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Helen Thompson *These Times*

Why Britain's timid green politics means it is yet to take the energy revolution seriously



Since June 2019, when Theresa May's government passed a bill stipulating that net zero greenhouse gas emissions must be achieved by 2050, British policy on climate change has become more ambitious. Yet the country still lacks a politics that is serious about the energy revolution.

There is general accord across the parties at Westminster on the Ten Point Plan for a Green Industrial Revolution, which Boris Johnson's government introduced in November 2020. The plan commits the government to £12bn of public investment in green innovation to create 250,000 jobs. Labour's only substantial criticism of the plan was to lament both the timing and inadequate size of the proposed expenditure.

In understanding how deep the present green consensus runs, the otherwise deeply divisive issue of Brexit is instructive. Britain's departure from the EU ensured Britain had to construct its own emissions trading scheme. But there has been strikingly little pressure on the government to link Britain's new system to the EU's.

The absence of a contested politics over energy policy in Britain differs from other countries. In Germany, for example, the two parties that have made the largest electoral gains since the 2013 federal election are the Greens and the climate-sceptic Alternative für Deutschland. The decisive question around the federal election this September is whether the Greens will be part of the next government. Having led the polls in April, the Greens have fallen back, partly because their candidate for chancellor, Annalena Baerbock, suggested raising the carbon price for petrol.

In the US, energy is perhaps the most important fault-line in the congressional Democratic Party. In February 2021, seven Democratic senators joined with Republicans on an amendment that prohibits Joe Biden's administration from banning fracking. This reflected the concerns of some Democrats who represent oil-producing states, such as Ben Ray Lujan of New Mexico, about future job losses in the shale sector.

The absence of energy as an area of political dispute in Britain reflects some of the relative advantages the country enjoys in the energy revolution. Unlike the US, Britain has a declining oil and gas industry. For four decades, the Scottish Nationalists saw oil as the economic basis for independence. But since the 2014 referendum Nicola Sturgeon has committed Scotland to net zero by 2045 – five years earlier than the UK as a whole.

Britain has also replaced coal as a primary energy source in its electricity sector. In Germany, however, the politician most likely to succeed Angela Merkel as chancellor, Armin Laschet of the CDU, is the premier of North Rhine-Westphalia, the heartland of German coal production. During the Merkel government's fraught negotiations in 2020 to construct a medium-term plan to

Net zero requires politicians to make hard choices about fossil fuel

exit coal, Laschet procured a new coal-fired power station for his region.

The easy gains Britain has made from the winds that blow off its island coasts and the absence of an anti-nuclear party like the German Greens are perhaps reasons why British politicians are not taking seriously what the energy revolution entails. The commitment to net zero requires politicians to make hard choices about how much fossil fuel energy will still be used that is then offset by carbon capture. It also requires judgements to be made on whether to invest in technological innovation and engineering infrastructure in electrifying the transportation and heating sectors, or to bet on hydrogen as a fuel to replace oil and gas.

Some choices are evident. The Green Industrial Revolution plan favours the use of hydrogen for heating and electrification for transport. But there will be no escaping the conflictual, class-driven politics that will

intensify as these decisions are made. More electrification that involves increased solar power or onshore wind means much greater use of land for energy purposes. Electrifying road transport is likely to entail fewer car journeys and greater emphasis on public transport, cycling and walking.

In recent months there have been some indications that a contest over the Green Industrial Revolution plan is emerging. In March, the shadow secretary for business, energy and industrial strategy, Ed Miliband, called for interest-free loans for low- and middle-income earners to buy electric vehicles. Conservative backbencher Steve Baker has warned Johnson that plans to force homeowners to buy new boilers could be as politically disastrous for the party as the poll tax was in the late 1980s.

But the political debate about energy is still mostly defined by rhetorical blather, whether that is Johnson's platitudes about Britain becoming the world leader in this, that, or the other, or Miliband's bromides about how "green and red together" is in the "DNA of Labour".

What is also missing is any serious debate over the implications for British foreign policy in the Middle East, a region that is likely to become a significant source of Britain's imported oil and gas (most oil imports at the moment come from Norway and the US). There is also little debate about the implications for Britain's strategic orientation in a geopolitical world shaped by Sino-American rivalry and China's position as the world's largest carbon emitter.

Until Britain's politicians articulate substantial differences with each other over the energy revolution, climate policy will be driven by jobs and "levelling up", rather than achieving net zero. Green politics will only have arrived in Britain when the parties start articulating competing judgements about which specific energy projects should be pursued and who consumes what volume of energy, and at what cost. ●

Helen Thompson is professor of political economy at Cambridge University

The return of the Celts

Why a reawakening of national identities could spell the end of the United Kingdom

By Simon Jenkins

The Celtic virus is back in British politics and defying all efforts at immunity. The first wave hit Ireland in 1921 and broke the island in two. The second wave was overcome with devolution in 1999 and subsided. The third is now upon us and the outcome is uncertain. When at last month's G7 summit in Cornwall the French president Emmanuel Macron taunted Boris Johnson for trying to rule four nations not one, Johnson was furious, but he choked on his Northern Irish protocol.

Every headline now indicates that the United Kingdom is anything but united. Relations between Scotland and England are more contentious than they have been since the Tudors. The festering wound of Northern Ireland has gone septic. Even in Wales, the number of those favouring an implausible independence has quadrupled in the past decade. A ghost now hovers over the British Isles, that of a new European nation in the offing, called simply England.

When the British empire disbanded over

the course of the 20th century, the fate of the ancient English empire of the British Isles was left unresolved. The English assumed they had assimilated the Welsh and Scots while the Irish Question had been "parked" with partition. That a small group of islands, liberal, rich and with a long shared history, could fail to establish a harmonious union seemed preposterous. Its neighbours, Germany, France, Italy, even Spain, had deployed devolutions and federations to merge the loyalties of their diverse tribes. All London could do was tell its troublesome Celts that they should remember how lucky they were to be ruled by England and shut up.

When the 15-volume *Oxford History of England* was first published in 1936, it declared it would "all-encompass" the British Isles. It described the archipelago's western half as "irregular, scrubby, sour-soiled and incommunicable", while the eastern was "soft, warm, alluvial and fertile". It then ignored the western half and told only the story of soft, warm England. Every British historian before and since – except the

admirable Norman Davies – has done the same. To them all, half the British Isles' land area – and, until the 1840s, the Celtic third of its population – just did not exist.

Who these Celts were remains obscure. Theories of Celtic empires and "invasions", like later Saxon ones, are now discredited. The doyen of Celtic scholars, Barry Cunliffe, identifies merely a scatter of migrations after the last ice age, mostly from Iberia up the Atlantic-facing coast of Europe. Probably in the trading boom of the Bronze Age, these "peoples of the sea" came to adopt varieties of an Indo-European lingua franca later named Celtic.

The boom in DNA archaeology over the past quarter-century has largely confirmed this view. While Celtic speech probably came to dominate most of the British Isles, the eastern flank was being settled from across the North Sea by migrants from northern Europe, later to emerge as Germanic-speaking English. The 2015 genetic survey of the British Isles revealed marked differences between peoples west and ►



DE LUAN / ALAMY

The “Big Fella”: an armoured car, named after the Irish revolutionary Michael Collins, in Dublin during the British handover to the Irish Free State, 1922

► east of the Pennine/Cotswold ridge. There were also differences within the west, as between Cornwall and Devon and between north and south Wales. There was no Celtic “race”. The only safe definition was of peoples settled on the fragmented western side of the islands who came to see themselves as not-English.

What was clear by the end of the Roman occupation was that its legacy of a heavily “Germanised” England had come to dominate lowland Britain, and that these so-called Saxons went on to subject the Celtic speakers to varying degrees of submission. The Normans saw Scotland as the senior neighbour, albeit owing homage to London. Wales was mostly confined to a minor kingdom, Gwynedd, surrounded by a Norman

driven by Woodrow Wilson’s call at Versailles “to show respect for the autonomy of small nations”. But how small should be small? To English unionists, Celtic politics had become insignificant.

No politics is insignificant. In British-ruled Northern Ireland Churchill’s “grim steeples of Fermanagh and Tyrone” emerged from the ooze of the Protestant plantation to generate a fierce sectarianism. The steady suppression of regional and local democracy throughout Great Britain had maverick nationalists crying for “Scottish oil” and “Welsh water”. Occasional by-election victories sufficiently unsettled London party managers for them to order the Kilbrandon commission on devolution, which proved abortive in 1972. But

administrations. But new platforms were being created and occupied by proportional representation. Celtic politics was given what it most craved, the oxygen of publicity. With the turn of the 21st century, nationalism took fire.

The concept of a Celtic independence was debated more vigorously in the 2000s than it had been since the 1880s. Scottish nationalists won control of the Edinburgh executive in 2007 under Alex Salmond and Nicola Sturgeon, and have held it ever since. In 2015 the party won 56 of Scotland’s 59 Westminster seats. Although the first Scottish independence referendum and recent opinion polls have shown that Scots are still ambivalent about leaving the Union, demography is heavily biased towards it. More than 70 per cent of Scotland’s under-25s are in favour. Although the nationalist Plaid Cymru did less well in Welsh Assembly elections in May, its leader Adam Price can point to poll support for Welsh independence rising by between a quarter and a third over the past ten years.

A sure sign of independence taking root is when a nation’s politics are no longer rooted in ideology – left versus right, rich versus poor – but rather in strategies for separatism. The Celtic revival came during a surge across Europe in territorial antagonisms to central governments. It could be seen from the Greenlanders and Faroese to the Walloons, Basques, Catalans, Corsicans and in the Balkans. While formal partitions – as in the former Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia – were rare, pressure for federalism and “independence-lite” was ubiquitous. Sometimes, as in Spain and Ukraine, it was also violent.

The underlying tensions were everywhere the same: those of group identity versus economic security. In the case of the Celtic nations they concerned degrees of “Britishness”, and how confident people were in their leaders’ capacity to guard their interests. In the 2011 census, 83 per cent of Scots felt a strong Scottish identity, while in Wales 66 per cent identified strongly as Welsh. Forty per cent of Northern Irish had a “British only” identity, the rest dividing equally between Irish and Northern Irish. It is only through such questions that we can define the “self” in self-determination.

The SNP’s demand to “take back control” of Scotland’s sovereignty has been countered by London playing the security card. A recasting of Project Fear states that Scotland cannot possibly afford independence. On economic policy, SNP strategists have long been vague. For some time they placed their faith in Scottish oil to guide them to a Scandinavian-style social democracy.

“I don’t mind being told how I must live, provided I am told it by someone Welsh”

March. Ireland was invaded and exploited as a colony, and kept that way.

From Edward I to Henry VIII and on to the Hanoverians and Victorians, the ineptitude and cruelty of England’s rule over these western lands knew no bounds – and rarely appears in “British” history books. It reduced all hope of assimilation, instead fuelling an abiding group hatred. When the American colonies were lost in the 1770s, London was warned by Edmund Burke and others that Ireland risked going the same way. They were simply ignored. England’s attitude to Ireland was typified in the 1880s by the Liberal Unionist Joseph Chamberlain declaring himself baffled as to why “five million Irishmen should have any greater right to govern themselves” than five million Londoners. Much the same attitude towards Scotland stalks the corridors of Downing Street today.

From the moment Ireland won its independence in 1921 – defeating a British army that grew to 57,000 troops – most English people thought they had lanced the Celtic boil, and good riddance. The new kingdom of Great Britain “and Northern Ireland” could be united and quiescent. The Tories asserted it, as did an emergent and strongly unionist Labour Party. For half a century that expectation proved sound.

How England allowed a militant Celtic identity to re-emerge in the past two decades is a mystery of modern British politics. Twentieth-century Europe saw three great nationalist reawakenings, in 1918, 1945 and after the Soviet collapse in 1991. All were

when Margaret Thatcher casually imposed a “pilot” poll tax on the Scots in 1989, she wiped her party off the face of Scottish politics, apparently for good.

Devolution refused to go away. In 1997 Tony Blair duly committed himself to modestly devolved assemblies in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Scotland was graciously accorded the status of being called a parliament. John Major was ridiculed for predicting devolution would “spell the end of the Union”, but he was probably more right than he knew.

The most dangerous time for a bad policy is, famously, when it starts to reform. At first devolution seemed harmless. Labour’s electoral strength in industrial Scotland and Wales took swift control of the new



“5,000 biscuits? You’re not those three dogs in a trenchcoat again, are you?”



Leave to Remain: pro-EU protesters support a legal petition against a no-deal Brexit, Edinburgh, 2019

That money has all but evaporated, and the manifesto now offers little beyond “a broad account of resources, natural, human and intellectual that only an independent Scotland can release”. Sceptics have dubbed this “a chameleon on a tartan rug”.

Pragmatists prefer to cite the experience of Ireland, Celticism’s signal success. Here there is little argument. Over the course of a century, the freedoms and disciplines of independence have turned what was a destitute British colony into a nation that has claimed to be one of the richest small countries in Europe. Though the 2008 recession ended the “Celtic tiger” 1990s, the traditional Anglo-Saxon caricature of Ireland as inherently feckless has vanished. In 1900, the entire south generated less wealth than Belfast in the north; by 2020, Dublin’s manufacturing base was six times Belfast’s. The south has about two-thirds of the island of Ireland’s population and seven times the north’s domestic product. The Irish have long stopped emigrating and started immigrating. Danny Boy has come home.

Escaping the legacy of British rule took Ireland time and help from the EU and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). But independence has worked. It has brought political maturity and stability, in glaring contrast to the British-ruled north. There, the once unthinkable is now on the horizon. As religious differences remain intractable, polls predict a clear swing over the coming decade towards a referendum favouring reunion with the south. This would be a sensational comment on a century of British partition, and a triumph of Celtic politics.

The bankers and economists who now crowd Edinburgh’s seminar rooms

understand what was needed for Ireland to escape the British yoke. Interwar Irish finance ministers would prefix their austerity budgets with warnings of “the price of independence”. If Scotland ever wants admission to the EU, it must drastically shrink a budget deficit of 8.6 per cent of its GDP, one of the highest in the developed world. By all reasonable criteria, Scotland should be as rich as Denmark. Instead, like Wales, it is among the poorest regions of Europe. Recovering from decades of institutional dependency on the British Treasury – the glue of England’s empire – will take a long time.

Much now turns on the legacy of the pandemic and the political prominence it has given to Sturgeon’s SNP. Scotland’s polling guru, John Curtice, points out that every Scot “has been affected by the devolved government in a way not

Scotland could “do a Norway” and join the EU’s single market

seen in 21 years of devolution”. Lockdown delegation has not weakened Celtic identity but strengthened it. Despite a party split, Sturgeon’s leadership was confirmed in the May 2021 elections. Wales’s uncharismatic leader, Mark Drakeford, was given a similar boost. As a Merthyr footballer said to the BBC, “I don’t mind being told how I must live, provided I am told it by someone Welsh.”

In Scotland, outside the ranks of extreme separatists, most commentators see a necessity for London to conceive new steps

towards ever greater home rule. The constitutional historian Linda Colley envisages a network of devolved parliaments beneath an umbrella assembly. Colin Kidd of St Andrews University likewise sees rigorous UK federalism as the only way forward. Even Gordon Brown, a devotee of the Union, accepts the need for a senate of regions and nations. To this Johnson’s implacable response is a “muscular negative”. It is Ireland’s story re-enacted.

The final challenge – and possible opportunity – has been Brexit. Had Britain gone for Theresa May’s soft “backstop” and stayed in Europe’s single market, Johnson could have avoided his Northern Ireland crisis and regulatory shambles along the EU border. Norway survives outside the European Union and inside the market. British exports to Ireland have fallen by half in a year, hastening full economic merger across Ireland even in advance of political union.

Since there is no alternative to the Northern Ireland protocol and thus to an all-Ireland economy within the single market, Scotland could investigate the possibility of joining it. Scotland’s voters opposed Brexit and want to regain EU membership. It could demand of England that the Northern Ireland protocol’s Irish Sea border be extended along Hadrian’s Wall, bringing Scotland within the single market. It requires no referendum and would splendidly enrage Downing Street.

An economist to whom I put this proposal added that it would keep open Scotland’s eastern ports to the North Sea and avoid the regulatory barriers on Scottish trade with the EU – albeit raising those with England. In such a war of sovereignties, Scotland would have made its point without raising the ogre of full independence. Scotland would merely be “doing a Norway” and joining Europe’s wider economic area. The prospect would be not of a Celtic tiger but a Celtic octopus, wrapping the single market around the western and northern shores of England and Wales.

Brexit has clearly upset the chemistry of Anglo-Celt relations. When Celts were merely not-English, Englishness was submerged in Britishness. But Brexit has led to a heightened sense of Englishness, beyond any right-wing nationalism. The House of Commons protocol of “English votes for English laws” has already raised the spectre of an all-England parliament. Who knows, but a future London government might swallow its pride, see sense in the Celtic octopus and decide to join it. ●

Simon Jenkins is currently writing a history of Anglo-Celtic relations

My billion-dollar feeling

I am in primary school, aged ten, and one girl in the classroom has hiccups. She looks embarrassed as others around her giggle, but I am almost frozen in silence, a strange warm feeling of relaxation fizzing at the back of my head.

I am eating dinner with my family, aged 15, and my younger sister is practising ballet steps around the room. My parents ask her to finish her food but I feel more serene than distracted.

I am commuting, aged 25, descending the escalator at St Paul's Tube station, and the same old busker is tunelessly whistling by the platform. Others ignore him as they rush past. I am fixed to the spot, savouring the tingles washing over my brain.

I am working from home, aged 31, and my boyfriend is pulling up weeds from the cracks between paving slabs in the garden with a trowel. The neighbours slam their windows shut to the metallic scraping. I breeze through the most focused hours of writing I've done in months.

At this point, you will relate entirely, or think I sound odd. Since childhood, I have experienced a sensation called autonomous sensory meridian response, or ASMR. This is a little-understood phenomenon best described as "low-grade euphoria", characterised by a tingling around the head that moves down the neck and back, coupled with a feeling of utter calm and bliss. ("Too much information!" was a friend's response when I described it recently, but it is not remotely sexual.)

Although the main trigger for ASMR is touch – someone fiddling with your hair, perhaps – the media more often associates it with whispering, soft speaking, tapping, fidgeting, repetitive and deliberate movements and sounds, and performing focused or routine tasks. Close but impersonal attention is another common stimulus – one writer in the *New Humanist* recently described how he would experience ASMR when having his eyes tested as a child.

Everyone is different. For me, it could be a hovering helicopter or a hesitant speaking style. I was the first person to report hiccups

as a trigger at the Wellcome Collection's public engagement event exploring ASMR six years ago. (As a child, I assumed everyone felt the same until a baffled school friend told me hiccups were generally considered irritating.) It is not known how many people experience the sensation, or why. "That's the million-dollar question," says Giulia Poerio, an ASMR researcher at the University of Essex's psychology department. "Eventually we will have to start looking into brain development to try to understand."

Through her research, Poerio has shown that ASMR is a genuine physiological response. Participants in her 2015-18 study displayed substantially reduced heart rates and increased "skin conductance" (enhanced sweating on the skin). This is a strange combination, like no other feeling. Usually your heart rate rises if you feel excited. "They were simultaneously feeling relaxed and euphoric," says Poerio, who herself experiences ASMR. "It suggests a really complex emotional profile."

Although anecdotally people use ASMR to ease insomnia or anxiety, it is a niche research area with fewer than 20 published papers on the subject. A global research network into ASMR set up in February missed out on grants and had to rely on crowdfunding. Though the science of ASMR is in its infancy, the sensation underpins a multi-billion-dollar industry. "ASMR" is the third most searched term worldwide on YouTube, where more than 13 million videos have been published to try to reproduce the sensation. The 25 most popular creators of these videos, known as "ASMRtists", make £850,000 a year on average. In December 2019 the top ten creators accrued more than 5.7 trillion views across their combined 4,450 videos, with over 24 million subscribers.

Questions about exploitation dog some of the accounts, with children as young as five featuring in clips – yet another unexplored frontier in the Wild West of self-published digital content. A typical video shows an adult whispering or speaking softly, brushing and tapping a microphone, or using objects to make gentle, repetitive

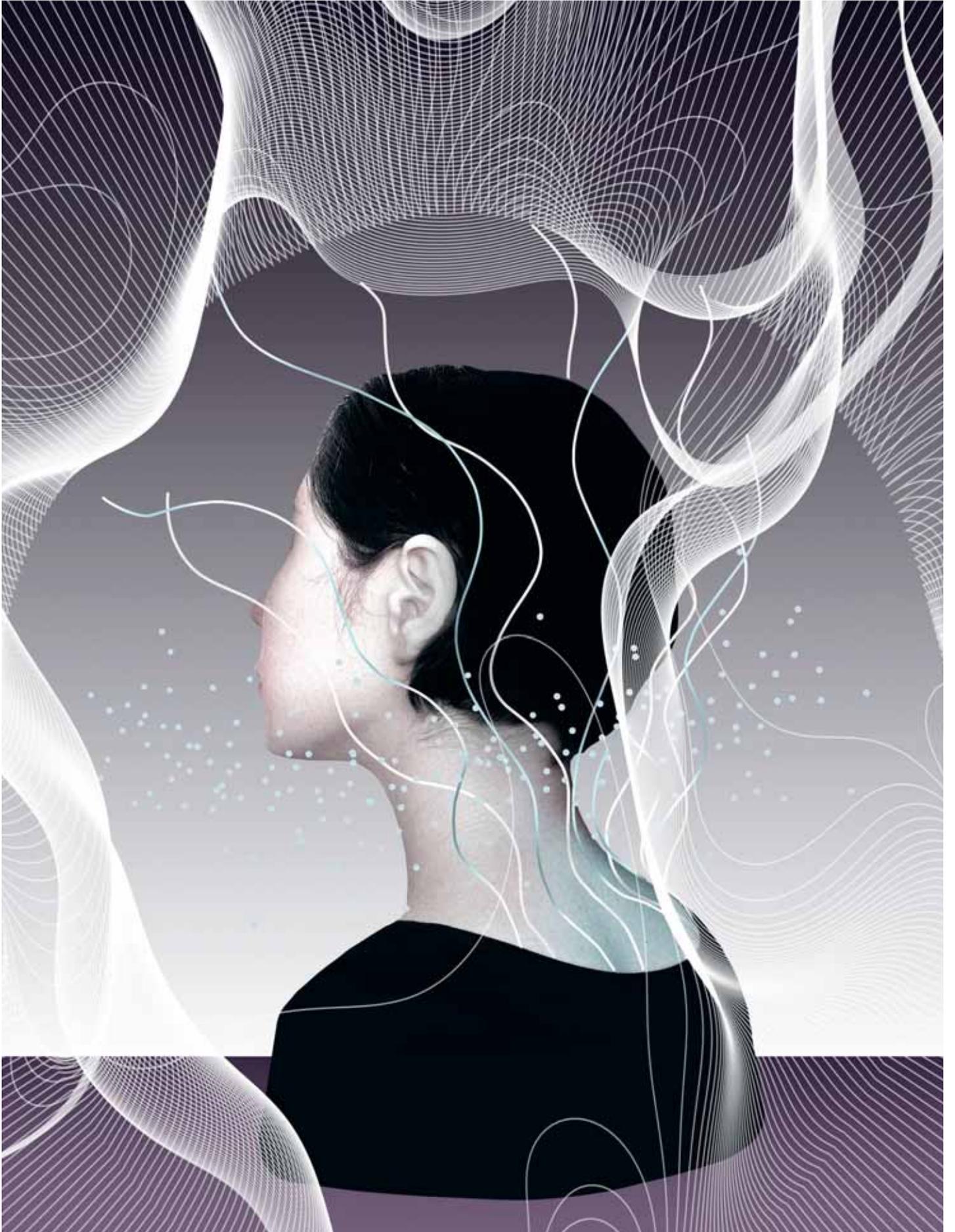
sounds. One of the most popular on YouTube, with more than 23 million views, is a 16-minute clip published in 2012 by Russian ASMRtist Maria Viktorovna, flicking the bristles of a hairbrush and tickling the camera with a peacock feather.

The first ASMR video, which featured relaxing whispering sounds, was posted by a YouTuber known as WhisperingLife in 2009. Journalists spotted the digital culture trend, and the first article about it appeared in the *Huffington Post* in 2012, entitled: "ASMR: Orgasms for Your Brain."

Capitalism took notice. Mars released the first ASMR-inspired advertisement in 2015 (lots of packet crinkling and chocolate bar snapping), and Ritz Crackers, Pepsi and KFC created their own the following year. Brands as diverse as McDonald's, Gucci, Apple and Ikea have used ASMR in adverts and social media. In 2018 Samsung announced it was building a phone case shaped like human ears for recording ASMR videos on smartphones. US rapper Cardi B created her own ASMR video the same year, and the breathy vocals of the teenage songwriter Billie Eilish have made her an "ASMR icon".

It is not just a quirk of the zeitgeist. Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* gave a convincing description in 1925, when Septimus hears the nursemaid spelling out an aeroplane's sky-writing "close to his ear, deeply, softly, like a mellow organ... which rasped his spine deliciously and sent running up into his brain waves of sound which, concussing, broke". In *The Bell Jar*, Sylvia Plath seemed to know the feeling too, when Constantin runs his fingers through her narrator's hair: "A little electric shock flared through me and I sat quite still. Ever since I was small I loved feeling somebody comb my hair. It made me go all sleepy and peaceful."

My own ASMR is more of the old-fashioned, spontaneous kind – the videos do nothing for me and I find them off-putting. "People forget that it is more than an online trend," says Poerio, who first felt it when having her feet measured for school shoes. "But ASMR as an emotional experience existed before the internet." ●





The new digital gold

Why the recent Bitcoin crash won't halt the growth in crypto assets

By Simon Chapman

The price of Bitcoin, the world's leading cryptocurrency, crashed by more than 50 per cent during one week in May, and continued to fall in June, shedding the gains made from its remarkable rise since the beginning of the year. What might explain the price plunge? First, a tweet from Elon Musk on 12 May stated that Tesla would no longer accept Bitcoin for vehicle purchases owing to concerns around fossil fuel energy consumption – a 180-degree turnaround from his position at the start of 2021.

Second, Andrew Bailey, the governor of the Bank of England, warned in May this year that cryptocurrencies were a danger to the public, saying: "I'm sceptical about crypto assets, frankly, because they're dangerous and there's a huge enthusiasm out there." (Last month, the UK's financial regulator, the Financial Conduct Authority,

banned Binance, a major crypto exchange, from regulated activity in the UK.)

Third, the Chinese government announced a crackdown on Bitcoin "mining", the computing process that uses cryptography to produce new Bitcoins and secure the overall network. This led to Chinese miners – who account for around 75 per cent of the Bitcoin computational capacity used to secure the network – dumping the cryptocurrency and adding to the negative sentiment.

It is human nature to create reductive stories to help us comprehend the complexity and uncertainty of the world. However, in the case of markets the prevailing "narrative" is often something that rationalises market behaviour after the fact, rather than giving an accurate summation of its causes. Nassim Taleb coined the phrase "narrative fallacy" to describe this tendency in his 2001 book *Fooled by Randomness*:

The Hidden Role of Chance in Life and in the Markets.

In any event, whether the recent Bitcoin crash narratives are accurate or not, it is important to take the wider perspective. One million dollars or zero – these are price predictions for the value of a single Bitcoin given by advocates and critics respectively. Those in the million-dollar camp include Raoul Pal, a former Goldman Sachs executive who has invested heavily in Bitcoin, while the sceptics include Warren Buffett, the CEO of Berkshire Hathaway, who is considered one of the most successful investors of all time. The price of Bitcoin hit an all-time high of \$64,000 in mid-April, which made it the best performing financial asset of the decade, with an annualised return of 230 per cent. In May 2010 (when a Bitcoin was worth less than half a cent) a man in Florida bought two pizzas ►

► for 10,000 Bitcoins. If he'd kept those coins, they would be valued today at more than \$300m.

Unlike government-issued currencies, which can be generated at will by central banks, Bitcoin has a maximum supply cap written into its code. This scarcity is a valuable characteristic for a currency, as no matter how much demand for it increases, its supply is fixed, barring major changes across the majority of its network – and therefore its value can increase indefinitely.

Bitcoin's most ardent proponents argue that it is the foundation of a new global monetary system. Recently, demand has been driven by recognition of Bitcoin's core use as a kind of "digital gold", which can provide a safe harbour for investors during periods of inflation and/or currency debase-

– one example of how CBDCs could be used to restrict liberty and influence behaviour through social engineering.

Even if widely adopted, CBDCs would not eliminate the investment case for Bitcoin, because a central bank could just as easily resort to the money-printer with CBDCs, in the way central banks have been using quantitative easing (QE) to manage the supply of their existing fiat currency.

Beyond Bitcoin, thousands of other crypto assets have emerged. "Fan tokens" based on blockchains – the digital transaction ledgers on which Bitcoin and other crypto assets operate – can be bought and traded by sports fans, allowing them to vote on club matters and access member privileges (teams partnered with the Socios platform include Barcelona, Manchester City and

computer code and crypto exchanges that have failed (the first and most notorious was the Mt Gox exchange in Japan). There are many crypto assets that have no discernible utility, and Dogecoin is arguably one example. It was created in 2013 as a joke inspired by the Shiba Inu dog meme (which became, for a spell, synonymous with internet frivolity), and its value has recently soared, largely as a consequence of Elon Musk promoting it on social media. Dogecoin's market value hit \$49bn at the beginning of June this year – larger than that of Barclays bank. It's hard to see a long-term future for those crypto assets that don't possess a clear real-world function; the challenge is to understand what will survive and thrive.

In countries suffering from government tyranny, Bitcoin could offer people a financial life raft

ment, as well as a way to make payments without the need for a bank. While the Bank of England's Andrew Bailey is a critic, some central bankers are beginning to see real value in Bitcoin. "Right now it's clear Bitcoin is a store of value," said Robert Kaplan, president of the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas, in April this year. (Kaplan also noted that Bitcoin's swings in value "could keep it from spreading too far as a medium of exchange and wide adoption, but that can change".)

Last month El Salvador became the first sovereign nation to adopt Bitcoin as legal tender (alongside the US dollar), purportedly to help the 70 per cent of its population currently outside the banking system, and to exclude the middlemen who eat into remittances sent home from overseas workers. Other countries, such as Paraguay, are considering similar legislation.

Elsewhere, some countries are actively considering their own central bank digital currencies (CBDCs), with China, inevitably, at the forefront. CBDCs could enhance the powers of the surveillance state and assist governments' control over their citizens' behaviour. Imagine if, after a future economic shock (such as another pandemic), the government issued support in the form of a digital-currency credit, instead of handing out benefit payments in cash that might be hoarded, gambled or spent on alcohol. This CBDC could be programmed to expire in three months and only be spent on certain "socially desirable" goods or services

AC Milan), and similar digital assets have been enabling artists and musicians to reclaim control over the distribution of their creative output. The band Kings of Leon recently issued a crypto-distributed album, and the art world was astonished by the sale of a digital artwork for \$69.3m at Christie's. Titled *Everydays: The First 5,000 Days*, the digital collection was created by the artist known as Beeple. It is the most expensive digital artwork ever sold, and has made Beeple, also known as Mike Winkelmann, the third most expensive living artist after Jeff Koons and David Hockney. The work was bought by a crypto investor.

The broader crypto world also contains its share of losses from scams, bug-infested

Who is behind all this crypto activity? The early adopters from 2009 to 2013 included techno-utopians known as "cypherpunks" whose origins were in San Francisco. Writing in *Bitcoin Magazine*, Alex Gladstein has characterised them as a group of civil liberties advocates concerned about "how personal freedoms could survive the great electronic transformation of society". Their early aspirations were, he says, "to separate money from governments and corporations, check the growth of the global surveillance state and preserve human rights in an increasingly digital age". In 2013 Julian Assange wrote in an article for the *Guardian* that "strong cryptography is a vital tool in fighting state oppression" – this was also the message of his book of the previous year, *Cypherpunks: Freedom and the Future of the Internet*.

More recent participants include entrepreneurs in the developing world – often using smartphones to access loans and payments to grow their businesses – and, increasingly, mainstream financial institutions such as JP Morgan, Goldman Sachs and Fidelity, as well as corporations such as Square, MicroStrategy and MassMutual.

For middle-class citizens in countries suffering from government tyranny, economic mismanagement, unlimited money printing and hyper-inflation, Bitcoin could provide a financial life raft for maintaining the value of savings and making payments to live. A recent tweet from a young man in Venezuela pleaded: "I live in Venezuela. Three weeks ago I used some Bitcoin I had from 2017 to afford Covid-19 treatment medications. I paid ZERO commissions to exchange. Had I kept government-issued currency instead I'd be probably dead."

Last year the Feminist Coalition – a gender-equality group in Nigeria protesting against police brutality – used Bitcoin to



"No more cuddles Gertrude"



Everything's gone green: the CryptoUniverse cryptocurrency mining farm in Nadvoitsy, Russia, 2021

raise funds when it noticed its bank transactions were being blocked. Its initiative even received support from Jack Dorsey, the co-founder of Twitter. The Human Rights Foundation – which promotes human rights globally – is a strong advocate of the benefits of Bitcoin. Alex Gladstein, its chief strategy officer, recently stated: “For millions of people around the world, it’s an escape hatch from tyranny – nothing less than freedom money.”

As with any new technology that undermines existing orthodoxies and changes the way we live, the crypto world is bewildering. According to British science-fiction writer Arthur C Clarke: “Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.” Bitcoin can seem like magic to the uninitiated.

In *The Sovereign Individual*, which has become a defining book for libertarians since its publication in 1997, JD Davidson and William Rees-Mogg predicted that the decline of nation states burdened by excessive sovereign debt, together with technological disruption, would lead to the emergence of a cyber-economy and “cyber-money”. The new cyber-currencies, they argued, would operate beyond government regulation and would lead to an irrevocable reconfiguration of the relationship between individuals and the state.

“It will consist of encrypted sequences of multi-hundred-digit prime numbers,” the authors wrote. “Unique, anonymous and verifiable, this money will accommodate the largest transactions. It will also be divisible into the tiniest fraction of value. It will

be tradable at a keystroke in a multi-trillion-dollar wholesale market without borders.”

This sounds a lot like Bitcoin, which was not created until 2009. It was only 12 years ago that the pseudonymous creator of Bitcoin, Satoshi Nakamoto, mined the first Bitcoin. This first block was dubbed “Genesis” – the biblical reference perhaps alluding to the displacement of traditional religion by techno-utopianism, with technology as the new god.

Built into Bitcoin’s code is a fixed maximum global supply of 21 million Bitcoins, which no central banker, politician or multibillionaire such as Musk can change. Bitcoin is a scarce financial asset; it is secure and durable, cannot be counterfeited, does not require a bank account and is easily transferred by anyone with a smartphone. Nakamoto once commented that “writing a description for this [Bitcoin] thing for general audiences is bloody hard. There’s nothing to relate it to.” Bitcoin is a philosophy as much as a currency, and it leads to an economic system that is enabled by technology.

The first ever Bitcoin block contained a coded message – “The Times 03/Jan/2009 Chancellor on brink of second bailout for banks” – referring to the UK government’s response to the financial crisis of 2008.

This hints at Nakamoto’s impetus for creating Bitcoin as a non-sovereign currency and long-term store of value – it could act as a bulwark against the kind of financial chaos engulfing the world at the time. During the early months of the Covid pandemic both gold and Bitcoin surged in value, because they were considered safe havens against money printing. However,

since the autumn of 2020, gold and Bitcoin have decoupled dramatically. Since the total value of Bitcoin in circulation – estimated at around \$650bn – is approximately 5 per cent of gold, there remains significant potential for further price appreciation if Bitcoin continues to displace gold as a safe haven.

In 1933, when Franklin Roosevelt mandated the sale of personal gold holdings to the Federal Reserve, he said it was to prevent private hoarding, which might stall economic growth and worsen the Great Depression – but the real reason was to allow the Federal Reserve to increase the money supply, which was at the time backed by gold. Bitcoin offers the additional benefit for those who hold it that it cannot be seized without consent if stored securely.

Physical gold has been used as a medium of exchange since around 1500 BC in the ancient Egyptian empire, which profited from its gold-bearing region, Nubia. In the next few years, could there be an unprecedented shift from gold as a 3,500-year-old physical store of value towards Bitcoin as its digital replacement?

As Davidson and Rees-Mogg observed: “The new digital gold will overcome many of the practical problems that inhibited direct use of gold as money in the past. It will no longer be inconvenient, cumbersome or dangerous to deal in large sums of gold. Digital receipts will not be too heavy to carry.”

Critics of Bitcoin, such as Andrew Bailey, would argue that the energy consumption required to power Bitcoin mining is wasteful, given the climate crisis. In February the Cambridge Centre for Alternative Finance (CCAF) put Bitcoin’s annual electricity consumption at around 121 terawatt-hours (TWh) – more than the annual energy consumption of Argentina.

Advocates would counter that the energy costs of powering the global banking system, as well as gold mining, are also substantial, and in aggregate more than those of Bitcoin. However, Ark Invest, an investment management firm with substantial holdings in Bitcoin, calculates that the cryptocurrency consumes less than 10 per cent of the energy of traditional banking, and around 40 per cent of the energy used in gold mining. (It should be noted, though, that there is currently a big size difference between the mainstream banking market and crypto, and it has been calculated that a Bitcoin transaction uses much more energy than one made on Visa.)

The question, then, should not be how much energy is consumed, since every economic activity consumes energy, but rather, how green is the energy source today, and ▶

The British
Museum

Nero the man behind the myth

★★★★

'wonderfully
evocative'

The Times

★★★★

'thrilling'

The Daily Telegraph

Book
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Marble bust of Nero. Italy, around AD 55.
Photo by Francesco Piras. © MiC Museo
Archeologico Nazionale di Cagliari.



► how can carbon emissions be reduced? Bitcoin mining farms can and should be located in remote areas in order to harvest renewable energy such as solar or hydro that might otherwise go to waste. In Canada, a company called Upstream Data is converting waste natural gas at well sites, which would otherwise be released into the atmosphere, into electricity in order to power mining farms. These mining operations are arguably carbon-positive. Recent research from Ark Invest and Square (a financial payments company founded by Jack Dorsey) argues that Bitcoin could be a key accelerator of the global transition to renewable power. Recent estimates of the percentage of green energy in the overall energy mix for Bitcoin mining have ranged from 39 per cent (CCAF) to 73 per cent (CoinShares Research) – even at the lower end, Bitcoin mining would be twice as green as the US grid. Since his market-moving tweet in May, Elon Musk has participated in the formation of the Bitcoin Mining Council, which plans to publish the renewable energy usage of Bitcoin

TIMELINE

Global money: key dates

1944 – The US established the Bretton Woods system making the US dollar the world’s reserve currency, with each US dollar freely convertible by any nation into gold at an exchange rate of \$35 per ounce of gold.

1971 – Nations became concerned about the US’s ability to maintain this exchange rate, and increasingly began seeking to convert their dollars to gold, leading President Nixon to “close the gold window”. It would no longer be possible to convert dollars into gold, removing the discipline that this brought. The dollar price of gold immediately escalated, reaching \$850 an ounce by 1980, which reflected a commensurate reduction in the value of the US dollar.

2008 – The global financial crisis resulted in a bailout of major banks and caused a significant increase in monetary expansion.

2020 – The Covid-19 pandemic led to unprecedented monetary stimulus by central banks to forestall global recession. The US created more US dollars in June 2020 than in the first 200 years of the country’s existence. Gold reached a peak of \$2,075 per ounce in August 2020. ●

miners to improve transparency and increase sustainability.

Beyond Bitcoin – whose validation process is called “proof of work” – most new blockchains use or are moving towards a validation process called “proof of stake”, which uses financial stakes as validation, rather than energy consumption, to secure their networks. The aim is to render the energy consumption debate nugatory.

Several years after Bitcoin’s launch, Vitalik Buterin, a young Russian living in Canada, recognised its limitations: its mining consumes large quantities of energy, it is slow and it does not scale well. Buterin saw an opportunity to introduce algorithms called “smart contracts” that sit on top of a blockchain. These would enable autonomous transactions to be performed without human intervention. This led to the release in 2015 of the Ethereum blockchain, which is now the second-largest crypto asset in the world. The name is a reference to the “ether” – the invisible medium once thought to permeate the universe allowing light to travel. Buterin wanted his platform to be the imperceptible underlying medium for the applications running on top of it.

Smart contract capability has led to the creation of hundreds of decentralised autonomous organisations (DAOs) that perform multiple functions, such as:

Decentralised finance (DeFi) – the trading, lending and borrowing of crypto assets on decentralised exchanges and lending platforms.

Stable coins – cryptocurrencies that are convertible on a one-to-one basis with the US dollar or another national currency or asset, which can then be sent worldwide more quickly and cheaply than via banks or traditional payment services providers. The cost of remittances using traditional means can be up to 30 per cent of the payment itself; using blockchain-based services, this cost can be reduced to a few cents, a boon for the international worker diaspora.

Non-fungible tokens (NFTs) – digitally secured assets that provide unique ownership of creative content, whether it is music, art or video. NFTs enable artists to bypass rent-seeking intermediaries and distribute works directly to customers, enabling them to take a greater share up front and ensuring they have an ongoing participation in royalty payments on future sales.

Metaverses – blockchain-based virtual worlds such as Decentraland have created

“metaverses” that users can explore as avatars. These are not games; rather they are rich visual and auditory 3D environments where users can roam, socialise with other avatars, buy and sell online real estate and open online businesses to earn cryptocurrency. The nightclub Amnesia Ibiza is planning to open a virtual venue later this year in the metaverse. In addition to virtual clubbing, users can access an NFT store selling electronic music, DJs’ autographs and wearables with which to dress up their avatars. Atari plans to open a retro arcade and casino. The owner of the Bepple artwork plans to put the piece on display in several virtual-world environments.

Alongside these technological developments, new, more democratic and inclusive business models are emerging based upon an alignment between customers, producers and capital. These are analogous to employee/customer-owned cooperatives or mutuals in the traditional business world, such as John Lewis, or the old building societies. Such “digital collectives” are replacing baby-boomer-led hierarchical power structures with community approaches led by Gen X and millennial innovators. The Ethereum community tends to attract left-leaning progressives seeking to create a better form of capitalism; hardcore Bitcoiners are invariably libertarians obsessed with individual sovereignty.

Crypto is more than just technology: it is a new political, economic and cultural paradigm. It is for the middle classes in failed states seeking to preserve wealth, and for entrepreneurs in developing nations seeking to access banking services. It creates opportunities for artists, and jobs and social engagement for millennials jaded by the iniquities of turbo-capitalism.

Bitcoin is a digital currency, a network and a global open monetary system with fixed scarcity. It resists censorship, exists outside the control of any politician, corporation or billionaire and is accessible to anyone in the world with a smartphone. The recent crash in its value has shaken emerging mainstream acceptance in the short term, but crypto will achieve greater adoption in time.

Over the past 30 years the internet has transformed the exchange of information. During the coming years blockchain and crypto will likely become just as ubiquitous – in the exchange of value, in the creation of online communities and in the preservation of individual liberty. ●

Simon Chapman is an observer of the nexus between government, finance and technology

Jonathan Liew **Left Field**

The England squad is built on immigration – yet our xenophobic government dares to cheer it on



Minutes after the full-time whistle blew in Rome on 3 July, concluding England's 4-0 victory over Ukraine in the quarter-finals of the European Championships, the Home Secretary Priti Patel tweeted her congratulations. "What a performance. What a team. It's coming home!" she wrote. The irony of the sentiment was not lost on many.

For one thing, Patel had been curiously forthright in her criticism of the England team ahead of the tournament. In an interview with the incel vanity project GB News, Patel refused to criticise fans who booed England for taking the knee before games to protest against racial injustice. Instead, she derided the players for engaging in "gesture politics". Bizarrely, she went on to conflate the entirely peaceable act of taking the knee with the toppling of the statue of the slave trader Edward Colston in Bristol last summer. "I just don't subscribe to this view that we should be rewriting our history," she said, deploying a tactic used by many politicians on the far right to cast even the mildest progressive tendencies as essentially indistinguishable from violent extremism.

But the wider irony is that the England team of 2021 is one that simply would not exist if Patel had been in charge of the Home Office a generation ago. After England's historic 2-0 win over Germany at Wembley in the last-16 on 29 June, a viral social media post from the Migration Museum in London, accompanied by a poster campaign, sought to underline the impact of immigration on English football. It depicted England's starting XI from the game, but with the names of all the players of foreign ancestry – with either a parent or grandparent born abroad – crossed out. Just three remained: the defenders Luke Shaw and John Stones, and the goalkeeper Jordan Pickford. All have had superb tournaments. Still, you suspect the three of them might have struggled to keep Germany at bay on their own.

Like many of this country's most cherished institutions, this is an England team built on migrant labour. Harry Kane, who

scored the clinching second goal against Germany and added two more against Ukraine, was born to an Irish father who moved to London from Galway. Bukayo Saka's parents are Nigerian. Raheem Sterling was born in Jamaica. Ben Chilwell's father emigrated to Britain from New Zealand. In total, 13 of England's 26-man squad could have chosen to represent another nation.

Quite apart from this, English football has benefited immensely over the past 30 years from what you might describe as its "open borders" policy. The influx of foreign footballers from the 1990s onwards has often been blamed for stifling opportunities for young English players, but few dispassionate observers would deny that the Premier League – from which 24 of England's 26 players have emerged – is among the best in the world.

Thirteen of the 26-man squad could have played for another country

Moreover, many of the team's key players have developed their games under the tutelage of migrant coaches. Sterling and Phil Foden would not be the players they are today without the influence of Pep Guardiola at Manchester City. Kane, Shaw and Kieran Trippier all owe their rise to the opportunities granted to them by Mauricio Pochettino at Tottenham and Southampton. Without his intensive football education at the hands of Marcelo Bielsa at Leeds, Calvin Phillips would be another jobbing Championship midfielder playing for his next contract.

You could argue that all this is, or should be, entirely irrelevant. Indeed, there is a persuasive case to be made that using the accomplishments of prominent, high-achieving individuals to underline the benefits of immigration is a counterproductive tactic, feeding into a narrative in which migrants have to "prove their worth" to gain acceptance in a host society. It goes without

saying that Robert and Melanie Rashford should not need to have produced a superstar footballer called Marcus to be treated with dignity and humanity.

And yet at this juncture, with the country uniting around the success of Gareth Southgate's side, with immigration returning to the political agenda, with the Windrush scandal still fresh in the mind, it feels right to expose the noxious double standard of populist demagogues like Patel as the shameless opportunism it is. On 6 July, the day before England's semi-final against Denmark, the Home Secretary unveiled the Nationality and Borders Bill in parliament – the latest front in the government's attempt to correlate migration with criminality, even as it embraces this immigrant England team with its polyvalent identity and abhorrence of racist dog-whistling.

Unfortunately for Patel and her colleagues in government, this is not a team that can easily be co-opted into their brand of un-nuanced flag-waving. There is, after all, an alternative story to be told here. For all the passion and fervour generated by international tournaments, modern football is a resounding refutation of narrow-minded ethno-nationalism. This is a sport that has always thrived on the easy interchange of expertise and talent across borders, on mixing and kicking ideas around. England's possession-based football is inspired by Spain's (itself based on the 1970s Dutch school); its emphasis on pace and pressing borrowed from Germany; its centralised academy system modelled on France's.

Above all, its outlook has been shaped by the diversity of its influences, by a complex world in which we are not simply one thing or another, but fluid and plural. At a moment of surging ethno-nationalism, rampant nativism and widening cultural division, it feels more vital than ever to get across that message: to point out the incongruity of wrapping yourself in England team colours while spurning the values they represent. ●
Jonathan Liew is a sports writer at the Guardian

The Critics



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The sexual battleground

How evolutionary theory explains why men and women seduce, deceive, abandon and hurt each other

By Louise Perry

There was a time, near the beginning of this century, when the wacky behaviour of creationists was the subject of intense media interest. People who believed that the Earth was less than 10,000 years old were intent on teaching schoolchildren a religious alternative to the theory of evolution by natural selection, and every right-minded atheist was intent on stopping them. Leading the charge was Richard Dawkins who, in a 2009 review of a book titled *Why Evolution Is True*, condemned

Bad Men: The Hidden Roots of Sexual Deception, Harassment and Assault

David M Buss

Robinson, 336pp, £18.99

the folly of those who, rather than “working out that they have probably misunderstood evolution... conclude, instead, that evolution must be false”.

An under-acknowledged truth, however, is that hostility towards evolutionary

theory is not confined to religious fundamentalists. Many secular liberals, for instance, find the notion of a divergent mark left by evolution on male and female brains to be a source of intense discomfort. Most feminists prefer to explain differences in male and female behaviour as a consequence of socialisation, particularly during childhood, and are sceptical of any account that presents these differences as innate – fearing, I suspect, that toxic male behaviour would be harder to challenge if it

were found to be natural in origin. In fact, the very idea that there are evolved psychological differences between the sexes has become so taboo in some circles that even voicing the possibility is taken to be an indication of anti-feminist sentiment.

In 2017, the Google engineer James Damore fell afoul of this taboo when he circulated an internal memo which suggested that the under-representation of women at the company might partly be a consequence of “differences in distributions of traits between men and women”. Damore cited legitimate scientific research, but he was nevertheless fired for violating Google’s code of conduct, provoking a media storm.

The problem Damore encountered is that the socio-political ramifications of evolutionary theory can upset everyone, because “nature red in tooth and claw” is grisly, and not only among non-human animals. Evolution is a blind, amoral process that essentially depends on two things: random gene mutations and a huge amount of death. It doesn’t care about human well-being or 21st-century niceties. And sometimes digging down into the research reveals things that we’d rather not know.

But David M Buss is one of those rare people who is able to look Darwin straight in the eye without flinching. Professor of evolutionary psychology at the University of Texas, Buss is the author of a long list of popular titles, the latest of which – *Bad Men: The Hidden Roots of Sexual Deception, Harassment and Assault* – returns to his favourite academic topic: human mating.

Buss is interested in conflict between men and women, both as groups and as individuals. We are all engaged, he argues, in a “co-evolutionary arms race” in which the weapons are beauty, deception, charm, coercion and aggression, often deployed subconsciously. Buss understands male and female interests to be fundamentally misaligned in important ways, and *Bad Men* is thus dedicated to “everyone who has suffered from sexual conflict” – which is, as he points out, all of us.

The book, organised lightly by theme, is a recitation of decades of accumulated research, conducted mostly, though not exclusively, on heterosexuals. Fortunately for Buss, his subject is gripping enough to carry what could otherwise have been a rather dry format. Delivered in the cool tones of an eminent scientist, each page nevertheless manages to evoke equal parts titillation and horror. Examining human mating from an evolutionary perspective turns out to be as disgusting, compelling and unnervingly intimate as watching someone burst a pimple.

Although his subject is “bad men”, Buss also introduces us to a lot of bad women. Sexual conflict has a way of bringing out the worst in humans: we learn about deception in online dating, treachery within marriage, stalking in the aftermath of break-ups and harassment in the workplace. Buss’s thesis – which is extremely well supported by the research data – is that male and female sexuality is, in general, different, and that these differences produce conflict, sometimes in strange and subtle ways.

We start from the recognition that reproduction places more physical demands on women than it does on men. Pregnancy lasts more than nine months, and concludes with a dangerous labour, which is followed by many more years of breastfeeding and childcare. Men, however, only really need to expend the amount of effort it takes to orgasm in order to reproduce. This foundational physical difference has led to average psychological differences between

industry is driven by demand. Sex-buyers are people who seek sex outside of a committed relationship, usually with a person they have never met before, and this kind of sexual encounter is far more likely to appeal to those who score higher on the inventory of what psychologists term “socio-sexuality”: a desire for sexual variety.

One of the most well-supported findings within the cross-cultural study of human sexuality is that men are, on average, higher in socio-sexuality than women. This makes intuitive sense within an evolutionary framework since, while it may be advantageous for fathers to hang around after conception to increase the mother and baby’s chances of survival, it isn’t always necessary. A man who can game the system by abandoning a woman after impregnating her, and then ride off into the sunset to impregnate more women is successfully spreading his genetic material. He carries the risk of retribution,

Evolution is a blind, amoral process that depends on two things: random gene mutations and a huge amount of death

the sexes that are sometimes profound. As Buss writes,

[S]ex differences in reproductive biology have created selection pressure for sex differences in sexual psychology that are often comparable in degree to sex differences in height, weight, upper body muscle mass, body-fat distribution, testosterone levels, and oestrogen production. . . [they] show up in mating motivations, such as sex drive and the desire for sexual variety. . . in the emotions of attraction, lust, arousal, disgust, jealousy and love. . . in thought processes, such as sexual fantasies and inferences about other people’s sexual interest.

Buss is keen to stress that these differences are average ones, just like differences in height between the sexes. You cannot confidently predict an individual’s preferences or behaviour if the only thing you know about them is their sex. At the population level, however, even minor average differences can produce striking effects.

The dynamics of the sex trade reveal this particularly starkly. Women make up the overwhelming majority of sex-sellers, for the simple reason that almost all sex-buyers are men (at least 99 per cent across the world), most men are straight, and the

including violence from the woman’s male kin, but the benefits may sometimes outweigh the risks.

Our female ancestors had to bring up their children in a dangerous environment, which usually meant keeping a male partner around, both for material support and for protection from other men. Our male ancestors, meanwhile, “recurrently faced an adaptive problem no woman in the history of human evolution has ever faced – investing resources in the mistaken belief that a child has sprung from his own loins and not from those of an interloper”. In our evolutionary history, men who unwittingly devoted themselves to raising children who weren’t genetically related to them were at a selection disadvantage, while those who practised what biologists call “mate guarding” could be certain that their children were their own.

Although women experience jealousy just as often as men do, the male expression of this emotion is most destructive: 50 to 70 per cent of female murder victims are killed by men motivated by sexual jealousy, whereas only 3 per cent of male murder victims are killed by romantic partners or ex-partners. The disproportionate institutional power that men have historically held means that male sexual jealousy is ►

THE NS POEM

Flowering currants

John Burnside

▶ also embedded in cultural and legal systems. In much of the Middle East and West and Central Africa, men are permitted to take multiple wives, but women must remain monogamous. Even in the modern West, where this sexual double standard is no longer formalised in law, it still shows up in myriad ways.

The invention of hormonal birth control may have reduced the biological necessity of mate guarding, but it can't undo evolution. If you take a group of married men, hook them up to machines that monitor heart rate and other physiological responses, and ask them to imagine their wives having sex with another man, they are sure to show an intense physical stress response, whether or not their wives are imagined to be on the contraceptive pill. Although cultural variation demonstrates that it is possible to encourage or discourage an instinctive emotion like jealousy through the use of social pressures, it is very hard to override adaptations that are deeply embedded in the human mind – this, in the end, is the core tenet of evolutionary psychology.

B*ad Men* is a popular-science book, rich with lively detail, but it can also be read as a self-help book informed by evolutionary research. Plenty of Buss's insights will be useful to anyone attempting to navigate the modern dating landscape. For example, it apparently really is true that men who own sports cars are more likely to cheat on their partners, as are women who wear a lot of make-up. It is also true that a man who is reluctant to introduce a partner to his friends and family is probably attempting what Buss coyly terms a "short-term mating strategy", or what others might refer to as a "fuck and chuck". Most stereotypes about human mating are borne out by the data.

But there are also more important insights to be gleaned from the second half of the book, which is concerned with violence, overwhelmingly inflicted by men on women. An unfortunate effect of the feminist rejection of evolutionary psychology is that most feminists have stepped away from the discipline and so play only a minor role in shaping it. Yet the discipline can still be put to feminist ends. Refusing to acknowledge the existence of psychological differences between the sexes is not only hard to justify scientifically, it also denies us the opportunity to take advantage of a body of knowledge that could be truly useful, particularly for the young women who are most at risk from sexual violence.

Bad Men is well worth reading for its

I would step through that scent on the way
to nowhere, adder's tooth
and cullet in the grass, my body
suddenly akin
to April rain;

chancing my luck, at large in the summer heat,
I crossed into the shadows, where a boy
could sing himself to sleep and wake up
naked and abandoned, scarred with touch

and full of voices that were not his own,
his mouth a bruise, all memory a blur,
and everything he knew of House and Home
abandoned to the greenwood
like a snare.

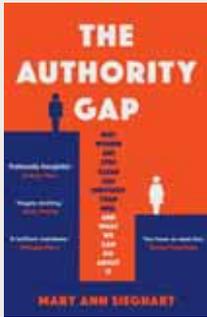
John Burnside is a Scottish author and the *New Statesman's* nature columnist. His latest collection of poems, *Learning to Sleep* (Jonathan Cape), will be published on 5 August.

practical advice, which includes – among much else – strategies for victims of stalking, as well as a lengthy description of the psychological characteristics of men most likely to rape (impulsivity, disagreeableness, promiscuity, hyper-masculinity and low empathy). Buss makes a scientifically informed case for recruiting more female police officers to investigate sexual crime, and explains why women's intuitive fear of strangers in dark alleys is perfectly rational, demonstrating that, at a policy level, evolutionary psychology could be used to argue both for major reforms to the criminal justice system, and for minor changes, such as improved street lighting.

Despite these helpful recommendations

and his attempts to signal friendliness by quoting icons such as Kimberlé Crenshaw and Susan Brownmiller, Buss is bound to be either condemned or ignored by most feminists, given that recognising the natural origins of male violence is such a dismaying prospect. Nevertheless, while this might not seem an obvious choice of feminist reading matter, I would press this book into the hands of any teenage girl. "Men's sexual violence toward women remains the most widespread human rights problem in the world," writes this unlikely feminist ally. "A deep understanding of the co-evolution of sexual conflict in humans will not magically solve all problems. But I am convinced it is the light and the way." ●

Reviewed in short



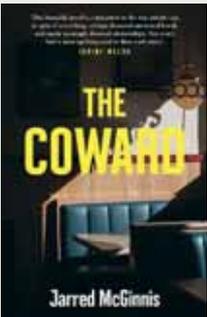
The Authority Gap
by Mary Ann Sieghart
Doubleday, 384pp, £16.99

Why are women taken less seriously than men? That's the question the journalist Mary Ann Sieghart seeks to answer in her study of the "authority gap" that exists between men (trusted, empowered) and women (underestimated, undermined), in and out of the workplace. Sieghart

draws on a wealth of data, including research that shows that women are interrupted more than men, and discussions with Janet Yellen, Julia Gillard, Mary Beard and Bernardine Evaristo.

This is a deeply researched, comprehensive book – so comprehensive, in fact, it can at times read like an A-Z of gender studies ("C" is for "confidence tricks" and "conversational manspreading", "I" is for "incels" and "intersectionality"), offering plenty of "what" but little "why". It is odd, in a book about male privilege, that so little space is dedicated to examining the psychological roots of misogyny, even less to the problem of childcare and the division of unpaid labour. And, despite Sieghart's pleas for optimism, it is hard not to leave this book feeling gloomy: girls, we're told, internalise bias, are silenced, sapped of self-confidence and forced to battle to be heard. All of which is true, of course, but it hardly makes me feel like fighting.

By Katherine Cowles



The Coward
by Jarred McGinnis
Canongate, 320pp, £16.99

Jarred McGinnis, an American short story writer and former academic researcher in artificial intelligence, describes over 59 brisk chapters his own experience of spinal injury following a car crash in which a woman was killed. It's not entirely fiction and not quite memoir

either; the distance between those modes, we're told in a prefatory statement, is "measured in self-delusions". The narrator, in his mid-twenties and newly wheelchair-bound, moves in with his father, whom he calls Jack, a widower and alcoholic still mourning the death of his wife more than a decade earlier. The return to home soil – a suburb of Austin, Texas – prompts a return to childhood memories of rebellion, substance abuse and a stint in a psychiatric hospital.

The book, efficient, bracing and bleakly comic, traces various parallel trajectories: Jarred's rehabilitation – or acclimatisation to a new reality – and the gradual reconciliation between defective father and errant son are portrayed alongside a series of flashbacks that explain how Jarred ended up in his predicament. This whole process is embodied in the writing of the book itself. As Jarred reflects during a conversation with a kind-hearted stranger, "It felt good to unravel the knot of me into words."

By Leo Robson



The Nile
by Terje Tvedt
Bloomsbury, 400pp, £30

Numbers can give an idea of the scale of the Nile, but they suggest little of the scale of its place in either the imagination or world events. The river draws water from some 3 million square kilometres and flows for 6,650 kilometres through 11 different countries, from Lake Victoria

to the Mediterranean. Throughout history, however, it has also watered the cultures of a thousand different peoples and entered their myths; for some the river emanated from Paradise, for others it flowed over a golden stone staircase.

In his vivid travelogue and cultural history, the Norwegian professor Terje Tvedt journeys from mouth to source, presenting a deluge of detail about the sediments of history, folklore and nature along the Nile's banks. It is the river's ancient past and the stories of the eminent Victorians – General Gordon, David Livingstone, John Hanning Speke et al – that are the most familiar. Tvedt, switching effortlessly from history to reportage, also brings the Nile into the present with discursions on everything from Barack Obama's family origins in Kenya and George W Bush's role in South Sudan's gaining independence in 2011 to Idi Amin feeding human bodies to the crocodiles.

By Michael Prodger



Amazon Unbound
by Brad Stone
Simon & Schuster, 496pp, £20

When Amazon signed a contract with the air freight company ATSG in 2016, it didn't just buy ATSG's services. It also bought "warrants" – options to pick up about a fifth of the shares in ATSG itself, at a fixed price. Two years after the deal became public, Amazon made hundreds

of millions of dollars because the lucky company that had won the lucrative contract with Amazon was, to a certain extent, Amazon. Jeff Bezos's response to this, Brad Stone reports, was: "That is how it's done!"

That has become how it's done with a lot of other companies, too. Amazon has become a major shareholder in more and more of the firms it works with, gobbling up more and more equity in the knowledge that the market will reward it for being even bigger.

Brad Stone's first book on Amazon, *The Everything Store* (2013), was about the rise of the e-commerce giant. *Amazon Unbound*, subtitled "Jeff Bezos and the Invention of a Global Empire", is about a company that has achieved critical mass, a size that allows it to act not just as a shop but as an investment bank, a shipping line, a postal service, a film studio, a publisher, a supermarket – an everything company.

By Will Dunn



Equality and the elites

How political ideas such as “levelling up” draw on centuries of meritocratic thinking

By Mark Damazer

Meritocracy, the idea that one’s place in society should be based on ability and effort, is under heavy attack – its failures having opened wide the doors for Brexit, Trump, Bolsonaro, Orbán and other populist mutants. The core criticism runs thus: meritocracy’s beneficiaries not only enjoy the fruits of a high-quality education and outsized salaries but are insufferably smug, sure of their virtue and superiority. They believe they are winners not because they are lucky to have had the “right” genes or parents who supported them in countless ways, but because they deserve to be winners. The elites may be brilliantly educated and regard themselves as sophisticated, tolerant and liberal, but in reality they are hopelessly disconnected from the societies

The Aristocracy of Talent: How Meritocracy Made the Modern World
Adrian Wooldridge

Allen Lane, 496pp, £25

they rule. They have grown way too big for their meritocratic boots. And if all that weren’t bad enough, it’s getting harder to become a meritocrat in the first place: social mobility, at least in the UK and the US, has declined since its postwar heyday.

But here comes the counter-attack. Adrian Wooldridge sees meritocracy as a revolutionary idea worth improving, not abandoning. He ranges across two and a half thousand years of history, surveying many societies and cultures, to remind us that

until relatively recently the talented were almost always a matter of no interest to the rulers – not only unrewarded but undiscovered. In a recent cover story for this magazine (“In defence of meritocracy”, 19 May), Wooldridge expanded on the contemporary political salience of the idea, arguing fiercely that if Labour wants to win elections it must claim – he would say reclaim – meritocracy in order to demolish the perception that it has been captured by “woke egalitarianism”, or at the very least harness meritocracy to define its central purposes and remedy its lack of “vision”.

Wooldridge, for decades a leading figure at the *Economist*, the global citizen’s anti-populism weekly bible, certainly understands why meritocracy has become

unpopular. He is the latest in a long line of commentators to point to the importance of the policy failures of the Iraq War and the 2008 financial crash. In both cases it wasn't only the politicians who failed or proved untrustworthy but the apparent experts, in intelligence and banking respectively. Meritocracy had soured before the eruptions of Trump, Brexit and the *gilets jaunes*.

Rousseau, in his 1762 book about education, *Emile*, argued that if the right people got to the top (became the experts) the masses would surely recognise their superiority and turn to them for guidance. True, Rousseau was writing during the *ancien régime*, when the most naturally talented were nowhere near the top, but his is a view of meritocracy in which all would recognise the social hierarchy that would result from the rule of the talented, and all would benefit.

Rousseau is just one of the many philosophers – including Plato, Aristotle, Confucius, Erasmus, Voltaire, Mill – whose work on this subject is succinctly summarised and sometimes analysed in Wooldridge's rich stew of a book. Alongside the philosophers are innumerable politicians, theologians, scientists, academics, authors and campaigners. He has dug up a priceless array of quotes from all perspectives on how to define the best people, how to seek them out, how to educate them, how to test them, how to give them power, even how they should behave.

For most of human history, a tiny number of men (they were always men) who happened to have the right combination of other qualifications – land, title, family connections – accumulated all the power, money and status. Of course there were exceptions: men whose talent and luck attracted a patron and gave them a position and rich reward. Wooldridge gives us examples – among them Pope Gregory VII, the son of a common labourer; Thomas Wolsey, son of a wool seller; and Thomas Cromwell, son of a blacksmith.

But long after the Enlightenment and the American and French revolutions had smashed feudalism and placed new emphasis on individual self-fulfilment, most talented people still couldn't get to the starting line: wrong gender, wrong parents, wrong religion, wrong race. It took longer for cleverness, measured by tests and exams, to become the principal basis for allocating positions. Wooldridge shines a light, rightly, on the Northcote-Trevelyan reforms to the British civil service in mid-Victorian Britain as a moment when the state gave meritocracy proper roots. The mess of the Crimean War (1853-56) provided the

background: the dim and lazy needed to be replaced by the talented, and recruited by "open competition" – though not too open (it was still an all-male affair). As for race, Wooldridge charts the alarming levels of inequality experienced by black households but his focus, in common with the recent storm-provoking Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, is on the differences between individuals within groups, rather than between groups themselves. He is very nervous about group rights, believing in some affirmative action, but focused not on race but on the deprived more broadly.

All the time that Wooldridge is chronicling the jagged progress of meritocracy he is in effect reminding the reader why the idea retains its attraction. Intuitively, it still

Social mobility in the UK has declined since its postwar heyday

seems both obvious and appealing that society's top dogs should not be defined by birth, property, class, race or gender, but by ability. But that intuition is not enough of a defence. Wooldridge, like anybody writing seriously about meritocracy, has to pay respects to the fundamental critique put forward by Michael Young, who popularised the term in his 1958 dystopia, *The Rise of the Meritocracy*. Young feared that the meritocrats would become a class, that judgements of ability would be made on too narrow a basis, that the many losers would be assumed to have only themselves to blame. And by putting equality of opportunity front and centre, meritocracy would displace the equality of outcome that he sought.

The work of two great American philosopher-critics of meritocracy whose criticisms overlap with Young's are also given an outing: Michael Sandel's beautifully written *The Tyranny of Merit*, published last year, which emphasises meritocracy's abandonment of the virtues of community, and the earlier attack by John Rawls in *A Theory of Justice* (1971). Rawls did not think people with high IQs deserved their success. Talent is a morally arbitrary matter, not a reflection of goodness. Even hard work does not make you more deserving of success because a propensity to work is inherited. This is a stringent view – and like Young, Rawls's idea of justice is bound up with limiting inequalities, not ensuring fair opportunities.

Wooldridge is a less radical figure. He emphasises the need for the talented to be rewarded, especially for their self-sacrifice ("even young Mozart had to practise") and

risk-taking. Without incentives for excellence, there would be fewer talented people and this would impoverish us all. Wooldridge undoubtedly recognises the hurt felt by contemporary meritocracy's losers. He punches hard against the triumphalism or, at best, incomprehension of the "cognitive elite". But he does not own up to the immense difficulty of reconciling even an improved meritocracy with the strain of left-wing thought that emphasises the moral case for equality of outcome. Wooldridge has little to say about redistribution of wealth. He is no egalitarian in Young's sense – at all.

But what is Wooldridge's recipe for meritocratic reform? He is not easy to pin down. His last chapter is a slalom, veering at moments towards the positively eccentric ("high executive salaries can persuade the mass of employees to make great efforts to become the next CEO") and then drifting leftwards ("inequality in most of the world is far too high for comfort"). He champions what is now seen as a conservative view of selective schools as "escalator[s] into the elite", but then, and with gusto, lays into Eton, Winchester, Marlborough and other private schools for abusing their charitable status by abandoning Britain's poorer children and "filling their places with the children of the international elite". Half their pupils could be drawn from children whose parents can't afford the fees. And Wooldridge becomes the latest in a long line pleading for better technical education in Britain, with more respect conferred on those with non-academic qualifications.

All sorts of other ingredients are thrown in. Get rid of referendums, take away power from the rank and file of political parties, tax the digital platforms. These may be desirable but they look like hasty add-ons to his main arguments. But is meritocracy really on the ropes? Wooldridge's desire to ameliorate it is the starting position of nearly all politicians, including many on the left, even if they don't frame their rhetoric in these terms. They may not say so but many wrap meritocratic thinking around their policies, with claims of how they would increase social mobility by "levelling up" or by spending more on education, childcare or housing, or by pressing universities to be more accessible to the under-privileged. We don't have a political and media culture that asks politicians about ideas – what do they actually mean by fairness, or equality of opportunity, or meritocracy? And so they can duck the difficulties that Wooldridge learnedly and entertainingly grapples with. More's the pity. ●

Conquered by culture

K Biswas

Soft Power: The New Great Game

Robert Winder

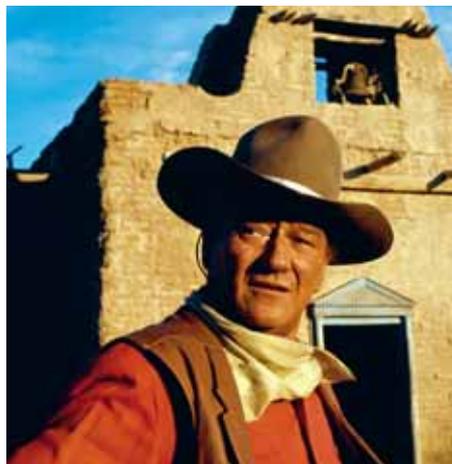
Little, Brown, 416pp, £20

In 1990, with the Cold War coming to an end, the American international relations scholar Joseph Nye declared in *Foreign Policy* magazine that the “direct use of force for economic gain” had become “too costly and dangerous for modern great powers”. Instead, he advocated prioritising “co-operative” or “soft” power – “getting others to want what you want”, akin to parents nurturing “their child’s beliefs and preferences” rather than behaving as strict disciplinarians.

The final decade of the 20th century was less triumphalist than the US foreign policy establishment would have liked. Japan’s manufacturing-heavy economy was thriving, India and Pakistan had developed nuclear arsenals, Europe was coalescing into an effective trade bloc, and there was an ongoing threat of rogue states in the developing world. Many worried that the costly pursuit of the Soviet Union had resulted in imperial overstretch. America had primarily exerted influence abroad through military and financial means. Soft-power resources – “cultural attraction, ideology, and international institutions” – were to become more important than ever.

Subtler than propaganda, soft power, Robert Winder argues in his global tour of cultural signifiers, is essentially a “storytelling competition”. Western nations – especially the US and Britain – dominate, since the greatest soft-power reserves are held by “nations that subjugated others”. Historically, Hollywood has been the quintessential soft-power tool, enabling the US to capture hearts and minds without using guns and money. America’s dream factory even enthralled its enemies: Stalin, like Hitler, loved Westerns (though not enough to forestall KGB plans to assassinate John Wayne).

In Britain, patrician outposts of the state such as the BBC World Service and British Council – both founded in the 1930s, the latter explicitly to “promote British culture and fight the rise of fascism” – continue their attempts to further its values abroad, as do non-governmental organisations like Oxfam and Save the Children. The country’s mass-cultural appeal is also effective in the soft-power stakes – in 2016 one-sixth of albums sold worldwide derived from the UK music industry, while the English Premier



West world: John Wayne on the set of *El Dorado*

League was watched in 643 million homes in the 2018-19 season, with only five countries failing to screen the Manchester derby.

But international reputation is primarily spread by people, not institutions. At a time when humanity is “more than ever reliant on connections and networks”, Britain’s greatest soft-power resource may well be its diverse and dispersed population, Winder argues. A multicultural citizenry plays a crucial role in how the nation is viewed abroad, through the messages and images they send home, while immigration is “rocket fuel” for social diversification and economic entrepreneurship.

Central European Jewish migration alone led to the launch of the Edinburgh festival, a richer interpretation of art, politics and philosophy (through the work of EH Gombrich, Isaiah Berlin and Karl Popper), and an estimated 16 Nobel prizes. Winder, a trustee of London’s Migration Museum whose previous book, *Bloody Foreigners*, interrogated Britain’s relationship with immigration, believes Britain should celebrate the fact that 58 recent global heads of state studied here, including the Gambian president, Adama Barrow, an Arsenal fan who once took a job in Argos on London’s Holloway Road: “The UK helped me to become the person I am today,” he proclaimed on his way to winning 2016’s election.

The legacies of the British empire loom large as we learn that quaint national staples were ultimately “born abroad”. A cup of tea (our most notable “contribution to world cuisine”) relies on cultivating leaves not found in our climes, and is sweetened with sugar “hacked out of Caribbean islands by enslaved West Africans”. Beneath Kew Gardens lay the empire’s research engine, where rubber seedlings from Brazil were prepared for new estates in Malaysia and tea varieties gathered in China were “hot-housed and interbred for new hillsides in Sri Lanka and Malawi”. The jewel in the imperial crown,

India, was left with a plantation economy, a “broken” manufacturing base and a life expectancy of 27, yet hard power’s softer “afterglow” proves difficult to extinguish. The Harrow School song is performed annually in Mumbai by a teenage choir, albeit with the words changed, while the Indian industrial giant Tata, in an example of the empire striking back, owns myriad British brands, from Jaguar Land Rover to Tetley tea.

Former colonisers now hawk their national trademarks in a globalised marketplace. In 2017, France – which, “like Britain, has scattered pieces of itself all over the world” – opened a “lavish outpost of the Louvre” in Abu Dhabi, cutting a £1bn deal with the United Arab Emirates. President Emmanuel Macron, failing to mention accusations that the conditions for migrant construction workers resembled “modern slavery”, launched the museum with “a high-minded speech” about the way art fights “the discourses of hatred”, creating a beacon “that would shine out to the world”.

For too long, Winder admits, imperial powers blocked indigenous voices, and soft-power indexes (such as those curated by the Portland consultancy and *Monocle* magazine) barely acknowledge the Global South – cultural clout is seen as “a Northern Hemisphere quality”. Meanwhile, Winder shows that in the post-colonial epoch “Africa is being hustled over again”: China, the continent’s leading investor, is loaning \$100bn to 29 nations signed up to the Belt and Road initiative; Russia offers diplomatic and military partnerships; Turkey provides development aid; while Germany pushes a Europe-led “Marshall Plan for Africa”.

Despite occasionally falling back on national stereotypes – Sweden is “the land of Abba, Volvo and Ikea”; in Japan, “children who grew up trading Pokémon cards now meet for rice cakes and green tea” – Winder has decent prescriptions for correcting historic soft-power imbalances. He strongly believes that with the 21st century unearthing new competitors – South Korean pop, Iranian film, Latin American writers, African artists – Western cultural monopoly is coming to an end.

To hasten the process, he suggests utilising advances in 3D printing to return looted treasures to their countries of origin. Following David Olusoga’s idea of a British Museum “supermarket sweep” – where arts ministers from former dominions, for five minutes only, load up their trollies with plundered objects – original artefacts could be scanned, then repatriated, with the donors keeping the copies. “Whatever the West lost in art kudos,” Winder writes, it might gain “with interest, in the soft arena of international goodwill.” ●

Generation TikTok

Sarah Manavis

TikTok Boom: China's Dynamite App and the Superpower Race for Social Media

Chris Stokel-Walker

Canbury Press, 288pp, £14.99

When the civil engineer Alex Zhu woke up in Shanghai on the morning of 22 July 2016, he had a gut feeling – one that would shape the future of Western popular culture. His video-sharing app, Musical.ly, had just crashed under the weight of 100 million users. He knew then that short-form video – skits, dances and lip-syncs – was going to become the next big thing.

“As long as it’s a video format, we think we can do it,” he said to tech journalist Chris Stokel-Walker at the time. “The fundamental thinking behind this is that [the app can share] every kind of video format for self-expression and social communication.” In 2018, Musical.ly was bought and renamed “TikTok”.

Stokel-Walker makes the case that TikTok – an app that has grown rapidly over the past year, as hundreds of millions downloaded it for the first time at the start of the pandemic in March 2020 – is the first Chinese tech company to break serious ground in the West, challenging the dominance of Silicon Valley. “‘Made in China’, where goods designed elsewhere would be put together in the Far East to take advantage of cheap labour, is mutating into ‘Created in China’: where ideas are born, and then spread to the West,” he writes.

TikTok’s success is largely down to the strategic approach of its parent company ByteDance – an opaque operation headed by the Chinese billionaire Zhang Yiming. He began his company with an app called Toutiao, which uses an algorithm to aggregate news articles and tailor them to users’ interests. Zhang then sought to create an algorithm so intelligent that it could quickly scan video content and serve viewers clips based on what they had already watched and (judging by their dwell time) enjoyed.

Zhu’s format – which allows users to create short videos with ease – and Zhang’s algorithm proved a winning combination. The app allows users – mostly teenagers and under-30s – to find any type of video they can think of. The dance routines, lip-syncs and comedy clips identified by Zhu form the majority of TikTok’s content, but increasingly it hosts highly political content, and well-researched scientific messaging



Flash forward: Alex Zhu, creator of the Musical.ly app that became TikTok, in Shanghai, 2016

related to the pandemic.

Because the clips are so short, TikTok content is “snackable”, meaning you could feasibly watch a handful of videos in the space of a minute. It’s a format that offers strong potential for videos to go viral – a motivation for its users to keep churning out content. The platform has spawned its own ecosystem of trends, lingo and multimillionaire stars. It was the most downloaded app of 2020 and, as of June 2021, with an estimated 2.6 billion global downloads, it is the most popular entertainment app in the world.

Its rate of growth is unlike that of any other platform

The algorithm is the secret of TikTok’s addictive success – the app has proved adept at serving users more of the content they want to see (if you watch just one video of dancing nurses, you’ll start to see medically themed memes; if you watch a video of a puppy, you’ll subsequently be treated to a litter), enticing many to spend hours flicking through hundreds of clips. The company sees its AI as such a powerful gauge of a user’s personality that during internal interviews, hiring managers seek to understand candidates by asking them to describe the types of videos they are fed by the app.

Much of the focus of *TikTok Boom* is on the platform’s dramatic rise, alongside growing scepticism and privacy concerns about Big Tech – worries that became widespread following the Cambridge Analytica Facebook

scandal in 2018. TikTok is, of course, Chinese-owned – and its Chinese sister app, Douyin, censors videos that are deemed to contradict Chinese Communist Party propaganda – and the app has frequently drawn suspicion from Western governments and media. In 2020 Donald Trump attempted, unsuccessfully, to ban TikTok via executive order, citing Chinese surveillance concerns. Stokel-Walker argues such issues will continue to be a preoccupation for the US under Joe Biden, but he thinks it unlikely that Chinese spies are accessing Western TikTok users’ data. “Should you worry about TikTok? Not really,” he says. “At least not in the way the most corpulent, vein-poppingly angry politicians of the world suggest.”

But *TikTok Boom* has one drawback that’s shared by many books about the internet: technology outpaces publishing. It’s especially hard to keep up with TikTok – its rate of growth is unlike that of any other platform. In a few years, the app has accrued double the number of users that Twitter did in 14. Since the book was written, TikTok has made major changes, such as extending the length of videos (originally capped at 15 seconds, they can now run to three minutes). Stokel-Walker cites viral videos and memes that became watershed moments for the app, but much of the time, the significance is lost – the effect is something like being told a convoluted story, only to hear: “I guess you had to be there.”

While *TikTok Boom* does not attempt to chart the app’s cultural impact, it succeeds in clearly explaining its unparalleled growth. And it feels almost certain that we are witnessing only the beginning of its story. ●

The one of the Sun

For Joaquin Mir, the colours of the Spanish landscape stirred not just the eye but the soul

By Michael Prodger

In the summer of 1897, a bar opened in the centre of Barcelona. Called Els Quatre Gats – The Four Cats – it was modelled on Le Chat Noir, a cabaret in Montmartre that was popular with the writers and artists of Paris’s most bohemian quarter. Els Quatre Gats occupied the ground floor of a new modernist building and was partly financed by a painter called Ramón Casas i Carbó. His idea was for something more than just a drinking den; he wanted it to be a venue for art exhibitions, an informal salon and a home for a progressive artistic-literary magazine too. Casas’s venture quickly took off and became the gathering place for Catalonia’s avant-garde coterie.

One of the early patrons was the young Pablo Picasso. The tyro artist, then still in his teens, not only drank at Els Quatre Gats but held his first solo exhibition there and also came up with various promotional designs for the establishment – an advertising poster depicting a puppet show, a “dish of the day” drawing and a picture to decorate the menu. Picasso sketched quick caricatures of some of the bar’s other artists too, and the man he drew most often was a painter eight years his senior, Joaquin Mir Trinxet.

Picasso, then not so confirmed in his egotism as he would soon become, was clearly slightly in awe of Mir. He would do 12 sketches of him over the next couple of years, at least one of which was made after Picasso had left for Paris and no longer had

Mir in front of his eyes. Mir (1873-1940) was by this point already one of the most talked about painters in Spain and Picasso had seen and admired his *The Rector’s Orchard*, a sun-bleached neo-impressionist picture of orange trees and church buildings, when it was first exhibited in 1896. Picasso knew too that Mir was part of a group of painters called the Colla del Safrà – the Saffron Group – because of their frequent use of the richest of yellows. Under a sketch of Mir made in 1903 Picasso wrote “The one of the Sun”, an acknowledgement of Mir’s role in infusing his landscape paintings with brilliant Spanish light.

Indeed, Mir briefly influenced Picasso directly. The drawing Picasso made for the Els Quatre Gats menu in 1899 showed “a perfect modernist man” – an Iberian Oscar Wilde in a floppy hat, long coat and voluminous trousers, with a flower in his buttonhole – sitting at a table outside the bar, and the dominant colour is saffron.

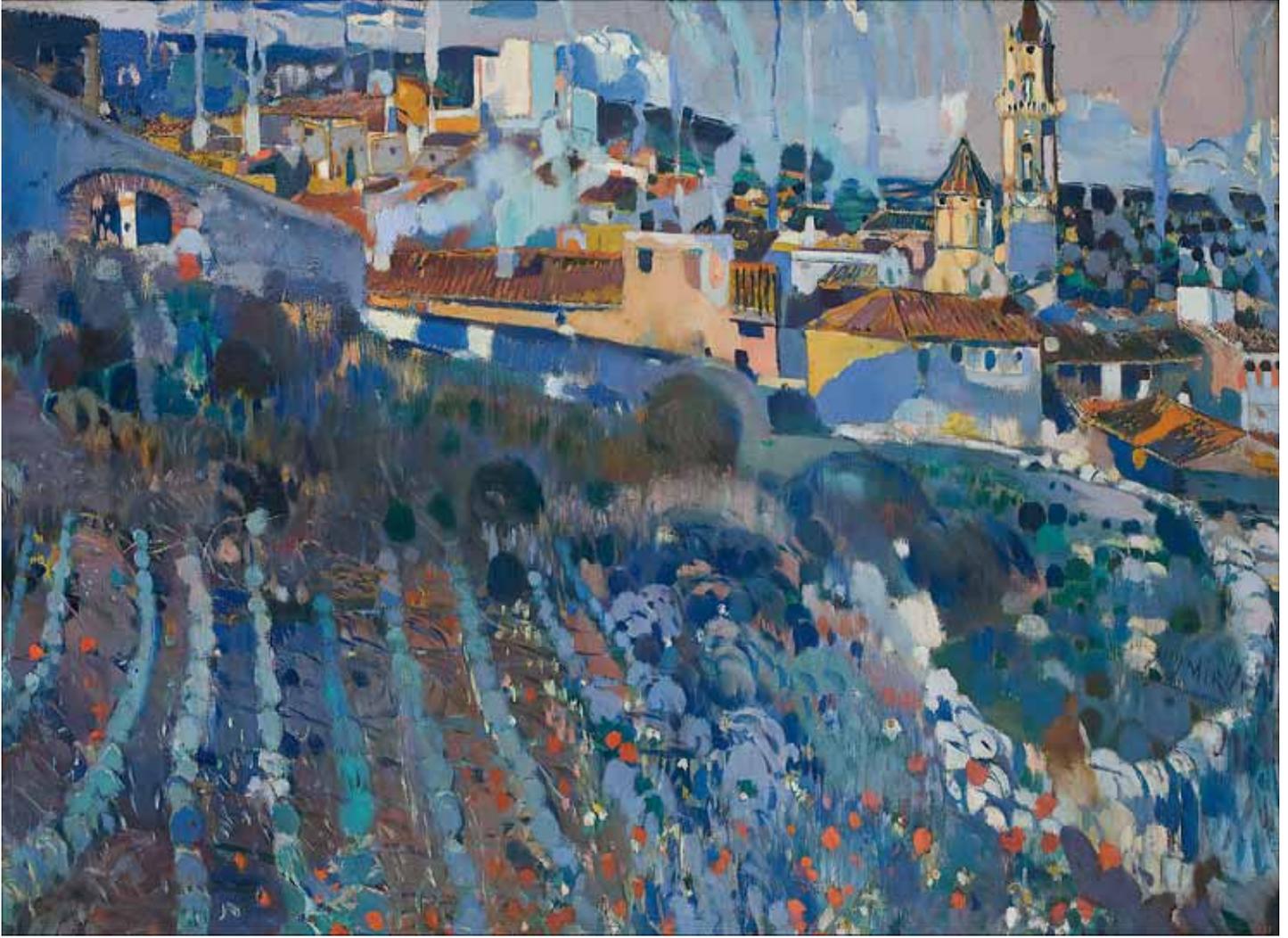
Mir was born into a well-off family who had made their money in the textile business. After training at Barcelona’s Llotja school of art, his initial forays as an independent artist were supported by his uncle Avelino Trinxet Casas. Mir would go on to paint murals and design stained-glass windows for his uncle’s new home, the Casa Trinxet, a modernist building designed by Josep Puig i Cadafalch, the architect of Els Quatre Gats and, alongside Antoni Gaudí and Lluís Domènech i Montaner, one

of the three modernist architects who gave Barcelona its most striking buildings.

Although his circle was interested in social realist paintings, Mir was engrossed by the landscape. Unlike many of his peers, he never went to Paris to study but in 1899 headed to Majorca with his painter friend Santiago Rusiñol, where he met and was influenced by the Belgian artist William Degouve de Nuncques, a painter of strange, mystical, nocturnal landscapes.

Mir’s stay on Majorca was marked by increasing isolation and an unusual degree of identification with the landscape. In the paintings he made both there and subsequently, representation becomes less important than the interchangeability of colour and form. He would put colours next to each other for their chromatic effect and as expressions of his emotions – the result can be a sense of near-delirium. He was later to write that: “All I want is for my works to lighten the heart and flood the eyes and the soul with light.” Colour for him was not just a sensory medium but a spiritual one.

In 1905, while painting out of doors and looking for a fresh viewpoint, he fell part way down a cliff. The real effect of the accident was mental rather than physical; it provoked a breakdown and Mir was committed to a psychiatric hospital at Reus near Tarragona. After a two-year stay there he moved on to live and work in a succession of Spanish regions and towns – Andorra,



Montserrat, Miravet and Gualba – before marrying in 1921 and settling in the Casa Mir, a farm near Vilanova i la Geltrú, a few miles down the coast from Barcelona.

This painting, *Poble Escalnot* or *Terraced Village*, is a view of Maspujols, a village up in the hills behind Reus and was painted probably around 1906-09 either during or immediately after his hospital stay. It is a late winter scene, with the smoke from the village chimneys streaking straight up into the windless sky and the bare ground showing between the cabbages and winter vegetables. Blue, in various shades, is the predominant colour – for smoke, hills, plants and garden wall – with splashes of yellow, biscuit and umber where the low sun hits the houses and the bell tower of the church of Santa Maria. A smattering of poppies decorates the near-ground and dabs of green give variety.

Who knows Mir's state of mind when he was painting this scene, or what was in his mind in the throes of his breakdown? Its mood, though, is less ecstatic than many

of his landscapes and more contemplative. Here, "the one of the Sun" is painting in a calmer register, concentrating on subtle harmonies and a gentle rather than a riotous poetry; his marks might be rapid but they are also careful. Perhaps he found the still air above the village an invitation.

Mir was occasionally suspected of somehow wanting to merge himself with nature; if so, in this picture he is looking hard at how the scene is put together – if he is to join it he needs to understand its underlying compositional structure first. Although Mir is often co-opted as a late-impressionist or a symbolist, the painter he most resembles, and whose work he can hardly have seen, is another damaged man who stood outside the mainstream, Van Gogh. The Dutchman also found the numinous in light and balm in nature, and he too invented his own system of mark making, filling each inch of the picture surface with calligraphic movement and interest. For both men, it was neither nature itself nor the act of painting that allowed them to express the inexpressible but both together. They needed the scene

in front of them in order to paint, while the paint itself was a means of emotional transmission. And although Mir had significant public success in his lifetime while Van Gogh had none, painting for them was nevertheless profoundly personal.

One of Mir's close contemporaries, Wassily Kandinsky, was also grappling with some of the same ideas at the time. But where Kandinsky took his colours into abstraction and wrote extensively about his theories of art, not least about synaesthesia – the phenomenon of linking senses that are not normally connected, such as colour and sound – Mir may have been in sympathy but espoused no such intellectual framework and kept his art rooted in the soil.

While his young admirer Picasso went on to international triumph, Mir remained largely unregarded outside Spain, which he never left. He carried on painting landscapes and stayed true to the leftist Catalan politics of *Els Quatre Gats*; he died of kidney disease in Barcelona in 1940 after being prosecuted by the Franco regime for colluding with the Republic. ●

FILM
Hit
women
Ryan Gilbey

Black Widow (12A)

dir: Cate Shortland

“Lord help the mister who comes between me and my sister,” sang Rosemary Clooney in *White Christmas*. *Black Widow* takes a similarly hard line on the subject, with mutually protective siblings Natasha (Scarlett Johansson) and Yelena (Florence Pugh) reacting unfavourably to anyone who threatens their sisterhood. “Natasha” may be the name on her library card but it is as Black Widow that she is a member of the Avengers superhero team. Not that newcomers would guess these credentials from the scene in which she sits in a rusty caravan eating dinner in front of the TV and mouthing along to Roger Moore’s dialogue in *Moonraker*. Alan Partridge would be proud.

During a tiff with Yelena, Natasha points out that they are not technically sisters, but then family in the movie is whatever you make it. The girls grew up together as part of a Russian sleeper cell in Ohio, along with two adult operatives: Melina (Rachel Weisz), a scientist, and Alexei (David Harbour), whose alter-ego is the Soviet superhero Red Guardian. “I could’ve been more famous than Captain America,” he gripes, squeezing himself into his old costume – a gag that is familiar from *The Incredibles* but has been in service at least since *The Return of Captain Invincible* in 1983.

A prologue in *Black Widow* shows the family escaping to Cuba under enemy fire. Risking life and limb only to be greeted on the tarmac by Ray Winstone in a shell-suit and faltering Russian accent is, in all honesty, not ideal. As the criminal mastermind Dreykov, he takes one look at young Natasha and spots her potential. Or as he puts it: “Dat one, she hass fire een her.”

Press-ganged into his platoon of young assassins, the sisters’ paths diverge, only for them to meet up again years later as adults. After some introductory hand-to-hand combat, the women call a truce. At this point they are panting on the floor, surrounded by broken crockery, and with a net curtain wound around both their necks – an oddly beautiful image that suggests a Flapper-ish glamour as well as the violent trauma which will bind them forever.

They have some catching up to do. Yelena wants to know what the deal is with



Fiery: Scarlett Johansson plays Natasha, the eponymous Black Widow

Natasha’s trademark fighting stance – one leg outstretched, one hand on the ground, hair tossed back. “It’s a great pose,” she says in a don’t-get-me-wrong tone. “But it does look like you think everyone is looking at you all the time.” This works as a kid-sister tease, though it also shows Marvel’s tendency to have it both ways, ridiculing its own conventions before indulging them all over again once the next action scene rolls around.

It could only feel fresh to viewers who have avoided *Killing Eve*

Black Widow is set immediately after the events of *Captain America: Civil War*, which means the Avengers have recently broken up. “It’s fine, I’m actually better on my own,” shrugs Natasha, giving off definite Zayn Malik vibes. Yelena has even bigger news: she recently escaped from Dreykov’s brainwashed assassin squad after being sprayed with a tube of raspberry-coloured stardust by one of her targets. It may look like your average vial of pink body glitter from Claire’s, but this is potent stuff capable of breaking the deadlock of docile groupthink and causing instant empathy. Imagine the difference it could make to Twitter.

The film follows the women’s attempts to liberate the rest of Dreykov’s trafficked female killers from his nerve centre. It’s called the Red Room, either in honour of *Twin Peaks* or *Jane Eyre*, or to reflect the practices

that go on there: the girls are forced to have hysterectomies, as Yelena explains in grisly detail in response to an offhand joke about her “time of the month”.

Finding the Red Room necessitates a family reunion of sorts. The sisters use a fighter plane to bust Alexei out of jail before tracking down Melina, who is busy doing mind-control experiments on pigs. “You named one after me?” says the uncouth Alexei in dismay. “You can’t see the resemblance?” she replies. Welcome to Marvel humour. It’s enough to make you miss Roger Moore.

As evidence of a drive to look beyond the usual suspects (and gender) for its directors, Marvel Studios has appointed the Australian film-maker Cate Shortland, whose track record lies in small-scale psychological dramas about oppressed women (*Lore*, *Berlin Syndrome*). She introduces hints of griminess to undercut the usual gleam, and treats the scenes between the long-lost sisters with a lingering warmth. It’s no small thing to bring together actors who have carried two of the most audacious films of the past decade (Johansson in *Under the Skin*, Pugh in *Midsommar*) but they deserve better than this material, which could only feel fresh to viewers who have avoided *Red Sparrow*, *Atomic Blonde* and *Killing Eve*.

Marvel Studios can hire any director it likes, but until the movies start taking the formalist risks of its recent TV spin-off *WandaVision*, which filtered superheroes through the world of sitcoms, the result will always be the same: action, talk, action, jokes, fireball, fireball, fireball. ●
“Black Widow” is in cinemas and on Disney+ now

TELEVISION

Admissions of guilt

Rachel Cooke

Raising a School Shooter

BBC Four

Someone drives to a car wash, someone else has coffee with a friend. A man carefully unpacks his supermarket shopping. A woman lies on a yoga mat and gently stretches her calves. In *Raising a School Shooter* (7 July, 10pm) the Scandinavian film-makers Frida and Lasse Barkfors devote quite a lot of time to the tedious and the quotidian, the message of their searching and ultimately profoundly moving documentary being not only that life must (and does) go on even after something unimaginably terrible has happened, but that human survival often depends on the humdrum. For those whose world has been razed to the ground – and for the people in this film, the devastation has been total – domestic routine is a kind of hand rail, a rope to be used to pull themselves along as the hours turn into days, and the days into weeks, months and (eventually) years.

Since 1970, there have been 1,677 shootings in American schools; 598 people have been killed, and 1,626 injured. What protocols have come to surround these all-too-common crimes? The news crews arrive. Behind a cordon, a crowd weeps. Later, there are funerals and memorial services, and a usually futile argument about gun laws. But for the parents of those who embark on such sprees – most are under 18, and still living at home – there is no etiquette. “Do you bring a casserole to the house of somebody whose son has shot up a school?” asks Sue Klebold, the mother of Dylan Klebold, one of the two teenagers who, in 1999, killed 12 students and one teacher at Columbine High School, Colorado. Her neighbours were mostly very kind, turning up on her doorstep bearing homemade food. The scrutiny elsewhere, however, was hard to bear. She and her husband were now “lesser human beings”. When, she wanted to know, would she be allowed to say sorry to Dylan’s victims? The authorities thought this an inappropriate question, perhaps even an inappropriate impulse.

Klebold has dealt with her all-consuming guilt by facing up, utterly open-eyed, to the magnitude of Dylan’s crime – though it never really goes away. There came a time, not so long ago, when she was sometimes able to feel happy for 20 minutes, at which point,



A Columbine memorial in Littleton, Colorado

she began to hate herself all over again, for what right did she have even to that relief? On the morning of the killings, as the news came in, she prayed Dylan would turn his gun on himself. But that prayer having been answered, she wishes now that she could take it back. If he was in prison, they would be able to talk. She would be able to ask – I found this hard to hear – for his forgiveness. She believes that she did not talk to him enough about his feelings, and that if she had, things might have been different.

Blame. Where does it lie? Whose job is it to apportion it? The other two parents in the film needed to displace culpability, to spread it about a little, even as they accepted what their children, both serving long prison sentences, had done. Jeff Williams, whose son, Andy, killed two students and injured 13 at his Californian high school in 2001, insisted that his boy had been bullied, raging at the press’s refusal to report this. At Andy’s sentencing, he “had to listen”, he said, to *four hours* of victim impact statements. His voice was on the edge of plaintiveness.

Clarence Elliot, whose son Nicholas shot dead his teacher, also in California, in 1988, spoke of bullying, too, though with less conviction. Nicholas, having already served 31 years, has been refused parole six times; the supposed indignities of the schoolyard must seem almost irrelevant at this point, the weight of time and hopelessness pressing on his father like a coffin stone. I have nothing but pity for both men. Listening to them talking on the phone to their incarcerated sons, so stilted and awkward, I felt, not love’s strength, but its crushing powerlessness. But beside Klebold, so full of grace, they also seemed timorous, somehow, their eyes carefully averted. She has reckoned it all up. She is ready: for the rest of this life, and, perhaps, for the next. She walks tall. Her back is straight, and not only because of the yoga. ●

RADIO

What cats really think

Rachel Cunliffe

My Cat, the Judge

BBC Radio 4

Is my cat judging me? It’s something I’ve often wondered when working from home accompanied by my perennially indignant cat Clio, and it’s also the question the comedian Suzi Ruffell sets out to answer in *My Cat, the Judge* (6 July, 11am), under the direction of her kitty companion Velma. Ruffell and Velma have been spending a lot of time together in lockdown, and their relationship has changed. “I have no idea how my cat’s mind works!” Ruffell exclaims. Can science help?

Billed as a serious investigation into feline psychology, this is really just a chance to chat about cats: why we love them, and how they feel about us. Yes, there are smatterings of the scientific: from an expert in animal behaviour who explains how cat features (wide eyes, flat faces) resemble those of human babies and tap into our innate desire to provide care, to a professor of animal health who painstakingly reassures Ruffell that her cat isn’t necessarily stupid just because she failed a feline intelligence test. (I sympathise: my cat is so stupid she occasionally gets confused by her own paws.) But ultimately, this is a comedy podcast – complete with tangents about a cat who plays the piano on TikTok and the Texas lawyer who appeared before a judge on Zoom with his face displaying as a kitten. Evolutionary biology about how humans and cats came to live together is interspersed with owners raving about their troublesome pets.

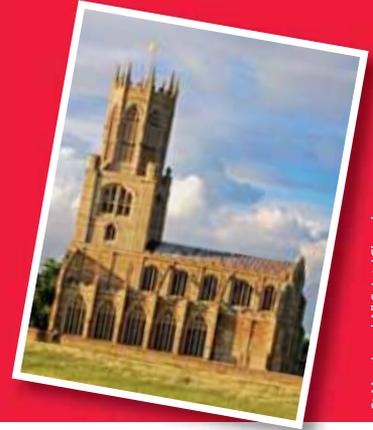
The only real conclusion the show comes to is that a cat’s needs and desires are different from a human’s, and behaviour we might mistake for feline spite is actually a fair response to our very irritating human actions. (How would you react if somebody picked you up while you were sleeping?) The amount of affection we expect from our pets may also overwhelm their comfort level – as the editor of the book *Decoding Your Cat* tells Ruffell, too much stroking is “not socially acceptable for a well-educated cat”.

So while it’s unlikely our cats are judging our pandemic lifestyles, it could well be true that we’re putting too much emotional pressure on them to fill the void of social contact left by lockdown. And if they rule our lives with a “tiny iron paw”? That’s why we love them. ●



**Brian Blessed, Actor,
Writer and Presenter**

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St Mary's and All Saints Church, Fotheringhay, Northamptonshire © Bob Stewart

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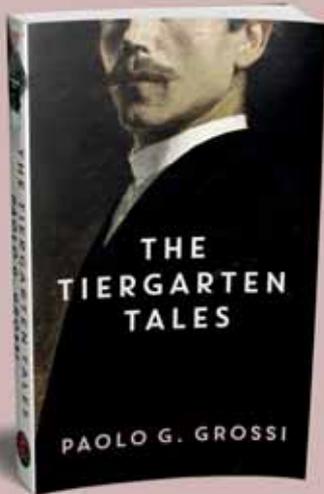
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Back Pages



Alice Vincent Gardening

In the past I was eager to pull up “weeds”.
Now I love seeing what gatecrashing plants
can do when left to their own devices

A year ago I gained access to a garden. After six years of growing plants on balconies, I got to play with the earth itself – something one can never take for granted after hefting it up six flights of stairs in bags. At first, I was scared of this big new space: it took me a week or so to acquaint myself with the soil. I knelt down, rubbing the sun-baked clay between my fingertips and wrenching out weeds. This was my first act: to pull things out.

That feels a bit barbaric now. Twelve months have passed and the garden has changed: fuller, busier. Goldfinches and foxes and aphids all visit. And there are

weeds among the foxgloves and the fennel – herb robert, mostly, but also chickweed, shepherd’s purse, ivy-leaved toadflax and white dead-nettle. Buttercups, dandelions and tiny pink flowers mingle in the lawn. I am fascinated by their tenacious growth, their ability to adapt. And I am quite happy to leave them be, fun gatecrashers at a good party.

I’ve been rethinking the word “weed”, too, and trying to come up with a replacement. The best I can do so far is “self-seeders”; admittedly, it needs work. In *Wild*, Jay Griffiths’s book about indigenous cultures, climate catastrophe and colonialism, she points

out that many indigenous cultures don’t have a word for “weed”, “pest” or “vermin”. Since reading it, I haven’t been able to shake the colonial associations of weeding and of what we consider to be weeds. Knowing that colonists compared indigenous people to “pests and weeds” reframes the idea of yanking plants out.

Self-seeded things get a good showing where I live in south London. To walk around most neighbourhoods is to enjoy an exhibition of what plants do when left to their own devices: a harmonious blend of bluebells and yellow dandelions smothering a front garden; a rogue foxglove in a tree pit;

the glorious pink trumpet of valerian creeping from a crumbling wall. While our “cultivated” plants bake in the sun and demand deadheading, this lot carry on regardless.

They are also the subject of a new book, *Gardens – Observations*, by India Hobson and Magnus Edmondson. It contains mostly photographs, and most of those photographs are of what many might consider weeds: Welsh poppies smothering kerbsides, the drifting colour chart of overgrown grass. It is a gorgeous thing, witty and quietly political: it makes me long for a designer to stick a skip full of rubble in a Chelsea Show Garden and grow things between the cracks.

Hobson and Edmondson write that they wanted to show “the gardens that are often overlooked and understated but brighten our everyday”, and isn’t that what self-seeders do? Look out for “weeds” and you’ll see life: pollinators, butterflies and caterpillars. Once the council has been past with weed killer, this is reduced to a dry, yellow graveyard.

Gardens – whether window box or sprawling estate – are political spaces, no matter how some try to neutralise them. The decisions we make in them (whether to use pesticides or peat; whether to let the lawn grow long) are reflected in the broader ecosystem, both in terms of the climate and in our societal attitudes to gardening. Which is why I’d rather leave some self-seeded things and let them grow alongside the plants I introduce. It’s easier to appreciate something once it’s had a chance to thrive. And as Hobson and Edmondson show, most plants can be beautiful if we change our way of looking. ●

Next week: *Nina Caplan on drink*



Nicholas Lezard Down and Out

When wounded, prepare to face innumerable microaggressions from a callous universe

I read my esteemed colleague Pippa Bailey's last column and first, I would like to commiserate with her. I wish there was a stronger word than "commiserate". Losing your lover of four years when you're not even 30 yet is a hard blow, and it's even worse when there is no other reason given than a "gut feeling". I was feeling sorry for myself but she has put matters into perspective.

Second, let me welcome her to the Writing a Column About a Break-up Maybe a Bit Too Soon Club, which I started last month. I didn't expect another member so quickly but when these things happen they take up all the available bandwidth, and you can't write about anything else because nothing else feels remotely significant.

As it turned out my column had precisely the disastrous effect I predicted it would, but then sometimes you feel so nihilistic that you simply don't care. A reckless madness seizes the soul. (After a telling-off, I have since undertaken not to write about her any more. But I am certainly going to write about me.) Grief can unhinge. I remember when the Moose died in May I would turn on

the radio and ask myself, "Why isn't this on the news?"

"In six months, a year, I know I will be OK again," Pippa writes, and this stoicism and self-knowledge is to be saluted. She makes it sound like a prison sentence for something like, oh I don't know, affray, or not-too-serious harassment, and that's right, it's exactly what it feels like, although I can't help feeling that the person who broke the other person's heart should be the one doing time. (When writing this, I had a little fun, if that is the word, looking up magistrates' sentencing guidelines. The very first offence on the list at Sentencingcouncil.org.uk is "abstracting electricity", which I like to think of as the new "failing to abate a smoky chimney", and can result in anything between a discharge or five years in the nick. I suppose it all depends on how much electricity you abstract.) Then again, use every man after his desert, and who should 'scape whipping?

I suppose being nearly 30 actually is grown up, especially these days, so I'm not going to offer advice, only sympathy, because she clearly knows

what the score is. I presume she knows what to face in the way of microaggressions from the callous workings of the universe.

At present, I am being triggered by anything that reminds me of the north-east in general, and Durham in particular. I picked up a copy of HV Morton's *In Search of England* and there's a whole bloody chapter on the north-east and Durham. England's first One Day International match against Sri Lanka was at Durham. I heard Bryan Ferry's rendition of the Tyneside (Wearside, technically) folk song "The Lambton Worm" and it nearly finished me. I am having to read the latest *Viz* very carefully. And this is before we even get to other, less specific or foreseeable triggers, like Co-op mini goat's cheeses or the sound of wood pigeons. (A pair of wood pigeons would regularly sit in the tree in her garden. Am I allowed to say that?)

Other things that have, over the years, caused me disproportionate grief because of being given the boot: Liverpool FC, anything whatsoever to do with Spain, anything whatsoever to do with Sweden, certain pubs (I still make the sign of the cross when I pass the Larrik in Marylebone), estate agents (no, really), King's Cross Station, the very word "Cambridge",

gin and tonic. I could go on. All these, with the exception of the Larrik and King's Cross, which has suddenly bounced back into the charts, can now be faced or borne with equanimity, or maybe at worst a wry smile.

I still don't know whether it's better for these things to happen in summer or winter. On the one hand the summer is meant to be the time for romance, not its end. I remember that episode of *Black Books* where Dylan Moran's Bernard Black goes mad and decides to stalk a girl because she is his summer romance (should have been six months for that without the option of a fine), but then in winter being made even more miserable than you are already going to be made by the weather could push you over the edge. Oh, that reminds me: I'm going to have to add "summer" to the list above.

Ah well, onwards and upwards. We rise on stepping-stones of our dead selves to higher things and all that rot. I have a quote from Dante about remembering the good times but I've already done Shakespeare and Tennyson this week. On the bright side, I had one of the best lockdowns I could have wished for and I now know how to identify wild garlic, butterbur and chaffinches. So it's not all bad. ●

This England

Each printed entry receives a £5 book token. Entries to comp@newstatesman.co.uk or on a postcard to *This England*.

This column – which, though named after a line in Shakespeare's "Richard II", refers to the whole of Britain – has run in the NS since 1934.

Spurring stuff

As some of you are aware a police exercise took place at Haworth today and, in full regalia, our very own deputy lieutenant took part. Sadly, he has lost a spur somewhere in Haworth Railway Yard. Being essential to his uniform, the deputy lieutenant has asked if anyone finds this, described as "a horseshoe shape with a dangly bit hanging from it", please let him know. *Keighley & Worth Valley Railway Staff Bulletin (Graham Mitchell)*



Pippa Bailey Deleted scenes

In my new single life, music, TV, films and books have become a ghost train of lurking frights

The afternoon I return to my flat, alone, I take photographs of my bed – which my ex bought and built for me – and list it on Gumtree. I am pleased by the symbolism and melodrama of disposing of this, our shared kingdom. Taking it apart, I curse his name at every too-tight screw. That evening I go to a bar with my oldest friends, and we hug for the first time in 15 months and later are told that we need to leave because we have drunk too much. The next morning a man from Gumtree comes to pick up my re-flat-packed bed

and, meet-cute style, he turns out to be quite good looking. My new bed is grown-up and expensive, and when it arrives I build it by myself, hauling it together with a vaccine-sore arm. (Who needs men? I scoff to myself, 15 minutes before I am once again prostrate and sobbing.) These are the highs.

The lows – well, I’ve called my mum several mornings this week because I do not care about anything enough to get out of bed.

I have a feeling of second-album syndrome about this column – not because my

previous was such a bestseller, but because I do not know quite how to follow it, whether to resume normal service as if nothing has changed. But this being “confessional” writing (though quite what I am confessing to I am not sure), I can only write about what is consuming me.

The cruellest thing about a break-up is that the person you would normally reach for in the midst of an emotional disembowelling is not only gone but is the person who did said disembowelling. Other comforts are taken from me, too. Music, TV, film and books have become a ghost train of lurking frights: memories, other people’s happiness. I can watch only *Criminal Minds* – hours and hours of serial murder so elaborate and disturbed its writers must be psychopaths themselves. It is formulaic and predictable; every episode closes with a barely related literary quote – Sophocles, GK Chesterton – which makes me smile a little; and any romance is soon ended by the madman’s knife.

My flat is littered with books started and abandoned – the offending words a sex scene, a city we visited together, a character with the same name as his best friend. In the end, awake at 5am when all I want is to be unconscious for as many hours of the day as possible, I reach for *Harry Potter* – the

early books, before they all start snogging each other. I know it so well I do not even really have to read the words.

I protect myself with the repeat button on iTunes, listening on loop to pre-approved, safe songs. Lany’s *Malibu Nights*, a perfect break-up record, has me convinced that my ex may in fact be Dua Lipa: “How am I supposed to move on if/You don’t even know what’s really wrong?” For guaranteed tears there’s Kodakline’s “All I Want” (“But if you loved me/Why’d you leave me?”), and for insouciant anger, Donna Missal’s “Just Like You” (“You flip a switch and then you turn your back/Like you’re so detached/It’s gonna get you when you least expect/Good f***ing luck with that”). For bursts of energy, there’s “Drive It Like You Stole It” from *Sing Street* – a film that I cannot watch as it is too full of Irish accents. And for everything else there’s *My Chemical Romance*, because the words are largely indeterminable and therefore cannot hurt me.

People repeat the same rote platitudes because they are easier than silence. They say, “He doesn’t deserve you,” and I can think only, “I don’t care.” They say, “Time heals all wounds,” and I know they are right, but I wish it wouldn’t move so interminably slowly. They say, “Everything happens for a reason” – and this I cannot believe. With hindsight we construct neat narratives to rationalise the pain. But sometimes people simply hurt each other, and there is no logic to it.

I find some small freedom in accepting that I simply do not have a choice but to go on; just one more day, I tell myself, day after day after day. I’m not sure this is mending, but it is coping, and perhaps they are the same thing. If this were an episode of *Criminal Minds*, it would end with a quote from *The Bear Hunt*: “We can’t go over it, we can’t go under it... We’ve got to go through it.” ●

Child’s play

An escaped king cobra which sparked an emergency call-out turned out to be a plastic toy.

A woman raised the alarm after spotting the snake on a chair in a garden in Cumbria. RSPCA inspector Martyn Fletcher said he quickly realised it wasn’t real, adding: “Thankfully too, as they are deadly venomous snakes.”

The toy has been safely returned to neighbouring children, Mr Fletcher said.

BBC North East
(Janet Mansfield)

Howzat!

A local cricketer’s huge six ended in tears after he smashed the ball straight through the rear window of his own car.



Asif Ali was batting for Illingworth St Mary’s Cricket Club. He was at the crease in the 37th over when he hit a slog to the square leg boundary, catching the ball sweetly to send it soaring through the air.

Ali watched on from the crease, but rather than a fist pump in celebration of the fine strike, his head was in his hands as the ball smashed through the back window of his Vauxhall Zafira. *Telegraph & Argus*
(Daragh Brady)

Spotlight

Regional Development Conference

9th September 2021 from 9am - 5pm BST

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THE NS CROSSWORD 546: OLD STYLE BY ANORAK

Anorak presents another crossword in an older style, this time from the late 1960s and 1970s. He hopes solvers will appreciate how crossword language and etiquette have changed in the past 50 years.

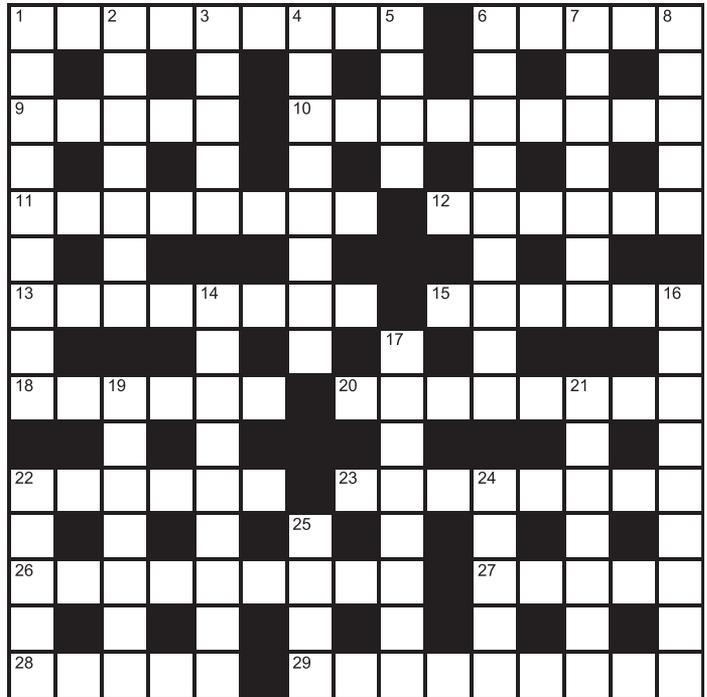
Across

- 1 Cape Horn clash? (9)
- 6 Tootles applies cream (5)
- 9 The informative finger! (5)
- 10 A kind of library (9)
- 11 Turner's pins (8)
- 12 Jolly upset, having to stay (6)
- 13 Like the Ring – sort of epic art (8)
- 15 Not such a big shot in Falstaff's entourage! (6)
- 18 If atomic, it has authority (6)
- 20 The good man's left his dog with nothing at Elsinore (8)
- 22 Assimilate an abstract (6)
- 23 Step this way (8)
- 26 *The Guardian* in Paris? (9)
- 27 Graduate accepts help in the Vale (5)
- 28 Liberal insularity in the yarn (5)
- 29 I followed troublesome creature fast – it's vexatious (9)

Down

- 1 Sulphur is full of colour (9)
- 2 Smashing machinist? (7)
- 3 Outwitted by Pitt's opponent (5)
- 4 We have drainage problems, flower (8)
- 5 Spat during the snack that's not popular (4)
- 6 Plain hero strangely revealed mock sun (9)
- 7 Darius's victim imprisoned without hanging (7)
- 8 Back of breastbone, mostly (5)
- 14 The saint of summer holiday-makers? (9)
- 16 Daring Dick? (9)
- 17 Fanatics disturbed bird on river (8)
- 19 Vehicle drivers (7)
- 21 Achieve increase taking in ale manufacture (7)
- 22 Claud in a graceful transformation (5)
- 24 *The Musical Times* (5)
- 25 Stay for an aircraft component (4)

● *This week's solutions will be published in the next issue of the NS*



Answers to crossword 545 of 2 July 2021

Across 1) Not a bit of it **7)** And **9)** Garbo **10)** Elemental **11)** Trendiest **12)** Sweat **13)** Winston **15)** Scam **18)** Toil **20)** Emeriti **23)** Tears **24)** Out of line **26)** Churchill **27)** Range **28)** Yen **29)** Silvery moon
Down 1) Night-owl **2)** Terrens **3)** Blood **4)** Thereon **5)** Fiestas **6)** Tree snake **7)** Anthem **8)** Delete **14)** Trossachs **16)** Pimiento **17)** Nineteen **19)** Look ill **20)** Estelle **21)** Sticky **22)** Saturn **25)** Forty
 The theme words are Winston Churchill: Blood, Toil, Tears and Sweat, Nineteen Forty

SUBSCRIBER OF THE WEEK

Joanne Waterhouse



What do you do?
Retired academic.
Where do you live?

Rural Suffolk.

Do you vote?

Always, if somewhat despondently.

How long have you been a subscriber?

Decades.

What made you start?

Youthful curiosity.

Is the NS bug in the family?

Despite my efforts, unfortunately not.

What pages do you flick to first?

I don't flick, but make my way through, from first to last.

How do you read yours?

In my bathroom.

What would you like to see more of in the NS?

Advocacy to abolish public schools, and more Ralph Steadman cartoons.

Who are your favourite NS writers?

Philip Collins, Rachel Cooke, Dr Phil Whitaker.

Who would you put on the cover of the NS?

Devi Sridhar.

With which political figure would you least like to be stuck in a lift?

It's got to be Boris Johnson.

All-time favourite NS article?
"The Peak", by Edward Docx.

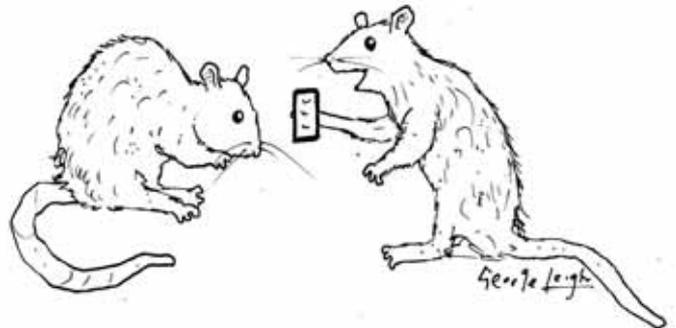
The New Statesman is...
Home. ●

THE NS WORD GAMES 236: TWO DOUBLES

The clue defines an eight-letter word with two pairs of different double letters, just as "football" exhibits. Solutions are in alphabetical order.

- 1) Apportioned
- 8) The number of customers through the door
- 2) Every 12 months
- 9) Firm fabric case for sleeping on
- 3) Blackpool Tower dance venue
- 10) Happened
- 4) Noisy publicity, commotion
- 11) Customer's building society transaction record
- 5) Dark red vegetable
- 12) Live-in friend
- 6) Recording medium
- 7) A very thin type of porcelain

Anorak



"Check out this place. It has a Food Hygiene Rating of 1"

NS Word Games answers

Allotted, annually, ballroom, ballyhoo, beetroot, cassette, eggshell, footfall, mattress, occurred, passbook, roommate



THE NS Q&A

“People will look back at our era with disgust”

Anita Rani, broadcaster

Anita Rani was born in Bradford in 1977. Her first presenting job was on Sunrise Radio at the age of 14. She has since hosted TV programmes including “Countryfile”, “Watchdog” and “The One Show”.

What’s your earliest memory?

Going to the hospital to see my brother for the first time, when I was two. I was very excited to be a big sister.

Who are your heroes?

Oprah Winfrey. She’s a badass. Her story is incredible – where she came from, what she’s achieved. She’s sensational.

What book last changed your thinking?

Isabel Allende’s *The Soul of a Woman*.

She’s got this “fuck it” attitude and is unapologetic about the way she feels. She opened my eyes to being able to speak your truth and not being worried. Also, she met her third husband in her seventies. Go girl!

Which political figure do you look up to?

Jacinda Ardern. She seems to connect in a way that is so human, unlike certain leaders who seem like they come from an alien planet and have never met a normal person ever. Can she run the UK as well?

What would be your *Mastermind* specialist subject?

It’s got to be something light-hearted, so maybe *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. I’d happily watch those over and over again.

In which time and place, other than your own, would you like to live?

I think people will look back at our era and go, “What?! People didn’t have access to education, and women were still having smear tests with that prehistoric equipment?” I’d like to go to a time, maybe 200 years from now, when people look back at our era with great surprise and disgust at how we did things.

What TV show could you not live without?

Poirot. Having read the papers, after a big Sunday lunch, if I have an episode of *Poirot* to fall asleep to, I’m happy.

Who would paint your portrait?

One of the classic artists that used to hand-paint these beautiful, huge Bollywood posters for billboards.

What’s your theme tune?

“Unfinished Sympathy” by Massive Attack. The song is really epic, but it’s the video that gets me. It’s one shot where she’s walking with such purpose and I love that, striding forward in your own world, knowing that you’re heading somewhere.

What’s the best piece of advice you’ve ever received?

Before I went to uni, my dad and my brother told me, “Don’t go to the pub if you can’t afford a round.” I guess it’s saying: always make sure that you can return the favour. I’ve always lived by it.

What’s currently bugging you?

The patriarchy. It’s exhausting and it underpins everything.

What single thing would make your life better?

Can I have three? More hours in the day; a PA; and a bigger garden.

When were you happiest?

I’ve just had a couple of amazing weekends with friends, in Devon and Norfolk. After a year of going nowhere, it’s magical to be hidden away in the countryside.

In another life, what job might you have chosen?

I’d like to make movies. You can tell any story you like with a movie.

Are we all doomed?

Nah. Nature is perfect. It’s designed to be just as it is. Pain and joy are all part of living. ●

“*The Right Sort of Girl*” by Anita Rani is published by Bonnier Books

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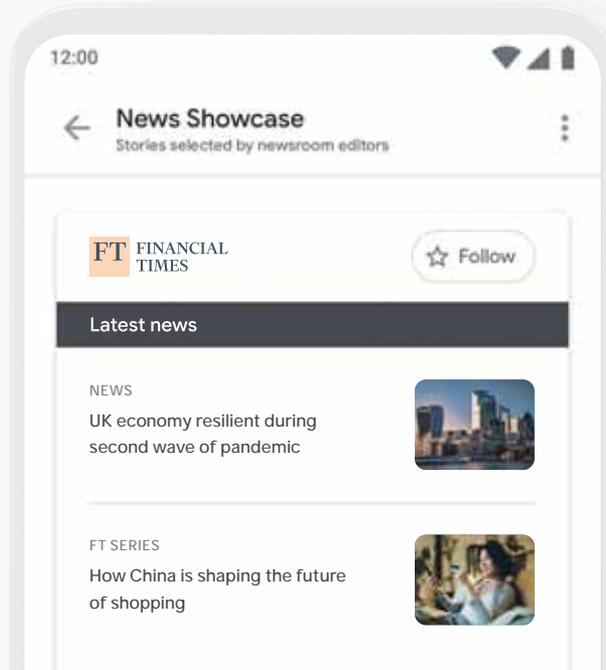
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