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The Guardian Weekly

A week in the life of the world | *Global edition*
17 JULY 2026 | VOL.215 No.3 | £6.50 | €9.95

THE RISE OF ANDY BURNHAM

AND THE CHALLENGES FACING BRITAIN'S NEXT PM
10





Eyewitness
Germany

PHOTOGRAPH:
MICHAEL PROBST/AP

Hold the line
Technicians work on a pylon of the Baltic Sea power line near Travemünde, on Germany's north coast. The line, connecting the energy grids of Germany and Sweden, diverts undersea at the busy port where cables have to be carefully routed to avoid interfering with ships' compasses.

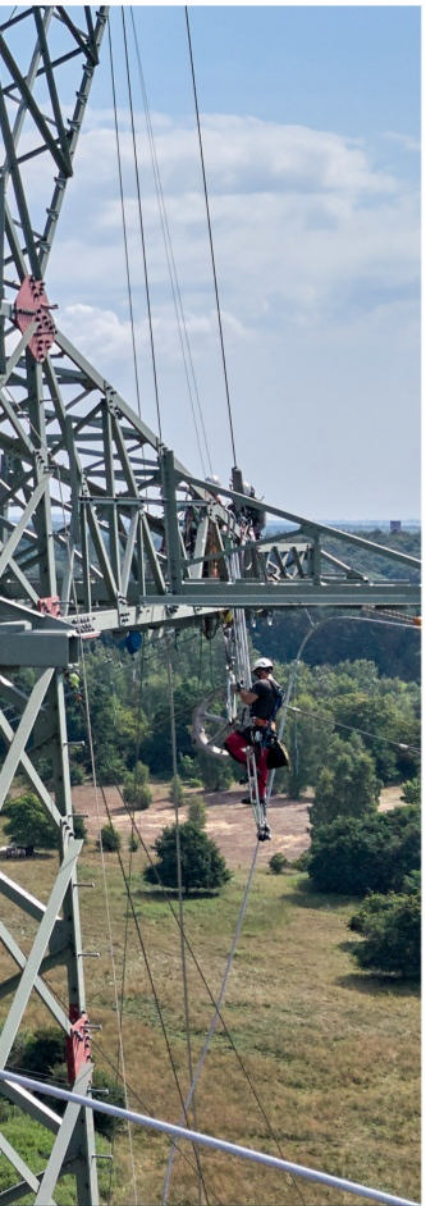
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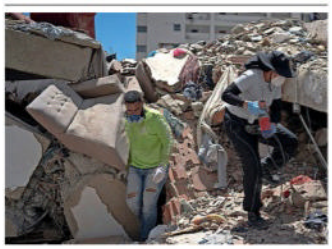
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17 JULY 2026



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MATT BLEASE





On the cover
Andy Burnham is to become Britain's seventh prime minister in a decade, having secured the Labour leadership with the landslide support of his party's MPs. How did he chart the path from school politics to No 10 – and what challenges await him when he steps into the role?
Illustration: Guardian Design; Dan Kitwood/Getty

Global report

Headlines from the last seven days

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1 NATO

Erratic Trump dominates final hours of summit

An erratic Donald Trump said he felt a "tremendous love" from western leaders at the Nato summit, only hours after lambasting them over their defence spending and not helping the US in attacking Iran.

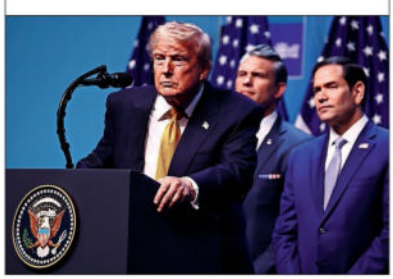
The US president's mixed messaging dominated the gathering in Ankara, Turkey, beginning with him calling Iran's leadership scum and renewing his demand for control of Greenland.

He then adopted a softer tone in a private meeting of 32 Nato leaders. "It was a great meeting, there was a lot of love in that room, a lot of unity," Trump said soon after at a bilateral meeting with Ukraine's Volodymyr Zelenskyy, which included a surprise offer to license the manufacturing of Patriot air defence missiles to Ukraine.

Trump concluded by hosting a rambling press conference where he praised Turkey's president, talked up the US economy and said he was "No 1 on TikTok".

Nevertheless, the shift from critic to Nato supporter - "If there's one word that comes out of today it's unification," Trump said - will be hailed as a victory for the alliance, whose stability has been called into question.

Spotlight *Page 32 →*



2 FRANCE



Le Pen to run for president after ban reduced on appeal

The French far-right leader Marine Le Pen launched her presidential campaign after a decision by a court of appeal last Tuesday shortened her ban on running for office, allowing her to take part in the 2027 vote. However, the court upheld her conviction for being at the centre of the embezzlement of more than €2.8m ($3.2m) in European parliament funds and funnelling the money into her party between 2004 and 2016.

Le Pen was also handed a form of one-year custodial sentence that would require her to wear an electronic ankle tag. Le Pen said she would appeal to France's highest court. While she lodges that, her sentence will be put on hold. This meant she could run without wearing the tag, she said.

Spotlight *Page 24 →*

3 UNITED STATES

$81bn in tariffs refunded after supreme court ruling

The US government has already paid back tens of billions of dollars in tariffs it collected before the supreme court ruled them illegal, according to budget figures released on Monday.

Tariffs - taxes on imported goods - have been a key part of Donald Trump's economic plan since he took office again last year.

In February the supreme court shut down a big chunk of the extra tariffs Trump had ordered, forcing the government to return money to the companies that had paid them. According to the budget data, the US has paid out $81bn in tariff refunds so far this fiscal year.

4 EXTREME HEAT

Hot weather leads to high excess deaths in Europe

Nearly 100 people, the largest proportion of whom were young men, died by drowning in Germany last month, authorities said, as extreme heat blamed for hundreds of excess deaths continued to affect western Europe.

In Germany's worst death toll from drowning for more than two decades, 99 people died in June, according to official figures, after temperatures rose as high as 41.7C in some areas. The victims were largely young men, the federation said, with 40 of them under 30 years old - the biggest group among those whose ages were known. More than 90% were male.

More than 1,300 people across Europe died in the blazing start to the northern hemisphere summer, according to the World Health Organization. Deaths by drowning have risen across the continent, with France's sports minister, Marina Ferrari, saying it was the cause of death of 131 people there since 19 June.

Last week, at least 13 people died after one of Spain's deadliest wildfires broke out in the south-eastern province of Almería.

Spotlight *Page 25 →*

5 UNITED STATES

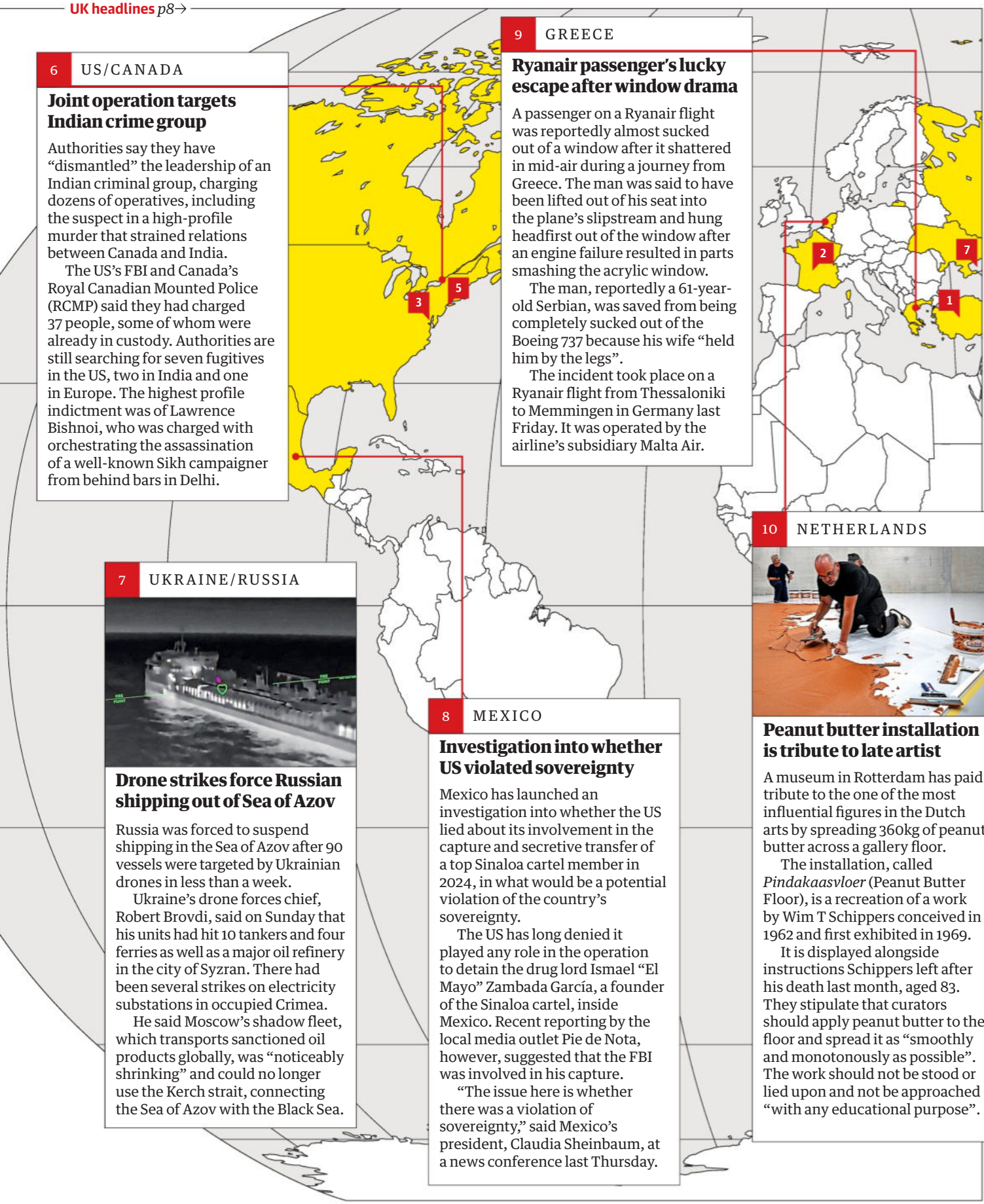
Judge orders release of $5m Trump owes E Jean Carroll

A Manhattan federal court judge ordered the release of the more than $5m Donald Trump owes E Jean Carroll following her successful 2023 sexual abuse and defamation trial against him. Trump immediately filed paperwork indicating he was appealing against the order.

Jurors in the 2023 civil case determined that Trump sexually abused the former Elle writer and unlawfully impugned her reputation with false denials. Trump denied all wrongdoing.

The new order followed the US supreme court's 29 June decision not to review Trump's appeal.

UK headlines p8→



6 US/CANADA

Joint operation targets Indian crime group

Authorities say they have "dismantled" the leadership of an Indian criminal group, charging dozens of operatives, including the suspect in a high-profile murder that strained relations between Canada and India.

The US's FBI and Canada's Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) said they had charged 37 people, some of whom were already in custody. Authorities are still searching for seven fugitives in the US, two in India and one in Europe. The highest profile indictment was of Lawrence Bishnoi, who was charged with orchestrating the assassination of a well-known Sikh campaigner from behind bars in Delhi.

9 GREECE

Ryanair passenger's lucky escape after window drama

A passenger on a Ryanair flight was reportedly almost sucked out of a window after it shattered in mid-air during a journey from Greece. The man was said to have been lifted out of his seat into the plane's slipstream and hung headfirst out of the window after an engine failure resulted in parts smashing the acrylic window.

The man, reportedly a 61-year-old Serbian, was saved from being completely sucked out of the Boeing 737 because his wife "held him by the legs".

The incident took place on a Ryanair flight from Thessaloniki to Memmingen in Germany last Friday. It was operated by the airline's subsidiary Malta Air.

10 NETHERLANDS

Peanut butter installation is tribute to late artist

A museum in Rotterdam has paid tribute to the one of the most influential figures in the Dutch arts by spreading 360kg of peanut butter across a gallery floor.

The installation, called *Pindakaasvloer* (Peanut Butter Floor), is a recreation of a work by Wim T Schippers conceived in 1962 and first exhibited in 1969.

It is displayed alongside instructions Schippers left after his death last month, aged 83. They stipulate that curators should apply peanut butter to the floor and spread it as "smoothly and monotonously as possible". The work should not be stood or lied upon and not be approached "with any educational purpose".

7 UKRAINE/RUSSIA

Drone strikes force Russian shipping out of Sea of Azov

Russia was forced to suspend shipping in the Sea of Azov after 90 vessels were targeted by Ukrainian drones in less than a week.

Ukraine's drone forces chief, Robert Brovdi, said on Sunday that his units had hit 10 tankers and four ferries as well as a major oil refinery in the city of Syzran. There had been several strikes on electricity substations in occupied Crimea.

He said Moscow's shadow fleet, which transports sanctioned oil products globally, was "noticeably shrinking" and could no longer use the Kerch strait, connecting the Sea of Azov with the Black Sea.

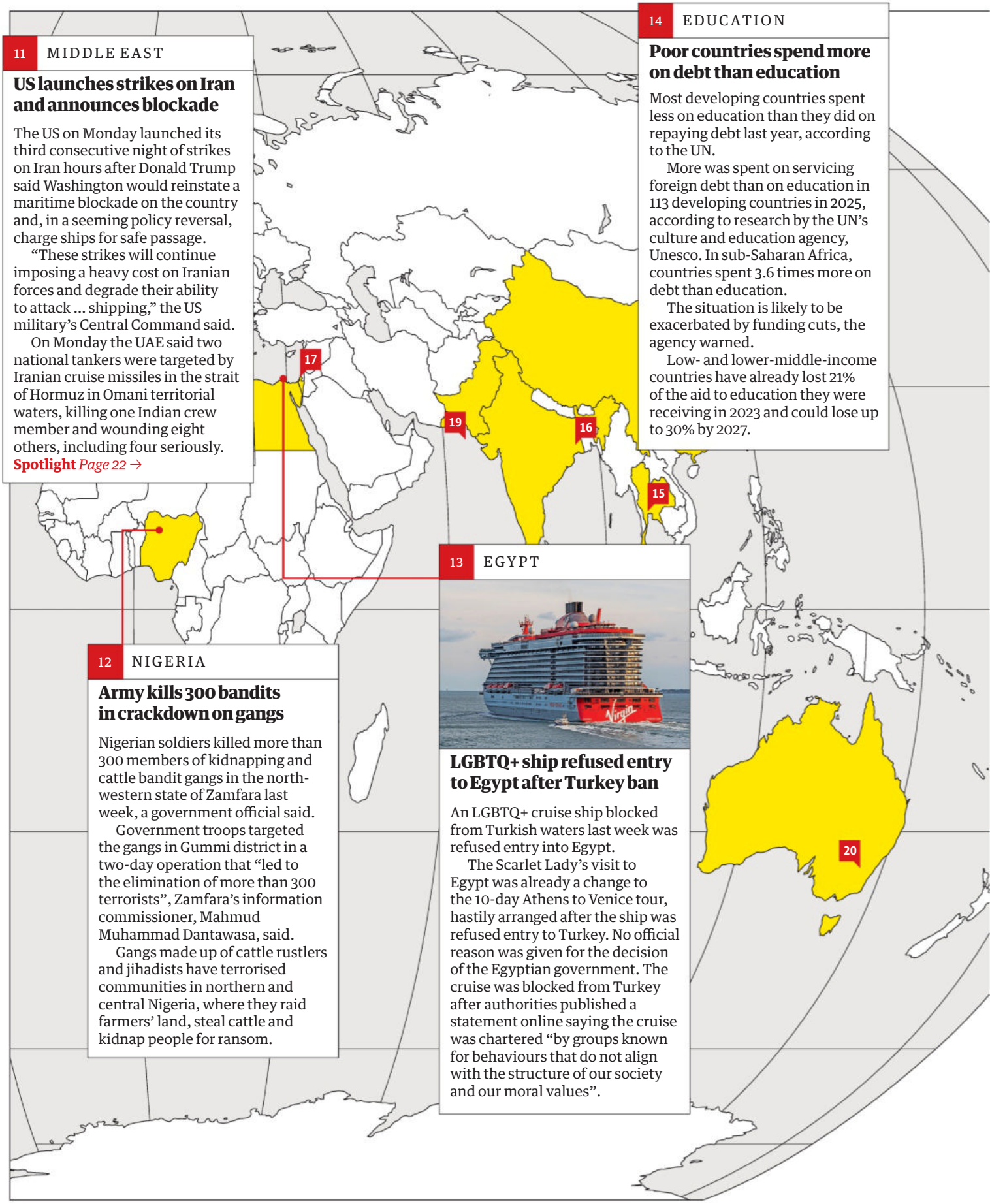
8 MEXICO

Investigation into whether US violated sovereignty

Mexico has launched an investigation into whether the US lied about its involvement in the capture and secretive transfer of a top Sinaloa cartel member in 2024, in what would be a potential violation of the country's sovereignty.

The US has long denied it played any role in the operation to detain the drug lord Ismael "El Mayo" Zambada García, a founder of the Sinaloa cartel, inside Mexico. Recent reporting by the local media outlet Pie de Nota, however, suggested that the FBI was involved in his capture.

"The issue here is whether there was a violation of sovereignty," said Mexico's president, Claudia Sheinbaum, at a news conference last Thursday.



11 MIDDLE EAST

US launches strikes on Iran and announces blockade

The US on Monday launched its third consecutive night of strikes on Iran hours after Donald Trump said Washington would reinstate a maritime blockade on the country and, in a seeming policy reversal, charge ships for safe passage.

"These strikes will continue imposing a heavy cost on Iranian forces and degrade their ability to attack … shipping," the US military's Central Command said.

On Monday the UAE said two national tankers were targeted by Iranian cruise missiles in the strait of Hormuz in Omani territorial waters, killing one Indian crew member and wounding eight others, including four seriously.

Spotlight *Page 22 →*

14 EDUCATION

Poor countries spend more on debt than education

Most developing countries spent less on education than they did on repaying debt last year, according to the UN.

More was spent on servicing foreign debt than on education in 113 developing countries in 2025, according to research by the UN's culture and education agency, Unesco. In sub-Saharan Africa, countries spent 3.6 times more on debt than education.

The situation is likely to be exacerbated by funding cuts, the agency warned.

Low- and lower-middle-income countries have already lost 21% of the aid to education they were receiving in 2023 and could lose up to 30% by 2027.

13 EGYPT

LGBTQ+ ship refused entry to Egypt after Turkey ban

An LGBTQ+ cruise ship blocked from Turkish waters last week was refused entry into Egypt.

The Scarlet Lady's visit to Egypt was already a change to the 10-day Athens to Venice tour, hastily arranged after the ship was refused entry to Turkey. No official reason was given for the decision of the Egyptian government. The cruise was blocked from Turkey after authorities published a statement online saying the cruise was chartered "by groups known for behaviours that do not align with the structure of our society and our moral values".

12 NIGERIA

Army kills 300 bandits in crackdown on gangs

Nigerian soldiers killed more than 300 members of kidnapping and cattle bandit gangs in the north-western state of Zamfara last week, a government official said.

Government troops targeted the gangs in Gummi district in a two-day operation that "led to the elimination of more than 300 terrorists", Zamfara's information commissioner, Mahmud Muhammad Dantawasa, said.

Gangs made up of cattle rustlers and jihadists have terrorised communities in northern and central Nigeria, where they raid farmers' land, steal cattle and kidnap people for ransom.

Global report

15 THAILAND



At least 30 killed after fire breaks out in Bangkok pub

The Bangkok pub that has become the scene of the city's deadliest blaze in 17 years has said it will cooperate with an investigation into alleged negligence, as the death toll rose to 30.

An initial assessment by officials of the devastating fire that broke out in the early hours of Monday found that an electrical short circuit in an air conditioner in the ceiling caused the fire.

Most victims are believed to be Thai nationals. Of the injured, 24 were in a critical condition, 15 had moderate injuries, and 36 sustained minor injuries and have returned home.

National police chief Kitrat Phanphet told reporters on Monday: "Police have established negligence as the primary theory guiding their investigation."

16 INDIA

Rape and murder of girl lead to lynching of innocent man

Protests engulfed the state of West Bengal after the rape and murder of an 11-year-old girl, the subsequent lynching of an innocent man and the police killing of one of the accused.

Outrage erupted on 5 July after the body of a missing girl was found in a pond in a town just outside the state capital, Kolkata.

The assault prompted fury from the local community, who set upon a 26-year-old man they believed was responsible. When police detained the main suspects, the man who had been killed was not named and the government said he was innocent.

17 ISRAEL

Date set for first elections since 2023 Hamas attacks

National elections are to be held on 27 October, giving citizens their first chance to pass judgment on the prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, and his coalition since the Hamas-led attacks of 7 October 2023.

The Knesset, Israel's parliament, was expected to be dissolved on Friday. The most far-right government in the country's history rushed to pass several controversial laws to try to bolster its position before polling day.

Netanyahu, 76, may be fighting for his personal freedom as well as his political future. He is on trial for corruption, despite interventions from Donald Trump calling for a pre-emptive pardon in the long-running case.

Current polling indicates voters will kick him out of office, although the man who has led Israel for much of the last three decades is a consummate political survivor who has repeatedly defied expectations. It was on his watch that Hamas broke through the fence around Gaza to kill nearly 1,200 people, the majority of them civilians, on the bloodiest day in Israel's history.

18 CHINA

Venomous snakes escape breeding farm hit by storms

Hundreds of snakes, including cobras, escaped from flooded breeding farms in southern China as severe storms continued to batter parts of the country.

State media reported that a snake farm in Hengzhou, in Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region, was hit by flood waters, prompting warnings for residents.

A dramatic video shared by state media showing local people using nets to catch snakes, and a cobra poking its head above a torrent of muddy water went viral. Local media reported that the types of the escaped snakes included water snakes, king ratsnakes and cobras.

19 PAKISTAN

Wreckage of missing cargo plane found in Arabian Sea

The wreckage of a Boeing cargo plane has been located in the Arabian Sea, off Pakistan's southern coast, the country's airports authority said. It added that rescuers were searching for the five crew members who were on board when the aircraft went missing.

The plane was approaching Karachi from Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates when radar showed it "rapidly descending" on 7 July after reporting a "navigational system issue", according to the Pakistan Airports Authority (PAA).

After a 12-hour search, Pakistan's navy and maritime rescue agency "successfully located and identified wreckage of K2 Airways cargo B737 which was declared missing last night", the PAA posted on X.



20 AUSTRALIA

Government to ditch paper arrival cards for travellers

The days of filling out paper arrival cards are to end for millions of travellers arriving in Australia on international flights.

The Albanese government has announced it will roll out digital passenger cards to all Australian international airports and seaports after a "successful" trial.

The paper forms, which ask passengers on long-haul flights for personal information and to declare any food, plant or animal products, have long been an annoyance for travellers.

The government said it would spend A$56.1m ($38.9m) over four years modernise airport systems.

DEATHS



Sam Neill
Northern Irish-born New Zealand actor. He died on 13 July, aged 78.

Bonnie Tyler
British singer. She died on 8 July, aged 75.
Appreciation, Page 54 →

Lindsey Graham
US politician. He died on 11 July, aged 71.
Spotlight, Page 33 →

Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani
Former Qatari ruler. He died on 12 July, aged 74.

Ann Widdecombe
British former Tory MP and Reform UK member. She died on 9 July, aged 78.

Jayden Adams
South African footballer. He died on 11 July, aged 25.

Derryn Hinch
Australian broadcaster. He died on 10 July, aged 82.

Wally Funk
US aviator and astronaut. She died on 8 July, aged 87.

Shahrnush Parsipur
Iranian author. She died on 3 July, aged 80.



CRIME

Terrorism police investigate Ann Widdecombe murder

British counter-terrorism police took over the investigation into the death of the former MP Ann Widdecombe in a development that renewed the debate over the security of politicians.

The body of Widdecombe, who was 78, was found with serious injuries by the ambulance service at her home in Devon last Thursday. This week a 28-year-old man was being held in custody on suspicion of her murder.

Officers at Devon and Cornwall police had initially said a review of the case had ruled out a terrorist motive. The suspect was later rearrested on suspicion of commission, preparation or instigation of acts of terrorism.

An intervention from the Reform UK leader, Nigel Farage, last Saturday prompted politicians from across the spectrum to urge greater restraint. However, the latest development triggered fresh debate about the safety of MPs.

The change in approach was prompted by "new information and evidence", according to counter-terrorism policing.

Widdecombe lived in Haytor Vale, a village within the Dartmoor national park. She was a Conservative MP from 1987 to 2010 for the Kent constituency of Maidstone, later Maidstone and the Weald. She became a member of the Brexit party in 2019 and served as an MEP, representing South West England, between 2019 and 2020. Widdecombe was also a member of that party's successor, Reform UK.

Later in life, she appeared on shows such as Celebrity Fit Club, Strictly Come Dancing and Celebrity Big Brother.

EXTREME HEAT

June heatwave 'killed 440 people a day' at its peak

The heatwave that affected England and Wales in June killed about 440 people a day during its three-day peak, scientists have estimated. Across the whole of the June heatwave, plus the one in May, about 2,700 people lost their lives prematurely.

The data starkly illustrates the danger of extreme heat, which is being supercharged by the climate crisis. More than 40% of the people affected would not have died without the 1.4C of human-caused global heating to date, according to the analysis. For comparison, about four people die each day as a result of road traffic collisions and about 35 a day because of alcohol and drug use, government statistics show.

Spotlight *Page 25* →

NATURE

Nature restoration plan 'completely insufficient'

The government's plan to protect and restore nature in England by 2030 has been condemned as "completely insufficient".

Ministers said the strategy, published on Monday, would accelerate action to meet a pledge to restore 30% of nature by 2030 made by more than 100 countries in 2022. But government analysis shows just 7% of land in England meets the "30by30" criteria.



CULTURE

Bayeux tapestry arrives for historic exhibition

The Bayeux tapestry is in England for the first time in nearly 1,000 years, as British Museum staff began to prepare it for exhibition during its year-long loan.

It arrived in a lorry just before 3am last Friday. The operation was the result of years of negotiations, tricky logistical planning and multiple technical studies to ensure the integrity of the 70-metre-long medieval artwork.

The French president, Emmanuel Macron, has said the loan shows what France and the UK "can achieve when they join forces". Writing in the Times, he said the loan was a "tangible expression of friendship".



LABOUR

Burnham secures party leadership in landslide

Andy Burnham is to become Britain's next prime minister after winning the backing of 349 Labour MPs, including all eligible members of Keir Starmer's current cabinet, which made it impossible for any rival to secure enough nominations to challenge him.

Burnham was expected to replace Starmer as Labour leader on 17 July before officially becoming prime minister on Monday 20 July.

Earlier this week, Burnham told the parliamentary Labour party that he would build a "broad church" cabinet. He said his new appointments would represent all wings of the party.

Burnham also praised Starmer for delivering the Hillsborough law, noting the prime minister kept the promise he made to the families of the 1989 disaster, before telling MPs that the country expects Labour to come together at a "significant moment" for Britain.

The big story *Page 10* →



10

The number of male tennis players to have retained the Wimbledon singles title in the open era. The Italian world No 1 Jannik Sinner became the latest after his four-set victory over Alexander Zverev of Germany on Sunday

Reader's eyewitness
Making a splash
'A truly Canadian triathlon when a family of Canada geese get in the way of swimmers at the Gatineau triathlon in Quebec, Canada.'
By Jason Benovoy, Gatineau, Quebec, Canada



SCIENCE AND ENVIRONMENT

CLIMATE CRISIS

European countries top environment 'scorecard'

Much of the world has made encouraging strides in reducing toxic problems such as water and air pollution. But there is still a widespread lack of progress among countries in dealing with the climate crisis, according to the latest edition of an influential environmental scorecard.

The biennial Yale University index again ranks Estonia as the best-performing of 177 assessed countries, after strong recent efforts to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions and protect its ecosystems.

Luxembourg is second, and the UK is third, having moved up from fifth place in the 2024 index.

European countries dominate the top 20, with only Japan, in 16th, not situated in the continent. Australia is in 25th place, two places ahead of the US. Laos is the last-ranked nation, with the bottom three rounded out by India and Bangladesh.

HEALTH

Cancer cases expected to rise globally, WHO report warns

Remarkable scientific progress against cancer has changed very little for millions globally, who face devastating physical, emotional and financial consequences after diagnosis, a new World Health Organization report has warned.

This year's WHO global status report on cancer found "persistent and widening" inequities in access to prevention, diagnosis, treatment and care. There are an estimated 20.6m cases and 10m deaths from cancer every year. Figures are projected to rise to nearly 35m cases by 2050. In richer countries, 85% of those diagnosed with breast or childhood cancers will survive at least five years, but the figure drops to less than 30% in poorer countries.

WILDLIFE

Health risk fears as European storks eat from landfill

White stork populations in Europe face health risks as a result of increasingly eating from landfill, according to research, which suggests they may be gaining a short-term energy boost at the cost of hidden long-term health effects.

Anustup Bandyopadhyay, a PhD student at the University of Veterinary Medicine Vienna who was involved in the study, said growing waste production was creating new feeding opportunities for wildlife, but the consequences for storks remained contested.

13
The speed, in kilometres per hour, reached by Australia's brown huntsman spider, making it possibly the fastest arachnid on the planet

ARCHAEOLOGY

No evidence for 'witches' marks', leading historian says

Over the years, English Heritage and Historic England have claimed to have identified large numbers of "witches' marks" or "ritual protection symbols" on the walls of historic buildings.

Now a leading historian has said there is "absolutely no evidence" that these marks have anything to do with witches or any "mystical meanings".

Daisy wheels, or hexafoils, are no more than the marks of stonemasons who worked on those buildings, according to Jennifer Alexander, a professor of architectural history at Warwick University and author of a new study.

The UK's next prime minister has taken a long road to the top. From Merseyside to Westminster via Cambridge, this is the story of how Andy Burnham found himself destined for Downing Street

The path to No 10



PLUS

Overflowing in-tray
The challenges for Burnham
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Mounting scrutiny
Questions over Reform funding
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Seen, heard and rather absurd
The rise of Count Binface
Page 15 →

The art of diplomacy
Can the new PM handle Trump?
Page 16 →

UNITED KINGDOM

By *Daniel Boffey*

ANDY BURNHAM had emerged victorious, but niggling doubts remained about his mandate. It was the summer of 1987 and the 17-year-old had represented Labour in a school hustings as Margaret Thatcher and Neil Kinnock were battling it out in that year's general election.

"Andy was standing against another guy, a really nice guy who was the Conservative candidate," said Steve Harrington, a former English teacher at St Aelred's Catholic high school, in Newton-le-Willows, Merseyside. "Andy gave a speech, which was excellent, then the other guy came on to make his speech and Andy's fans – unbeknown to Andy – snatched the plug out of the microphone. So they couldn't hear what he was saying. Andy won by a landslide. Having said that, he probably would have anyway as it was a heavily Labour area … But he was innocent, he hadn't been involved in [the prank] and wouldn't have been."

If there was a whiff of illegitimacy to Burnham's first election, his uncontested selection by the Labour party to be the UK's next prime minister now leaves him with a particularly fraught task: create the change he has promised without clear electoral backing. He will need to outline a vision more sharply than Keir Starmer.

It is the contention of many of those closest to him that Burnham will be aided by what they claim is a remarkable consistency in the 56-year-old's "communitarian" belief that people can only enjoy their individual rights if rooted in well-functioning communities with control over their surroundings.

Friends note that, two decades ago, Burnham worried privately with aides that children would need to be protected from the "wild west" of the internet. He had a huge mock-up of an ID card in his office as a junior Home Office minister. Today, he talks about public control over utilities and an active state directing planning and investment. There is a thread, they say.

As to the character of the new prime minister, the picture painted of those who know him well is that of a warm, affable man who likes to be liked. Burnham is a Cambridge graduate and poetry lover who insists on writing his own speeches, but picks up policy ideas while doing the family supermarket shop. He counts his mother, Eileen, a retired GP receptionist, as a political sounding board.

Yet he has also been willing to risk the closest of relationships, including with his new chief of staff, when determined on a course of action. In 2020, he declined to support the leadership bid of Keir Starmer, who had backed Burnham's own attempt to be Labour leader in 2015, on the grounds that he would not choose him over north-west MPs and fellow candidates Lisa Nandy and Rebecca Long-Bailey.



Burnham is a poetry lover who insists on writing his own speeches

"They had been pretty tight but Keir loathes him now," said a source close to Starmer. Burnham is said to be capable of being extraordinarily stubborn. "There is a steeliness," said a longstanding friend, who added that they believed this would lead to another bold decision. "I think he will want to go to the country [for a general election] sooner rather than later. He will want his own mandate."

The source added: "And being home for the weekends for the family and Everton is sacrosanct … It is not for spin – he will not give that up."

Burnham was born in Aintree, Merseyside, but brought up in Culcheth, Cheshire, after his father, Roy, a telephone engineer, was promoted by the Post Office to a job at Dial House, in Salford. He has described his childhood as "wonderful in every way".

Burnham's parents were "madly enthusiastic" that their son, the middle of three boys, should try for Cambridge. Burnham has spoken of suffering from "impostor syndrome" while at Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge, but it is where he met his Dutch-born wife Marie-France van Heel, known by Burnham as M-F. He graduated with a 2:1.

In October 1991, after returning home at the age of 21, he wrote to the Guardian to complain that Philip Larkin had not made the newspaper's league of great poets. "Wearing the odd cycle-clip and drinking a pint of beer or two doesn't stop you from writing great poetry," wrote Andy Burnham, of Warrington. "I hereby proclaim Larkin's Love Songs in Age as the century's greatest poem."

◀ Andy Burnham, MP for Makerfield, is set to be prime minister

GUARDIAN DESIGN; ISABEL INFANTES/REUTERS

▶ Burnham, then MP for Leigh, pictured in 2008

ANTONIO OLMOS /THE OBSERVER



◀ Burnham attends a cabinet meeting in 2008
DANIEL BEREHULAK/GETTY



▼ Jeremy Corbyn and Burnham shake hands in 2015
SCOTT HEPPELL/AP



▲ Challenging for the ball against Luther Blissett
JOHN STILLWELL/PA



▶ Pictured with then-PM Gordon Brown in 2010
STEFAN ROUSSEAU/PA

IN 1992 HE MOVED to London for a publishing job, where he met Eleanor Mills, the stepdaughter of the Labour MP and future culture secretary Tessa Jowell. Mills suggested that he apply to her stepmother for a parliamentary assistant role.

Burnham helped Jowell work on Tony Blair's leadership campaign and the 1997 election. A stint as a special adviser to the culture secretary Chris Smith followed. In 2001, Burnham realised his dream of becoming an MP in Leigh, near his family home.

Arriving in parliament, Burnham shared an office with fellow former special adviser James Purnell. Two and a half decades later, Burnham would make Purnell his chief of staff.

A regular visitor to the office was the then home secretary, David Blunkett, for whom Burnham took up the role of parliamentary private secretary. "It was a great learning curve for him," said Blunkett, who has remained a mentor. Blunkett would later urge Burnham, as mayor of Greater Manchester – a role he served in for nine years after leaving Jeremy Corbyn's shadow cabinet – to bide his time before seeking a return to London.

Burnham was made a minister in Blunkett's department and then in the health ministry. He played the political game well in 2007 when he was one of those who formed a "Blairites for Brown" group as the prime minister of 10 years prepared to stand down. He was rewarded by Brown with his first cabinet job: chief secretary to the Treasury. It was, said an insider, a "baptism of fire".

Promoted to culture secretary, Burnham visited Anfield in 2009 to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the Hillsborough disaster. As he offered words of condolence, he was interrupted by angry calls for justice. A series of governments had refused a public inquiry. "My journey away from Westminster began at Anfield that day," Burnham later said.

There were other factors at play in his dwindling affection for life in the House of Commons though, a friend suggested. Burnham was caught up in the expenses scandal when it was revealed that he had lobbied the House of Commons fees office to approve £16,644 in expenses for a flat. After being rejected three times, Burnham had written a note claiming he "might be in line for a divorce" if left out of pocket. The money was paid.

There was no suggestion of wrongdoing but "it was a horrible period", said a friend, "and there was some personal stuff too". Burnham's sister-in-law died from breast cancer. It was discovered that Marie-France had the same BRCA1 gene mutation and she underwent a preventive double-mastectomy.

That year, Burnham had a further personal and political dilemma. Purnell had decided to resign from the cabinet in an attempt to oust Brown. Burnham told his friend that he would not follow him. Burnham was made health secretary after Purnell's resignation.

The loss of the 2010 general election opened up the question of Labour's leadership again. Burnham was under pressure to step aside for David Miliband, who he found condescending at times. But he "felt he had something particular to say", said a friend. The contest was dominated by a fratricidal battle between David and Ed Miliband. Burnham's own campaign struggled.

With Ed Miliband's election, Burnham became the shadow health secretary. The leader of the opposition's office found him to be difficult.

After the 2015 election was lost, Burnham was the favourite to take the top job but "we fought the wrong election – appealing to the public not the Labour membership", said a source. Burnham refused union funds and emphasised his fiscal discipline.

Buoyed by an influx of new members allowed to vote in the election in return for £3, Corbyn forged ahead with a radical agenda from the left, beating Burnham heavily into second place. As Corbyn celebrated his win, Burnham was left picking at a dingy pub buffet where a "wake" rather than a victory party was being held. "Don't worry, Andy," said Charlie Falconer, the ever-optimistic Labour peer and Burnham backer. "There's always a third time." Few, let alone Burnham, believed it.

DANIEL BOFFEY IS THE GUARDIAN'S CHIEF REPORTER

Those who know him well speak of a warm, affable man



▼ Burnham at an Everton football match last season
PAUL CURRIE/ SHUTTERSTOCK

The PM's in-tray
The key challenges Burnham will have to tackle

By *Jessica Elgot*

Andy Burnham arrives with an overflowing in-tray of challenges left over from Keir Starmer – from geopolitics to the cost of living. Here are some of the most pressing issues on his Downing Street desk.

Welfare

The final recommendations of the Timms review into disability benefits are due soon. The interim report recommends radical changes to personal independence payments and a more humane assessment process. Personal independence payments are forecast to double by 2030.

The new PM will face a rightwing opposition who will demand cuts, especially to those with fluctuating mental health conditions such as anxiety. The situation clearly needs overhauling, but to do this without significant harm to those dependent on the payments – and without causing significant ructions with Labour MPs – will be one of his trickiest balancing acts.

Defence investment

Allies of Burnham say he accepts the defence investment plan – which commits £298bn ($398bn) to buying weapons over four years – as "settled", even though it requires finding an additional £4.7bn at the next budget. There are also longer-term questions over how he could find the money to increase Britain's defence spending to 3.5% of gross domestic product by 2035, as his predecessor promised.

Taxation

Burnham has promised to stick to Labour's 2024 manifesto pledges of not raising income tax, national insurance or VAT. He recently told LBC radio, however, that there was "some room within that manifesto for movement on tax".

Burnham has talked about changing business rates, which he says he wants to refocus so that large companies with out-of-town warehouses such as Amazon pay more, and small high-street businesses pay less.

He may need something more radical to pay for this, however, with allies talking up the possibility of a significant rise in capital gains tax.

Middle East

Burnham's first foray into geopolitics was an apology for Labour's handling of the conflict and suffering in Gaza that alienated so many of the party's supporters. He has promised to be much tougher on Israel, including further potential sanctions. But it will be the Iran conflict – and its economic fallout – that is likely to be his first big international challenge.

The UK public is yet to feel the pain of the energy crisis that could yet come from the blockading of the strait of Hormuz. While no one expects Burnham to commit any firepower to the US and Israeli-led offensive, he will have a decision to make on how much he contributes to any peacekeeping or clearup operation.



Last week Burnham apologised for the suffering in Gaza

Immigration

Burnham is planning to proceed with most of Shabana Mahmood's proposed overhaul of the immigration system. This includes changes to gaining indefinite leave to remain (ILR) from five to 10 years and scrapping permanent refugee status, making people eligible to be removed if their countries are deemed safe.

Mahmood, who is tipped to remain as home secretary, may yet soften the ILR changes, with many Labour MPs uncomfortable about them applying retrospectively.

White House relations

As Manchester mayor, Burnham has barely featured on Donald Trump's radar – unlike London's Sadiq Khan – and there are not many embarrassing anti-Trump comments in Burnham's past.

However, it will be a high-stakes meeting when they have their first encounter – which may be at the G20 summit in Miami in November. Burnham plans to keep Jonathan Powell as national security adviser, which may provide much-needed continuity of relations.

Europe

Starmer put closer ties with Europe at the heart of his attempt to stay in power, although the Labour manifesto red lines on the customs union and single market have tied the hands of negotiators.

Burnham has previously said that, at heart, he believes the UK should return to the EU but he distanced himself from that aim during the Makerfield byelection. With a promise to put more focus on domestic issues, he may not give closer ties with Europe as much focus as Starmer has.



Burnham is likely to follow Starmer's lead on fuel licences

Devolution

If Burnham has one big change he wants to achieve in office, it will be significant and widespread devolution of powers to local mayors and authorities – from tax to education and transport. This "rewired Britain" was at the heart of the first – and only – policy speech he has given since he became the MP for Makerfield and was what he has termed "Manchesterism".

But the approach does have its opponents within the Labour party – especially those uncomfortable with handing sweeping powers to Reform UK mayors and those in London and the south of England who already feel uneasy about emphasising the regional divide.

North Sea oil and gas

Labour went into the last general election promising not to issue any new licences to explore oil or gas in the North Sea, a promise that has caused angst among fossil fuel companies and unions with large representation in the industry. Burnham is unlikely to break that promise, especially if he makes the energy secretary, Ed Miliband, his chancellor.

But his government could choose to approve the new Jackdaw and Rosebank fields, which do not require new licences. A decision on Jackdaw is likely to come as soon as next month.

JESSICA ELGOT IS THE GUARDIAN'S DEPUTY POLITICAL EDITOR

EXPLAINER

Five questions to answer
Pressing issues for Reform UK over its finances

Scrutiny over gifts, donations and loans have left even supporters wondering if the 'anti-establishment' party can weather the storm

By *Anna Isaac*



▶ Nigel Farage, Richard Tice, Christopher Harborne and George Cottrell

GUARDIAN DESIGN; GETTY; PA; GEORGE CRACKNELL WRIGHT; JNVISUALS; TAYFUN SALCI

The disclosures have brought on Reform's biggest crisis

Scrutiny is mounting on Reform UK's finances. Last Tuesday, amid an investigation by parliamentary standards into an undisclosed £5m ($6.7m) gift, Nigel Farage announced he would resign and trigger a byelection in his constituency of Clacton.

His statement came an hour after a deadline to respond to the Guardian's latest investigation, which revealed that the £5m gift had been reported by bankers to the National Crime Agency (NCA) over money laundering concerns.

The Guardian has also revealed he was not alone: transactions worth more than £1m involving other senior figures at Reform had caused bankers to make suspicious activity reports (SARs). These are not the same as a crime report. They are an invitation for the NCA to examine a transaction and decide whether it merits further investigation.

The disclosures have precipitated Reform's biggest crisis. Here are some of the most pressing questions the party must now answer on the revelations and their consequences:

When did Farage receive the £5m?

After the existence of the £5m gift was revealed, Reform UK briefed news organisations that it had been received in early 2024. Lawyers for billionaire Reform donor Christopher Harborne said the gift was given by him on 5 April 2024. Both have suggested that, at the time of the gift, Farage was not actively involved in politics.

But financial industry sources told the Guardian that a report on the £5m gift was made to the NCA on 16 May 2024. They added that at that time, it appeared that not all of the money had been transferred to Farage's account. Some of the money did not appear to have been received until after he said he would not stand for parliament on 23 May 2024, and before he announced his candidacy on 3 June 2024.

Farage has claimed previously that it was a personal gift and therefore did not need to be declared. He did not respond to questions from the Guardian regarding the timing of the gift.

Where did a separate £1m donation come from?

There have been extensive efforts to trace £1m given in June 2024 to Britain Means Business, which raises funds for Reform UK and was previously called Leave Means Leave. Efforts to trace the money – given by Fiona Cottrell, a Reform donor and the mother of the close associate of Farage and convicted fraudster, George Cottrell – have failed, according to sources. Bankers queried the origin of the £1m with Richard Tice, the deputy leader of Reform, according to sources. The £1m was routed via an Australian money exchange called Oneify,

which also provoked concerns among bankers, sources said. Tice did not respond to questions from the Guardian about this and other transactions.

Should a loan from George Cottrell to Richard Tice have been declared?
Tice received what he described as a personal loan of £80,000 from George Cottrell in late 2024.

He told the Telegraph it was a "bridging loan". It raised concerns among bankers who believed it was connected to a property purchase in Dubai, according to sources.

Given the loan appeared to be at a preferential rate, and George Cottrell is heavily involved with Reform and a donor to Farage, there are questions over whether Tice should have declared the loan to the parliamentary authorities.

George Cottrell's lawyers did not respond to questions that included queries about the loan to Tice.

Can Reform weather the cloud hanging over its finances?
Some Reform donors are increasingly unhappy about the scrutiny they will face and the handling by the party of the £5m gift.

Mohamed Amersi, who gave £25,000 to Reform in 2025, told the Telegraph he would not make any further donations "until the cloud hanging over [the £5m gift] is resolved". Another Reform donor told the Guardian that they were disappointed by Farage's decision to hold a byelection before the standards commissioner's verdict.

Are there other problems on the horizon?
Robert Jenrick, a former Conservative minister who defected to Reform, is facing a police investigation over a £37,500 donation he received as part of his Tory leadership campaign.

The Guardian revealed in April that the Metropolitan police were reviewing the donation after a referral by the Electoral Commission. The Met confirmed they were investigating it last Wednesday. Jenrick said the allegations were "entirely false".

The investigation looks likely to add to the pressure on the party.

ANNA ISAAC IS THE GUARDIAN'S CITY EDITOR

COMMENTARY

Trash talk
What Count Binface tells us about British politics

By *Daniel Boffey*

Many may have concluded some time ago that British politics could not get any sillier, but last week Nigel Farage resigned as the MP for Clacton in order to stand for … the seat of Clacton. His reasoning was that it was not for the parliamentary commissioner for standards but the constituency to decide whether he had done anything wrong in deciding not to declare a £5m ($6.7m) gift from the cryptocurrency billionaire Christopher Harborne and funds from the convicted fraudster George Cottrell for his staffing, security and housing.

"This will be a people versus the establishment byelection," the Reform UK leader said, before a further unexpected twist. After the other main parties said they would not stand in a "stunt" election, Count Binface – a candidate with a silver bin on his head, who has stood on multiple occasions at UK bylelections – issued a statement: "I will be a unity candidate and pledge to build at least one affordable house. Nigel Farage says he wants 'The people versus the establishment'. So be it. Leave him to me."

Is the man in the mask the hero the country needs, if not deserves? Probably not. Binface did not want to talk to the Guardian unless it was in character.

But Binface, real name, Jon Harvey, has certainly become a media favourite since last Tuesday, enjoying a moment in the limelight to talk of his policies of nationalising the singer Adele and capping the price of croissants at £1.

It is Harvey's stated aim to have policies that get a giggle but maybe make the voter think. Even the Daily Mail, sympathetic to Farage's anti-immigration party, could not avoid poking a little fun. "Farage: Binface byelection is deadly serious", was its splash headline last Thursday.

There is international interest too. In France, he has been styled Comte Tête-de-poubelle, while in Spain he is El Conde Cubo de Basura.

The tradition of novelty candidates in Britain arguably began with Lieutenant Commander Bill Boaks, a heavily decorated war hero, who from the 1951 election onwards stood in 28 polls on the issue of road safety while riding around on a modified bicycle plastered with slogans. It was, though, David Sutch, better known as Screaming Lord Sutch, who made the role his own. He first stood in the 1960s in a byelection forced by the resignation of John Profumo after the famous sex and spies scandal. He then formed the Monster Raving Loony party in the early 1980s, satirising the political class while floating bizarre yet strangely attractive policies.

Harvey began his political career not as Binface but perhaps the more storied character of Lord Buckethead. It all began with Harvey watching a video with a friend at Oxford of a film called Gremloids which included a Darth Vader-inspired figure. They subsequently learned that a businessman called Mike Lee, who had bought the video rights to the movie, had stood in 1987 dressed as Lord Buckethead against Margaret Thatcher in her Finchley constituency. He hoped to flog some videos.

Two decades later, as Theresa May triggered a general election in order to push her Brexit deal through, the farcical nature of British politics in 2017 reminded Harvey of Buckethead. He decided it would be amusing to bring him back and an opportunity to develop his standup.

What is Harvey's motivation? "I genuinely think that, more than the clicks and shits and giggles, he does actually believe that the absurdist element of British elections is kind of a cool one," said David Hughes, a former press officer to the original 1987 Buckethead. "And there is that endless joke: there is one absurd, parody, completely inappropriate candidate – and he is standing against Count Binface. That one is kind of funny."



Count Binface will be Farage's main challenger in Clacton



COMMENTARY

Foreign affairs
Burnham now has to master the art of dealing with Trump

By *Gaby Hinsliff*

It's all starting to feel very real. Or so Andy Burnham said on the day he in effect became Britain's official prime minister-in-waiting.

Last Friday, Burnham made his first brutal break with his predecessor, apologising over Keir Starmer's head for Labour's handling of the war in Gaza. The government should, he said, have called for a ceasefire earlier, and should now be increasing pressure on Israel.

Since the Foreign Office is already considering further sanctions, that's arguably less a dramatic foreign policy shift than a change of domestic tone. Recognising the deep anguish on the left over Gaza, which undoubtedly drove some Labour voters to the Greens, Burnham is signalling that for good or ill he'll listen more closely to the grassroots than Starmer did. But like any attempt to toughen policy on Israel, it also raises some intriguing questions for his relationship with the White House.

How will the man Donald Trump dismissed as "the mayor of a town" deal, in office, with this impossible president? Though it's business as usual in some ways – Burnham committed last week to the 3.5% Nato target for defence spending, though without explaining how it will be paid for, and to keeping Jonathan Powell as national security adviser – he enters office at a tipping point for the US's relationship with the west.

Frustration was palpable at last week's Nato summit in Ankara, where Trump threatened to ban trade with Spain if it doesn't obey his demands for more defence spending; reconfirmed his desire to own Greenland; and tore up a fragile Gulf ceasefire by resuming the bombing of Iran. More disconcerting even than the resulting rise in oil prices is the prospect of a new kind of rolling conflict in the Gulf that would be the lethal equivalent of Trump's endlessly on-again, off-again trade wars, conducted with scant regard for existing norms.

In his new book Ten Steps to Prevent World War Three, the former UK Foreign Office minister Tobias Ellwood depicts a future where such conflicts are routine. It opens in 2040, imagining the west looking back and ruing the chances missed in the mid-2020s to avert disaster.

Ellwood's third world war isn't one territorial battle but a series of localised conflicts around the globe, creating a climate of near-permanent violence and insecurity in which battlefield taboos – including over the use of tactical nuclear weapons – are routinely broken. Greenland is gone, Nato collapsed, and western governments reduced to managing decline. Climate disasters or disease outbreaks hit harder, because countries won't cooperate against shared threats.

His prescription for avoiding it begins with defining exactly which bits of the rules-based world order the west seeks to defend, and then circling the wagons of like-minded countries around them. Rejoin the single market, share renewable energy technology with poorer countries, widen European military participation in rapidly deployable forces, and forge a new "stability alliance" of middle-ranking powers focused on early prevention of conflicts before they reach war.

This agenda isn't a terrible fit for Burnham, but it leaves open the question of how far to go in confronting Trump. The threat to Greenland convinced many European leaders that something had to change. Ukraine still needs US assistance, but less than it did, having built up its defence manufacturing capabilities; and it's the EU now paying for the weapons that Washington supplies, a deal Trump seems content with judging by the way he praised Ukraine's audacious drone strikes on Russia.

Starmer wasn't wrong to make those grovelling trips to Washington. He can be proud of helping buy time for Ukraine, which used it with extraordinary ingenuity, and for many of its neighbours. The country that wasted that grace period, ironically, was Britain. Having never properly made the public case for more defence spending, let alone for funding it, Starmer now bequeaths that mess to a very green successor.

If he means what he says about spending less time on foreign affairs than "never here Keir", in the circumstances Burnham will need an extraordinary foreign secretary. (David Miliband, who held the job under Gordon Brown and might well have become Britain's ambassador to Washington had Kamala Harris won in 2024, is now visibly auditioning.)

But he'll also have to master something Starmer couldn't: measuring the dosage of each fractional policy shift or symbolic gesture so it's just enough to cause the desired reaction and no more. Assertive enough on Gaza not to seem morally complicit, yet without denying Israel's right to self-defence. Not too close to Trump, but close enough. And each time with a hair's breadth separating success from the kind of failure that by 2040 our children may bitterly regret. Burnham is right about one thing: it doesn't get more real than that.

GABY HINSLIFF IS A GUARDIAN COLUMNIST

◀ Andy Burnham will have to make nice with Donald Trump

GUARDIAN DESIGN; DAN KITWOOD/ANDREW HARNIK/GETTY

> ***Burnham enters office at a tipping point for the US's relations with the west***

Nato allies ponder Trump's changing tune
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Truth and fiction over extreme heat

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Spotlight



VENEZUELA

In the ruins of a Chavéz-era housing project, fury mounts

By *Tom Phillips* CARABALLEDA

Even before two powerful earthquakes reduced the OPPE 25 government housing project to an anarchy of shattered concrete and broken lives, the foundations of Hugo Chávez's populist "Bolivarian" revolution were shaking in what was once a hotbed of support.

Gabriel González remembers his elation when, in 2013, he received the keys to his apartment in one of the 12-floor blocks that *El Comandante* had ordered to be built in an affluent corner of the resort town of Caraballeda.

The 45-year-old construction worker lost his home during deadly mudslides and spent two years in an emergency shelter before receiving his new home near the beach. "It was wonderful," recalled González, for years a proud supporter of Chávez's socialist party, the PSUV. "The Chávez government helped the poor so much … Back then, everyone was on Chávez's side."

But shortly after González moved into OPPE 25, Chávez died, and in the years that followed, the builder said his feelings – and those of many neighbours – began to sour. Years of poverty, mass migration, hyperinflation and authoritarian rule under Chávez's successor, Nicolás Maduro,

▲ Military personnel, search and rescue teams and volunteers amid the rubble of the OPPE 25 housing project in La Guaira

Continued →



▲ A mural of Nicolas Maduro reads 'I'm innocent, I'm a decent man and I'm still the president'

'I haven't seen anyone here. I haven't seen a governor. I haven't seen a mayor'

fuelled widespread discontent. "Everyone around here said the Bolivarian revolution … was no more – that it was no longer the same," said González, whose siblings fled to the US and Brazil. "Unfortunately, what happened is that it became a dictatorship."

Then came last month's twin earthquakes, which devastated Venezuela's north coast and revealed a revolution in ruins as Chávez's heirs struggled to respond to a catastrophe for which they seemed woefully ill-prepared.

"We don't have a government," González complained one morning as he stood by the donated tent where he sleeps on a golf course near his obliterated home. Two weeks after the disaster, González's 22-year-old son, Daniel, and mother-in-law, Esmeralda, are still missing. His family squats by the wreckage as they wait for news.

Like many residents of La Guaira, the northern state worst hit by the disaster, González criticised the sluggish reaction of Venezuela's acting leader, Delcy Rodríguez, the former vice-president who was installed in January after Maduro was abducted by Donald Trump.

"Unfortunately, I haven't seen anyone here. I haven't seen a governor. I haven't seen a mayor," said González, who spent 24 hours buried under the rubble of OPPE 25 with his wife, Rosa, before they were miraculously rescued. The couple now depend on humanitarians and church members who visit with food and prayers.

Once González had finished speaking, a local pastor, Ismael Yarves, opened a suede-bound Bible and read from Psalm 46, its words contrasting with the paucity of the government response. "God is our hope and strength, a very present help in trouble," Yarves proclaimed. "Therefore will we not fear, though the earth be moved, and though the hills be carried into the midst of the sea."

Experts agree few nations would have been fully prepared for the astonishing ferocity of the 24 June disaster – 7.2 and 7.5 magnitude quakes that struck less than a minute apart, toppling large, densely populated buildings such as OPPE 25 in seconds.

"It was a truly extraordinary event," said Carlos Genatios, a structural engineer and natural disaster planning specialist who served as science and technology minister after Chávez took power in 1999.

Genatios said the earthquakes released energy equivalent to 240 of the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima. "It was much worse than the [7.0] earthquake in Haiti, which is considered the 21st century's greatest catastrophe," he added.

Even so, Genatios, who went into exile after writing articles criticising Maduro's regime, believed the government had questions to answer about a calamity that killed at least 4,333 people and injured nearly 17,000.

Why, in a known seismic zone, were such large buildings erected on soft soils that shook during the earthquakes? Were social housing projects such as OPPE 25 – and other nearby properties, which also collapsed – properly built and following strict building codes? Had Venezuela's Chavista rulers been focused on preparing the seismology, health and emergency services for a natural disaster? Or had they been distracted by their obsession with retaining power?

Genatios believed that once the dust settled, a thorough investigation was needed to determine where blame lay. But the former minister was convinced lives could have been saved had successive governments better planned for such disasters. "It would have been impossible to have zero losses," Genatios argued. "But the losses could have been far fewer."

Loss was everywhere around OPPE 25 last week as distraught, sleep-starved families clawed and tunnelled their way through an apocalyptic landscape of crumpled blocks in search of loved ones. Occasionally, they interrupted their excavations to watch corpse collectors in yellow helmets and blue scrubs haul grotesquely disfigured bodies from the debris.

Relatives of those entombed under buildings had painted pleas on their front walls. "Precident Deisy Rodrigues [sic] – please help. My son is in here," read one message on a block of flats a few streets from OPPE 25.

Many survivors said that in the crucial hours and days after the tragedy, help never arrived. Alongside the mourning, there is profound anger at what many perceive as the lethargic, bungled response from Rodríguez's officials and troops, with dust-coated civilians taking the lead in trying to extricate victims from giant heaps of concrete while security forces stood around holding guns.

240

Energy equivalent to this number of Hiroshima atomic bombs was released during the Venezuela quakes

"There are more rifles here than pickaxes and shovels," complained Milagri Rodríguez Guanire, one of nearly 8 million Venezuelans to have migrated in recent years, who flew in from Chile to hunt for her mother, Ymelda, in the wreckage of OPPE 25.

Fury over the government's response has amplified longstanding grievances that have been building for years in working-class areas that were bastions of regime support.

The estate's walls are adorned with propaganda celebrating the "eternal giant" Hugo Chávez and his mustachioed heir Maduro, depicted in one mural as an "iron-fisted" superhero called *Súper Bigote* (Super Moustache).

But many voiced sadness and indignation at how, after Chávez's years of oil bonanza, the energy-rich South American country nosedived into one of the worst economic crises in history under Maduro because of plunging crude prices, inept governance, corruption and crippling US sanctions.

"[It's] a pile of shit … we need to get rid of these rats," fumed Roberto Dupuy, a 65-year-old cook, whose daughter was lost when two of OPPE 25's seven towers came crashing down. The ruins of the remaining five buildings were so severely damaged that they also seemed close to keeling over.

Other residents of Chávez-era estates along Caraballeda's Caribbean coast spoke angrily of how they suspected they had been housed in badly built death traps, where the ceilings leaked, the lifts didn't work and the powdery cement walls left some wondering how sturdy the structures were. "They were poor-quality buildings – that's why they collapsed and killed so many people," claimed González's father-in-law, Marciel Edilberto Llarve, who lived in a development called OPPE 33, which also disintegrated.

Llarve, whose wife remains buried there, compared his family's transfer from a rickety hillside shack to the brand new tower block to being unwittingly sent to the guillotine. "They took us from the poverty of life to the riches of death," he said. "This building was made of jelly."

As Maduro employed increasingly draconian tactics to survive successive waves of protests, uprisings and even an assassination attempt, González said many of OPPE 25's inhabitants concealed their political opinions for fear of being ratted on by members of the Socialist party's neighbourhood committee and losing their benefits, jobs or homes – or even being arrested.

His sister-in-law, Yolife Llarve, recalled scenes of exhilaration when residents flocked to polling stations during 2024's presidential election hoping to vote Maduro out. "People were excited. They were happy. Lots of people thought it was the end. We were sure it was the end, until they announced the results," Llarve said of the vote, which Maduro is widely believed to have stolen from the opposition movement led by the exiled Nobel laureate María Corina Machado.

Venezuela's former dictator is now in a New York prison, having been seized by US special forces in a 3 January raid. A wall painting near OPPE 25 quotes Maduro's statement during a court appearance two days after his rendition. "I'm innocent. I'm a decent man. And I am still the president," it reads, although part of the mural crumbled during the earthquakes.

Trump unexpectedly backed Rodríguez after capturing her boss and has called her a "terrific person" who is helping US oil and mining companies do business in a country that was until recently a cradle of anti-imperialism but many now consider a protectorate. But the acting president's political future looks uncertain, amid widespread outrage over her handling of the earthquakes. One post-disaster poll showed 63% of Venezuelans disapproved of Rodríguez, while nearly half thought fresh elections more urgent than reconstruction efforts, although some suspect the earthquakes will reduce pressure for a vote.

Rodríguez has defended her government's "tireless" response to the disaster, attributing criticism to a malicious media conspiracy cooked up in propaganda "laboratories". She has also pushed back at claims that Chávez's housing projects were shoddily built, saying most fallen buildings were commercial developments.



▲ Milagri Nohemi Rodríguez, left, looking for her mother, and Josabet Pacheco, searching for her aunt, in the rubble of OPPE 25



◀ The father of Rosa Llarve, who was rescued after spending 24 hours under the rubble of OPPE 25

Photographs *Manu Quintero*

Genatios, the ex-minister, believed the earthquakes and their aftermath had exposed how "the revolution was a lie". "Venezuela's government is an utterly failed one, with less and less public support," he said. "Its revolutionary rhetoric about helping the poor … is a facade detached from reality … There's absolutely no revolution [any more] – their motivation is just money and power. There's no revolution. It doesn't exist."

Rodríguez Guanire echoed those sentiments as she took a break from digging for her mother in one of OPPE 25's towers. "I think people have had enough … We've had 27 years of this," she said of Chavismo, predicting that sooner or later the regime would fall.

"I feel like [the earthquakes] were a Pandora's box or the straw that broke the camel's back, so everyone can see that enough is enough with what is happening in Venezuela," added Rodríguez Guanire, who wore a mask to shield her from clouds of toxic dust and the sickly scent of death.

Moments later, a government ambulance pulled up outside OPPE 33 after reports a survivor had been found, trapped under 12 layers of pancaked concrete slabs. The side of the emergency vehicle was branded with an adhesive vinyl photo of a grinning Nicolás Maduro. But vandals had peeled away chunks of the fallen dictator's head and face. All around the ambulance, the buildings, and Chávez's revolution, lay in ruins.

TOM PHILLIPS IS THE GUARDIAN'S LATIN AMERICA CORRESPONDENT

Additional reporting by Clavel Rangel

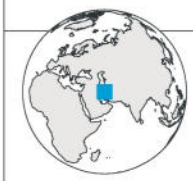




Growth market

Labourers plant saplings as part of a government tree planting campaign in Gadha Village, on the outskirts of Prayagraj in northern Uttar Pradesh state. The Indian government has launched a number of schemes to increase forest cover and meet climate goals.

RAJESH KUMAR SINGH/AP



‘They will be finished’ At the graves of people killed in street protests

IRAN

Guardian reporters

Six months on from the bloody regime crackdown, the dead are remembered with sorrow and anger at a Tehran cemetery

The US-Israel war with Iran, which began with the killing of the supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, on 28 February, was preceded by weeks of widespread protests against the Iranian regime sparked by an economic crisis. Six months on from the bloody crackdown on protesters, which may have claimed more than 30,000 lives, families remembering loved ones at their graves at Behesht-e Zahra cemetery in Tehran tell their stories.

Sepehr

Sepehr, 25, was killed during January’s mass street protests. His father became widely known because of a video he recorded on his phone in their home south of the capital Tehran. In the video, his father repeats: “Sepehr-e Baba, where are you?” It is an intimate Persian address, something close to “My Sepehr, my child”.

Sepehr became known by that cry, and the same words are now written on his gravestone: “Sepehr-e Baba, where are you?”

Today, there is a crowd around Sepehr’s grave. People arrive, speak, stand for a while and then leave. The mother of a 16-year-old boy killed during the nationwide women’s rights protests in 2022 is there.

Sepehr’s father says he does not fear arrest and speaks with a courage that seems to come from the place where grief has hardened into something else. He gestures to the people gathered around him and tells them they are free to film and take pictures.

“I’m waiting for these people to fall,” he says. “Don’t doubt it – they’re already gone. This regime will not go back to what it was before [January’s crackdown on protesters].”

Mohammadreza

Mohammadreza was 38 when he was killed in Tehransar, an area in western Tehran. At his grave are his sister, with long curly hair, and his elderly mother. “I cursed [Ali] Khamenei,” says his mother. “I was very happy when they [US/Israel] killed him. But my heart aches for these children of ours. I wish they had been here, too; they had dreamed of seeing Khamenei gone. There is so much longing in it. I miss my son. We have to endure.”

Mohammadreza’s sister says: “My brother saved a lot of people the night [he was killed]. He brought everyone into the parking garage. At his funeral, people said: ‘He saved our lives that night.’ He was very kind. He had so much loyalty and honour.

“I want to write *javidnam* [Farsi for ‘everlasting name’ and adopted by families to remember those killed in protests] on my brother’s gravestone, but we were afraid because they [Iranian police] have broken some of the stones. I’m waiting for a little time to pass, for the atmosphere to calm down. Then I’ll write javidnam on his stone. God willing, by next *Nowruz* [Iranian new year in March 2027] these pieces of shit will be gone.”

Sara

From a distance, Mohammadreza’s sister points out Sara’s grave. Sara was 45 when she was killed during the January protests. A CCTV video of the moment she was attacked in the street by plainclothes security forces carrying machetes went viral on social media: her terrified gaze, alone, empty-handed, under the kicks of a plainclothes man with a blade.

No one is at her grave today. Nearby,





One of the many gravestones at the Behesht-e Zahra cemetery in Tehran, where Danyal’s father and aunt sit by his graveside

another woman sits at the grave of her own javidnam. "They killed my cousin [in the protests] and this one [pointing to the grave] a day later. We found my cousin after four days, but we couldn't find this one. My cousin was killed with bullets; this one with a knife.

"I wish they had seen Khamenei's death. Let those bastards go to hell. They will be finished in the end."

Mohammad

Mohammad, 28, was killed in Ariya Shahr, in north-west Tehran. Today, his father and young brother are at his grave. They are from the poorer neighbourhoods of the capital.

"They had grabbed two girls and were dragging them," says his brother. "He went to save the girls, and those bastards hit him. He was a boxer. His friends who were with him told us what happened. Four or five *Basijis* [the Basij is a volunteer paramilitary branch of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps] had surrounded two girls. My brother and his friends beat the Basijis and helped the girls escape.

"Then the Basijis surrounded them on motorbikes. They beat them until finally one of them shot my brother in the side. He fell and said, 'I'm burning, I'm burning.' Then one of them came over and shot him in the head and heart, too. Three times in total."

Ali

Ali was killed by a bullet in Moshiriyeh, south Tehran, and still has no gravestone. The last time I was here, I saw a young man sitting alone at his grave in the dusk, crying, playing a sad pop song on his phone.

"They killed my friend in Moshiriyeh. They arrested me, too, but for some reason they released me, and I wish they hadn't. Since that day my life has gone black. My friend is under the ground and I'm alive."

Today, Ali's whole family is at his grave. His father thanks everyone who comes. Money is short in Ali's family and buying a gravestone will be difficult for them.

Ali's father says: "My son was a footballer. He was two metres tall. A goalkeeper. We went to Kahrizak and identified him there. After everything happened on Thursday, we had no news of him until two or three in the afternoon on Friday. Then we went looking for him."

Ali's younger sister stands beside her father. He points to her and says: "His sister suffered so much. She was so attached to him." His mother wears a long black *manto* (coat) and has a gentle, kind face. She does not speak. She only gives me a soft smile and thanks me for coming to her son's grave.

Danyal

Danyal's father is sitting on a chair. His mother and aunt sit beside the grave. His father says: "These people – the Islamic Republic's units – have no religion, no faith, no mercy, no decency. One of them was saying they should open fire on the opposing people. Their brains have been washed like this.

"The Islamic Republic has done something to them, to the regime loyalists and supporters, so that they think anyone who says anything against the system should be lined up against a wall and shot. They come with that way of thinking and kill everyone. They killed my son."

Danyal's father says he has two sons, Danyal and Nima. Nima works in music. Danyal, his father says, was among the first people to be shot and killed in Fardis, west of Tehran. "We opened the body bags one by one, searching through the bodies.

"At one point I lost hope. I said: 'That's enough, leave it.'" Here, Danyal's father begins to weep. "After days of searching, we found him and put him in the morgue."

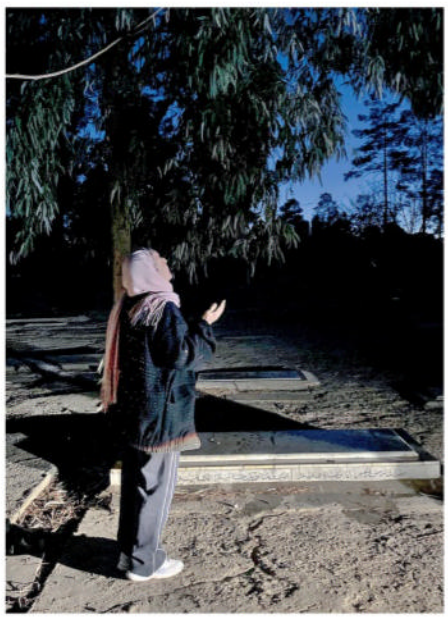
The family say the mortuaries were full of bodies, with women and men screaming as they searched for loved ones, opening zipped-up bags one by one. Danyal's aunt says: "My other brother said there was a girl whose body bag had been left open and she was naked. I said: 'God damn you. You killed so many people over a few strands of hair, and now you've left her here like this?'"

Danyal's father says the Iranian security forces put pressure on him to declare his son a martyr. "They said we had to write 'martyr of a terrorist attack'. I said to myself, because of this other child [his other son, Nima], we have to accept whatever they said. Later, when things calm down, we'll change it."











Below, from top left, a friend of Ali, who was shot dead in Moshiriyeh, sits at his graveside; family members gather to mourn Sepehr; a woman at Behesht-e Zahra prays for those killed in January's protests; the stone marking Mohammad's grave



◀ Marine Le Pen in Paris last week when she announced her latest run for the presidency

JEANNE ACCORSINI/ SIPA/SHUTTERSTOCK



FRANCE

Upheld conviction fails to dent Le Pen's popularity

By *Angelique Chrisafis* MONTARGIS

In the small French town of Montargis, Jean-Antoine, a retired decorator, was pleased Marine Le Pen had again shaken up French politics by launching a run for the presidency, despite her legal woes.

"Even the judges said she didn't personally profit from the money, it was for her party," he said of Le Pen's newly upheld conviction for embezzlement. "All politicians in France have always been schemers, it's just a fact of life."

Jean-Antoine, 76, felt voters for the figurehead of France's far-right, anti-immigration party National Rally (RN) wouldn't care about last week's appeal court decision over Le Pen's misuse of European parliament funds.

Jean-Antoine's late father fled to France from Spain during its civil war in the 1930s and became part of the French resistance standing up to occupation by Hitler's Germany. "But now immigration has to stop," he said.

Le Pen's conviction last year had meant she was barred from running for office until the 2030s, but that restriction was shortened by appeal judges last week. This allowed her to declare a phoenix-like return to the presidential race, which will be voted on next year.

The court's decision came despite its ruling that she was guilty of playing a key part in siphoning off more than €2.8m ($3.2m) through a fake-jobs scam of unprecedented scale and duration, and funnelling it to her cash-strapped party between 2004 and 2016.

Judges ordered her to wear an electronic ankle tag for one year with a curfew at her home, but she has vowed to lodge an appeal with France's highest court, which will effectively put her conviction and sentence on hold while she campaigns ahead of the presidential vote. Snap polling last week showed her popularity is high and she is in a strong position for the two-round vote next April and May. She previously lost to Emmanuel Macron in 2017 and 2022.

Montargis, 120km south of Paris, is known for its scenic canals and its pralines. It is one of many towns that elected rightwing mayors in local elections earlier this year, when RN and its allies more than tripled the number of town halls under their control.

A Montargis local, an antiques dealer in his 60s who did not want to be named, said: "People will still vote for Le Pen because there's massive pressure for change. Immigration, benefits, the healthcare system – none of that is working properly and people have had enough."

Montargis played its part in the *gilets jaunes* anti-government protests of 2018 and 2019, with its RN mayor, Côme Dunis, an active participant. In 2023, there was unrest in the town and damage to shops and businesses when rioting spread across France after Paris police shot and killed Nahel Merzouk, a 17-year-old boy of Algerian and Moroccan descent, when he failed to comply with an order to stop his car.

RN's election gain in Montargis, where it took votes from the traditional right, was viewed as a reflection of Marine Le Pen's 15-year attempt to detoxify the party's image – changing its name while keeping its hardline anti-immigration policy. Co-founded in 1972 as the Front National by her father, Jean-Marie Le Pen, it has long been seen by its critics as a danger to democracy and as a promoter of racist, antisemitic and anti-Muslim views.

Gisèle, 84, a recently retired girls' gymnastics coach and competition judge from the area, said the fear of crime and drug-dealing was increasing. She was glad Le Pen was running, but felt the embezzlement conviction could hinder her. "I think this could put a brake on her," she said.

Le Pen's decision to stand for president means her party's president, Jordan Bardella, will not now run in her place. The 30-year-old had been broadening RN's voter base by appealing to more bourgeois, higher-income voters from the traditional right.

"I'm disappointed Jordan Bardella isn't running for president," said Christiane, a chiropodist. "I like Marine Le Pen, but is France really going to elect a president with a conviction?"

Céline, a pharmacist and centrist voter, said: "I don't think it's right to run for French president if you have been convicted."

Selma, 48, a mother-of-three whose Tunisian grandfather was decorated for fighting for France in the second world war, said she feared Le Pen's growing presence in the campaign was polarising people. "Racism is becoming more brazen," she said. "The other day I was verbally assaulted in a car park. A woman who wanted my parking spot humiliated me in a racist way, saying she was more French than I was. We're all human and we don't choose our skin colour or our origins."

ANGELIQUE CHRISAFIS IS THE GUARDIAN'S PARIS CORRESPONDENT

Poll positions

Where the votes could go

36%

Voters who would opt for Le Pen in the first round of the presidential election, according to pollsters Ifop

19%

Share of first-round voters who would choose centre-right former PM Edouard Philippe

15%

Joint share of first-round votes for centrist former PM Gabriel Attal and leftist Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the other main candidates

EXPLAINER
EXTREME HEAT

Climate chaos
Busting the myths and lies about heatwaves

By *Jonathan Watts* LOCATION

Some people – and media organisations – still have difficulty connecting the heatwaves gripping much of the world and human-caused climate chaos. Others are in outright denial. So how to address their evasions, distractions and lies?

The Guardian has trawled through climate sceptics' claims and put their doubts to one of the UK's top climate scientists, Prof Ed Hawkins at the University of Reading. Here are his responses to those who ignore or downplay the truth.

Can't we just get used to this as the new normal?
The "normal" for humans and other life is fundamentally changing: high temperatures today are likely to seem cool in comparison with those of the future. The warmest 10 years on record have all happened in the past decade. And while an average global increase of 1C or 1.5C doesn't sound like much – and might even seem quite nice on a typical day – that is not how we experience a changing climate. The extremes are often changing faster than the mean. For example, while the global average rose by 1C, heatwaves in southern England have become 3C hotter.

Don't scientists disagree on how much we are affecting the climate?
No. We are certain that global warming is caused by human activities, primarily burning fossil fuels such as gas, oil and coal. Every heatwave and every summer is hotter than it would otherwise have been without those greenhouse gas emissions. That's the simple message from climate scientists and experts around the world.

This is a complex subject and there are degrees of uncertainty. Isn't there room for doubt?
The physics and chemistry are very simple: the more we increase greenhouse gas levels in the atmosphere, the more we will warm the climate. Those basics have been known since the 1850s, with the first quantification of the effect of increasing carbon dioxide levels being made in the 1890s.

In 1938, Guy Callendar, an English steam engineer, was the first person to show that the world had already warmed by about 0.3C, and linked this to the rise in carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere and the amount of coal that had been burned. That was more than 80 years ago. Today, the evidence is overwhelming. There is no doubt among scientists, even if other people still refuse to believe it.

Natural phenomenon
El Niño is a natural fluctuation every few years in temperatures in the tropical Pacific, which affects weather patterns around the world but especially in South America, the US, Africa, Australia and parts of Asia. But the current El Niño has just started and won't be peaking until around Christmas of this year.

Aren't heatwaves this year caused by natural weather cycles? I heard it was because of *El Niño*
We've always had, and will always have in the future, times when the weather patterns align to give us extreme weather such as heatwaves and floods. But now the consequences are worse because of our warmer world.

I have read there is no way to determine whether any particular extreme weather event is caused by human-driven climate change. Is that true?
Climate change doesn't cause the weather patterns that lead to extreme events. But when those weather patterns do occur, like they have always done, climate change makes the consequences more severe, such as hotter heatwaves or heavier rainfall. That amplification can be estimated with attribution studies, which consider how climate change has affected the likelihood or intensity of extreme weather events.

There are any number of different approaches to attribution now and they all show that, yes, these heatwaves are becoming hotter as a result of human activities. They may disagree slightly on the precise amount, but they're all consistent in the big picture.

Aren't human records too short to show clear trends?
Temperature records go back to the early 1800s. Since then, it's very clear that the world has become a lot hotter. The last time the world was as hot as it is now was about 125,000 years ago. We also have much older ice-core records dating back hundreds of thousands of years that show how much carbon dioxide and other gases were in the atmosphere. They reveal that the levels of CO_2 today have risen to a high that exceeds anything in the ice cores. That increase is mainly down to our actions of burning fossil fuels and deforestation.

JONATHAN WATTS IS THE GUARDIAN'S GLOBAL ENVIRONMENT WRITER



◀ Global warming is caused by human activities, primarily burning fossil fuels

JASON WHITMAN/ SHUTTERSTOCK



How aid cuts are hitting country's 2 million refugees

The largest refugee population in Africa has seen access to food, medicine and healthcare slashed as funding levels drop across agencies

UGANDA

By *Caroline Ariba*
KIRYANDONGO

▲ Mothers wait with their children at Panyadole health centre in Kiryandongo
ZAHARA ABDUL

The skies are gloomy over the wattle-and-mud houses of Kiryandongo refugee settlement, home to more than 167,000 people. Spread across an undulating plateau, the crowded camp, 200km north of Uganda's capital, Kampala, draws new arrivals every day as conflicts in Sudan and South Sudan add to the displacement toll. Of nearly 50,000 refugees who have arrived in Uganda since January, more than 1,000 have come to Kiryandongo.

Known for its progressive refugee policies, which include granting freedom of movement, land to cultivate, and the right to work and open a bank account, Uganda is home to 2 million refugees – the largest refugee population in Africa – who live in 13 settlements across the country.

But funding shortfalls, compounded by aid cuts, have left the country's refugee programmes in crisis. This year, the UN's refugee agency, UNHCR, received only 12% of the $850m it needs for Uganda.

The World Food Programme's (WPF) rations have been slashed – in early 2025 it supported 1.6 million refugees, but this year can help only 663,000.

The International Rescue Committee (IRC) said funding cuts have pushed the country's health system to the brink. In 2025, the IRC's Uganda health budget was about $18m. In January, it fell to $4m, forcing the IRC to close health clinics in 11 refugee settlements and lay off about 80% of its staff.

"Two million lives are at stake. Without a response, I worry the refugee health systems will collapse," said Elijah Okeyo, the IRC's country director.

In December, the IRC had to shut the two clinics it supported in Kiryandongo, forcing refugees to walk farther to access medical care. When they get there, they often find stocks of medicines are low or nonexistent.

Suzan Mandera, 30, from South Sudan, regularly attended one of the two clinics that closed, Cluster G health post, to get medicine to treat her children's malaria or typhoid, and pain relief for her chronic back pain.

Now she walks 14km to the government-run Panyadole health centre, but it too is operating under severe strain. It lost 58 of its 130 staff in December and is struggling to serve the 300,000 people under its care.

Mandera, who left South Sudan in 2014 during the civil war, pointed at the surrounding guava, mango and eucalyptus trees, and said: "That is now my medicine. I mix the leaves in a pot, boil them all and drink until I become dizzy with sleep. I don't think it is a good idea, but what can I do?"

The cuts are taking their toll on staff too. Dr Nicholas Sabiiti, a medical officer at Panyadole, barely has time to eat as he races between the wards, theatre and outpatients. Sabiiti's colleague Sarah Birungi, a midwife, said pausing for a break would mean patients giving birth unattended. "We are seeing mothers with sepsis returning to hospital because of all these delays," she said. "It's either they delay getting to us because of long journeys and queues, or we are delayed attending to them, which was never the case before we lost staff."

She said that while no cases of puerperal sepsis (infection of the reproductive tract after childbirth) were diagnosed in Panyadole before the staff cuts in October, there were at least five cases in January. According to IRC records, newborn deaths at Panyadole rose from 13 in October to 23 in January.

In January, the United Nations Population Fund, UNFPA, identified a critical need for 267 midwives

▼ Dr Nicholas Sabiiti, a medical officer at the health centre in Kiryandongo
ZAHARA ABDUL



Cutbacks
The crisis in numbers

167k
Number of people in the Kiryandongo refugee settlement, 200km from Kampala

12%
The proportion of the $850m funding the UN's refugee agency needs for Uganda that has been recieved

163
The number of village health teams, often first point of contact for refugees, down from 2,517 in 2025

30%
Shortage of medical supplies in at least seven of Uganda's settlements, including Kiryandongo, according to the UN

across all of Uganda's settlements. The persistent funding gap means only 23% of these are in place. Kristine Blokhus, country representative for the UNFPA in Uganda, said: "When women in remote zones cannot access a mobile team or afford transport to a clinic, they are forced to give birth at home, dramatically increasing the risk of maternal death.'

The struggle to treat everyone adequately is getting harder, despite a drop in the number of patients.

Mandera puts the fall in numbers down to a sense of resignation among the refugee population. "One time I called the ambulance driver from Panyadole hospital when a mother was in labour and they said it was not an emergency," she said. "There is only one ambulance driver for the whole settlement." The settlement previously had three ambulances.

The UNFPA said there is a 30% shortage of supplies in at least seven of Uganda's settlements, including Kiryandongo. When targeted projects aimed at curbing malnutrition were shut down, the prevalence of acute malnutrition rose from 5.4% to 7.8% in Uganda's settlements. A recent $5.4m boost to the Ugandan ministry of health from Unicef and UNHCR is expected to improve the situation.

The number of village health teams, who are often the first point of contact for refugees, has fallen from 2,517 in 2025 to just 163, weakening health promotion and early response to illnesses such as malaria, pneumonia and diarrhoea.

Outside Panyadole health centre, Mandera's friend Poni Annet, 32, also from South Sudan, pointed at her 16-year-old daughter's itchy, dry skin and sighed. The girl, Evelyn, has what looks like a bad case of eczema. "Sometimes I get paid for digging the gardens of residents in the host communities and can afford a tube [of cream] from the pharmacy, but most times I cannot," Annet said. "But even malaria treatment is a problem for us [now], so how can I get treatment for her skin?

"I can't afford the money for tests that clinics need and I know even if I go to Panyadole, I will stay in line for hours, even the next day or two, and yet they will still ask me to go and buy medicine elsewhere. Sometimes they just give you a half dose and send you away."

CAROLINE ARIBA IS A UGANDA-BASED JOURNALIST

UNITED STATES

Musk's legacy
Doge decision to cut aid resulted in deaths from Ebola in Congo

By *Melody Schreiber*

Elon Musk has an Ebola problem. SpaceX stock dropped after its initial public offering, and Tesla faces a wave of lawsuits. But instead of focusing on his companies, Musk has posted frequently on X about the US Agency for International Development (USAID), which he helped dismantle last year.

"In a way, it's helpful that Elon is doing this, because it's putting attention back on the issue of what he did last year," said Jeremy Konyndyk, a former top USAID official who oversaw the agency's Ebola response in 2014-15 and the president of Refugees International.

Musk has said his critics "cannot cite a single name of someone who died". When confronted with the names - including those of children - Musk called a journalist "an utter piece of shit and a liar".

Musk's cuts, through the short-lived US "department of government efficiency" (Doge), have come under scrutiny during the Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Last year, Musk admitted to "accidentally" cutting Ebola detection and response programmes.



▶ Families of Ebola victims claim their bodies in DRC

"This is one of the reasons why there was not enough surveillance and preparedness for the outbreak of Ebola," said Davide Rasella, head of the Global Health Impact Assessment and Evaluation Group at the Barcelona Institute for Global Health (ISGlobal) in Spain.

If global health programmes hadn't been slashed in the DRC and elsewhere, the Ebola outbreak would have been detected much earlier, Konyndyk said.

It's difficult to pinpoint exactly how many people will die as a result of these cuts, said Rasella. "But the important thing is the scale," he said. There will probably be millions of deaths over the next several years, he added.

Musk's demolition of USAID, and the resulting suffering and death, "is going to be a defining part of his legacy, and I do wonder if that's why he's scrambling so hard to rewrite that history now", Konyndyk said.

If not for Musk, USAID would probably still exist, Konynydk said.

Congress could have stopped the dismantling of USAID - and it still could, Konyndyk said. USAID is required to exist by law, and what few aid programmes still operate have been choked by the slow release of funding from the state department, he said.

After the Covid pandemic caused about 20 million deaths around the globe, it was "absurd" to cut programmes that would prevent the next pandemic, Rasella said.

"When you disrupt a single piece of that [aid], you can really create more and larger damage to the entire system," Rasella said. "This is just the beginning."

But that means there's still time to act and avert some of the worst effects of ending foreign aid, Konyndyk said.

"We have a window here to try and bring some of this back before the worst of the harms set in," he said.

MELODY SCHREIBER IS A JOURNALIST FOCUSED ON HEALTH, SCIENCE AND THE ARCTIC

CHINA

In rural villages, is football starting to take root?

By *Alastair McCready* TAIPEI

Michael Owen, a man who once quipped he had never drunk tea or coffee, isn't known for his adventurous palate. So the former England striker was probably out of his comfort zone sipping Roxburgh rose juice and eating chilli-wrapped rice noodle rolls during his recent visit to south-west China's Guizhou province.

The 2001 Ballon d'Or winner dusted off his boots for a match in Rongjiang county, the birthplace of viral amateur football league Cun Chao, also known as the Village Super League. Scoring twice in a 4-3 loss for local side Rongjiang Niubi, Owen endeared himself to the thousands in attendance, even if some weren't familiar with the former Liverpool and Real Madrid star. "Many people didn't know who he was. The older generation doesn't even know who David Beckham or Cristiano Ronaldo are," said May, a Rongjiang local whose family helps to run Cun Chao.

"But what left a deep impression was watching him play football with the local players. There were also very young schoolchildren who had been preparing for days to interview him in English. Owen was very patient in communicating with them."

Guizhou's amateur tournament became an unexpected viral hit in 2023, drawing the attention of tens of millions on social media, including from Owen. Tourists began flocking to the rural, mountainous community, as crowds of more than 10,000 watched farmers, construction workers and students represent their local village teams.

"When it started, Guizhou was amazing. Chinese tourists found there was a place where ordinary people played football," said Rowan Simons, a China football expert who founded one of the country's first amateur networks in the early 2000s. "It's quite remarkable that China is latching on to amateur football 150 years after the rest of the world."

The league's success – the fourth season of Cun Chao, which kicked off in January, had 137 village teams – has inspired similar initiatives by local governments across China. Amateur football has since become a national phenomenon. It has even drawn praise from the country's leader, Xi Jinping, who said in 2024 that it "presents a vibrant and flourishing China to the world".

137

Number of village teams taking part in the fourth season of Cun Chao, the amateur football league of Guizhou province. There are around 13 other leagues in China, with attendances higher than many European professional leagues

But while this nascent love affair with the game has drawn comparisons to British football's formative years, experts remain sceptical that China has finally found a formula to develop its grassroots football scene. Mark Dreyer, the Beijing-based founder of website China Sports Insider, doesn't believe authorities will allow the amateur game room to grow organically.

"The more successful it becomes, the more it's going to get co-opted by the state, the football association and the sports ministry. Then all their bad decisions are going to start impacting these more organic leagues," he said.

Poor governance has long held back China's professional game. In 2016, its football association outlined its vision to become a "world football superpower" by 2050, including getting 50 million children and adults playing by 2020. What followed was an ill-fated spending spree, in which global stars were given lucrative contracts. The splurge ended in the early 2020s as several clubs folded amid funding issues and corruption scandals.

Today, China's men's national team has made little progress, languishing 91st in the Fifa world rankings and this year failing to qualify for a sixth consecutive World Cup. Dreyer says this failure is due to Chinese authorities applying their customary top-down approach to football.

"Football needs to be bottom-up, but China is fundamentally a top-down country. Everything stems from the top, so they focus on the elites instead of focusing on the base of the pyramid," he said.

Crucially, the amateur leagues aren't part of a larger pyramid connected to China's professional game, and so their potential as a talent pipeline is limited. "There still isn't a pathway to go from amateur through to professional," said Simons.

But that's of little concern to the regional governments running the roughly 13 leagues that have sprung up around China since 2023. Football is almost a "sideshow", said Dreyer, with match days serving as hyperlocal celebrations of ethnic heritage, food and culture.

ALASTAIR MCCREADY IS A JOURNALIST COVERING SOUTH-EAST ASIA

Additional reporting by Yu-chen Li



▼ A match in the Village Super League, or Cun Chao, in Rongjiang county, Guizhou province

YANG WENSHU/VCG/GETTY



◀ Pati, a picker on GreenGold's estate outside Ozurgeti in the tea-growing region of Guria
CECILIA NOWELL



GEORGIA

A new leaf
Soviet-era plantations brew up a renaissance

By *Cecilia Nowell* OZURGETI

Rainclouds shroud the Caucasus mountains as the day's harvest begins on a rural estate in western Georgia. A tea picker moves quickly between bushes with confidence, her hands plucking only the greenest, most recent growth on each plant.

When Pati began picking tea leaves as a teenager this was a collective farm in the Soviet Union - following its collapse it was abandoned and the bushes swallowed by the surrounding forest until new growers began cutting them free in the 2010s.

Today those leaves are in high demand as luxury tea importers across Europe and the US discover what the Soviets already knew: Georgia's humid Black Sea air and cold Caucasus winters make it an ideal location to grow tea, but now with a focus on quality above Soviet-era volume.

"These plants are obviously very happy where they are because it just tastes incredible," said Ana Dane of the New York-based In Pursuit of Tea, the supplier to Michelin three-star restaurant Eleven Madison Park.

Georgia's tea renaissance was boosted also by the EU, which poured money into the industry in the hope of revitalising its economy. That stalled when the Kremlin-leaning Georgian Dream party withdrew from accession talks, but Georgian growers are still making significant inroads.

Tea may have been carried along the Silk Road to Georgia but the first recorded instance of cultivation was in the early 1800s, when a Georgian prince began planting bushes outside today's city of Ozurgeti. ***The Russian empire then looked to Georgia when it wanted a steady tea supply*** and later Soviet collectivisation designated the Guria region the USSR's centre of its production. By the 1980s, it was the fifth-largest tea producing country in the world.

It is an era remembered by Lika Megreladze, who as a girl growing up in the 1970s, would sometimes visit her mother at work at the Institute of Tea and Subtropical Cultures, taking a winding 8km path from her multi-generational family home through the lush Gurian forest.

She recalls meeting in her mother's workplace international students from tea growing countries such as Vietnam, Sri Lanka and Yemen. If they were raised in the Soviet Union, visitors to her house are often delighted to see old boxes of *Gruzinsky chai* - a tea less known for its taste than its affordability.

Industry plant Georgia's subtropical coast makes it one of the northernmost places in the world where tea will grow. Its cold mountain winters force the bushes into a seven-month dormancy that serves to boost its polyphenol content, producing a noticeably sweeter leaf. The winters also kill off pests, allowing Georgian growers to easily commit to organic standards.

When the Soviet Union collapsed, so too did Georgia's tea industry. Its revival was spurred by a young engineer in Tbilisi, Shota Bitadze, who imported Chinese herbs during a medicine shortage in his hometown and then turned to tea.

"We had situations where people had tea bushes in their garden, but they didn't know how to make tea with their hands," said Giorgi Bitadze, Shota's son. In 2006, the Bitadzes sought to change that - founding the Georgian Organic Tea Producers Association alongside 16 other families and opening the Bitadze Tea Museum in Tbilisi.

From 800 hectares of active tea production in 2014 that number rose to 1,900 hectares in 2019 with a government programme to finance up to 70%-90% of costs to rehabilitate abandoned Soviet-era tea plantations.

While tea drinkers in Ukraine, Poland and other countries once part of the Soviet bloc have been quick to purchase tea through the Bitadzes' organic association, "getting past the Iron Curtain is a struggle", said Timothy Merkel, an American tour guide living in Tbilisi who previously ran a company aiming to sell Georgian tea in the UK.

Yet, a growing number of Georgian growers are managing it. In Paris, speciality tea shop Palais des Thés extols its "exceptional" Georgian tea lines and has increased the amount of tea it orders from Georgia 12-fold since 2019. In New York, the fine tea importer Royal Cathay is stocking leaves from Georgian growers.

Nika Sioridze co-founded growers GreenGold with his childhood friend Baka Babunashvili in 2017, with the aim of experimenting and finding something for a new generation of tea drinkers. They renovated a Soviet-era silk factory to process tea leaves, began fermenting tea in the clay *qvevri* traditionally used for wine and opened a tasting room in Tbilisi. Through experimentation, the pair developed new teas that spoke to the cycle of death and rebirth that has long followed the Georgian tea industry.

In one case, while drying leaves for green tea, Sioridze recalled seeing smoke and worrying he had burnt the leaves. "And then we realised that we have not burnt the tea, we have roasted it," he said. "I'm burning it and it's alive again, a new life."

CECILIA NOWELL IS A REPORTER AND EDITOR



The tardigrade – also known as a "moss piglet" or a "water bear" – was named as the Guardian's 2025 invertebrate of the year. It can survive searing heat, extreme cold and even time in space.

BIOLOGY

Beyond the tardigrade

Scientists hope DNA sequencing these tiny yet virtually indestructible creatures could help us understand the secrets of their superpowers

By *Patrick Barkham*

Witek Morek is closely inspecting an old brick-and-flint wall on the Cambridgeshire campus of the Wellcome Sanger Institute.

"We are going to use a very advanced tool designed by bioengineers and evolved over millions of years – the human hand – and grab some moss, and put it in an envelope," he said.

This is tardigrade hunting, the first small step in a gargantuan, wildly ambitious scientific undertaking: to sequence the genomes of all life on Earth.

Accompanied by Prof Mark Blaxter, who leads the institute's Tree of Life programme, Morek, a postdoctoral researcher and tardigrade expert, goes on to collect lichen from a walnut tree on the lush campus, before returning to the lab with his samples.

In 1998, a millimetre-long nematode worm became the first animal to have its whole genome sequenced. The human genome was first sequenced just five years later, although it was not absolutely completed until 2021.

A genome is the instructions for making an animal, written in a chemical code known as DNA. Genomics looks beyond genes to all the DNA found between the genes. Establishing "reference genomes" for species can help scientists better study organisms' biology and evolution, as well as identify new medicines and compounds.

Sequencing genomes used to take years. Blaxter sequenced 18 genomes over 25 years of study in his early career. Now, the Tree of Life programme is sequencing 48 each week, thanks to advances in technology. It has sequenced 2,600 genomes so far, from whales to fungi, mostly focusing on British and Irish species.

And now it is the turn of microscopic tardigrades – the popular winner of last year's Guardian invertebrate of the year contest.

About 1,500 species of tardigrade – the name means "slow stepper" – have been identified around the world so far. They are indestructible, able to survive searing heat, extreme cold and even a spell in outer space. This is because of their ability to dessicate and enter a suspended animation, until they are reawakened by water.

Morek begins the sequencing process by putting the moss and lichen samples he has collected in a beaker of water. Thirty minutes later, the tardigrades are wiggling away.

He places tiny pieces of moss beneath a microscope and soon identifies a tardigrade. It is waggling its chubby-baby legs. This "moss piglet" is a translucent, middle-sized tardigrade, about 350 micrometres in length (a human hair is 50 micrometres in diameter). It has recently eaten: Morek can see the contents of its gut.

Morek, who has so far collected about 20 of the 50 tardigrades on the British list (a "huge underestimate" of the total species number, he says), will need to see its eggs to identify this exact species. Some tardigrades have smooth eggs; others have mushroom, conical or needle-like shapes on the surface.

Tardigrades can be "voracious carnivores, chasing down nematodes [microscopic worms] and eating them like spaghetti", said Morek. But he also reveals how they can demonstrate parental care. A mother sometimes sheds its cuticle (its skin) with eggs safely inside the shed skin. But she keeps the cuticle attached to her legs until the eggs are hatched.

Morek makes a temporary slide – putting the tardigrade between glass – to confirm its taxonomy as closely as possible. It has to be temporary because the water will evaporate and the tardigrade could be crushed by the glass.

The tardigrade is kept alive and transferred to a barcoded plastic tube. This is frozen for later sequencing – kept in the lab's special double-doored freezers set at -71C.

There are four high-quality tardigrade genomes deposited in public databases, Morek is closely working on another 14, and there are approximately 50 species in the freezer awaiting sequencing.

Before extracting the DNA for sequencing, Witek must "manually disrupt" his specimen. He can cut a 200-micrometre tardigrade by hand or use a form of mashing within a block of ice when frozen.

A tardigrade contains a tiny amount of DNA, just 200 to 500 picograms (one picogram is one trillionth of a gram). In the old days, researchers would need to pool 1,000 tardigrades to obtain enough DNA, an arduous process which was impossible with rare or hard-to-find species. Another strategy is to use a single female to produce large numbers of genetic clones.

But the Wellcome Sanger Institute deploys a different approach: the picogram input multimodal sequencing protocol.

With this technique, genomic DNA and RNA are extracted from the tardigrade and separated into two tubes. Researchers then use a polymerase chain reaction (PCR) to amplify these fragments to create enough material.

The quality of the DNA produced is checked and samples are handed to the institute's scientific operations team. After it is sequenced, the data is available on the institute's computer cluster. The sequence itself is millions-long strings of the four types of bases found in a DNA molecule: adenine, cytosine, guanine and thymine (ACTG).

Fortunately for tardigrade researchers, tardigrade genomes are small – 30 times smaller than the human genome. Although the PCR process is complex, scientists require less data to assemble the genome of a tardigrade.

For Morek, the sequencing of tardigrades will help reveal how species are related to each other. Incredibly, some tardigrades are separated by 550m years of evolution.

But genome sequencing could also reveal how the tardigrades' superpowers – such as resistance to freezing (cryobiosis), resistance to a lack of oxygen (anoxybiosis) and the ability to repeatedly survive desiccation (anhydrobiosis) – may help us.

"And, because most of life on this planet is small, like the tardigrades, this new approach to genome sequencing promises to open the gates to sequencing all of life," said Blaxter. "These genomes will in turn open up new ideas and opportunities in biomedicine and biotechnology."

Through sequencing, scientists can pinpoint the genes and proteins required for these processes. If a certain protein is crucial in anhydrobiosis, can we use it to produce vaccines that are dry, or add it to crops to make them more drought-resistant?

"There are a lot of research questions," said Morek. "The more we know, the more questions we are asking. It's a never-ending story."

PATRICK BARKHAM WRITES FOR THE GUARDIAN ON NATURAL HISTORY

The winner of the 2026 Guardian invertebrate of the year will be announced on 17 August

2.6k

The number of genomes that have so far been sequenced by the Tree of Life programme, ranging from whales to fungi

1.5k

The approximate number of species of tardigrade that have so far been identified around the world, including 50 in Britain

▼ Witek Morek, a researcher, collects tardigrade samples from lichen

ALI SMITH



ILLUSTRATION: GUARDIAN DESIGN; WELLCOME SANGER INSTITUTE; GETTY

Opinion p45 →

UNITED STATES

Trump's changing tune prompts Nato allies to plan for worst

By *Robert Tait* WASHINGTON

Donald Trump's relationship with Washington's Nato allies is nobody's idea of a happy marriage. But the US president's volatile performance at the western military alliance's annual summit in Ankara last week seemed extreme, even by Trumpian standards.

He arrived in the Turkish capital last Tuesday in a spectacular funk, visibly angry that the temporary ceasefire arrangement he had agreed with Iran had failed to hold, and threatening to unleash more destruction and mayhem in consequence.

The country's Islamic leadership, which he had praised as "very reasonable" just two weeks earlier, were "scum" and "sick people", he told journalists as he sat beside Nato's secretary general, Mark Rutte.

Just as vehemently, he lashed out at Nato, which has been the cornerstone of western security policy since 1949, when it was founded in response to the spread of Soviet communism after the second world war.

Trump was "not happy with Nato", he said, complaining about the failure of alliance members - including Britain - to help him in the Iran war, rehashing his claims on Greenland, and demanding the US sever trade ties with Spain because its socialist government (who he denounced as "bad people") refused to comply with new defence spending targets.

Hours later, he emerged from a meeting - with the leaders he had lambasted - talking about unity. "There was a lot of love in that room," Trump said. He had, apparently, never had a Nato meeting that had been so positive.

Trump extended this sudden warmth to Ukraine's president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, whom he praised as "ingenious" for holding his country together against Russia, led by Vladimir Putin, whose political style and cause Trump has long been assumed to prefer.

Why had Trump suddenly changed his tune on an alliance he has frequently derided as a "paper tiger"? One driver of his sudden shift may have been an affinity for the summit's host, the Turkish president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, a strongman leader who has held power for 23 years, and for whom Trump has long expressed admiration despite his Islamist roots. Ian Lesser, a fellow at the German Marshall Fund who attended the summit, said it had a "bipolar quality", which he attributed to Trump's chemistry with Erdoğan, whose domestic opponents have labelled as an autocrat who has stifled political opposition and freedom of the press.

"Trump, more than many, puts his personality out there when he deals with international affairs," said Lesser. "He has a tendency to see the world through not so much through alliances, but through individual countries and, above all, individual leaders ... he has a sceptical view of alliances."

Equally effective is the extravagant flattery bestowed by Rutte, a former Dutch prime minister who frequently praises the US president for "saving" Nato by getting European allies to raise their spending on defence.

"Rutte is really doing a good job of trying to say to Trump, 'Hey, it's working. We're becoming more capable allies,'" suggested Charles Kupchan, a professor of international affairs at Georgetown University and a former senior White House adviser on Europe under Bill Clinton and Barack Obama.

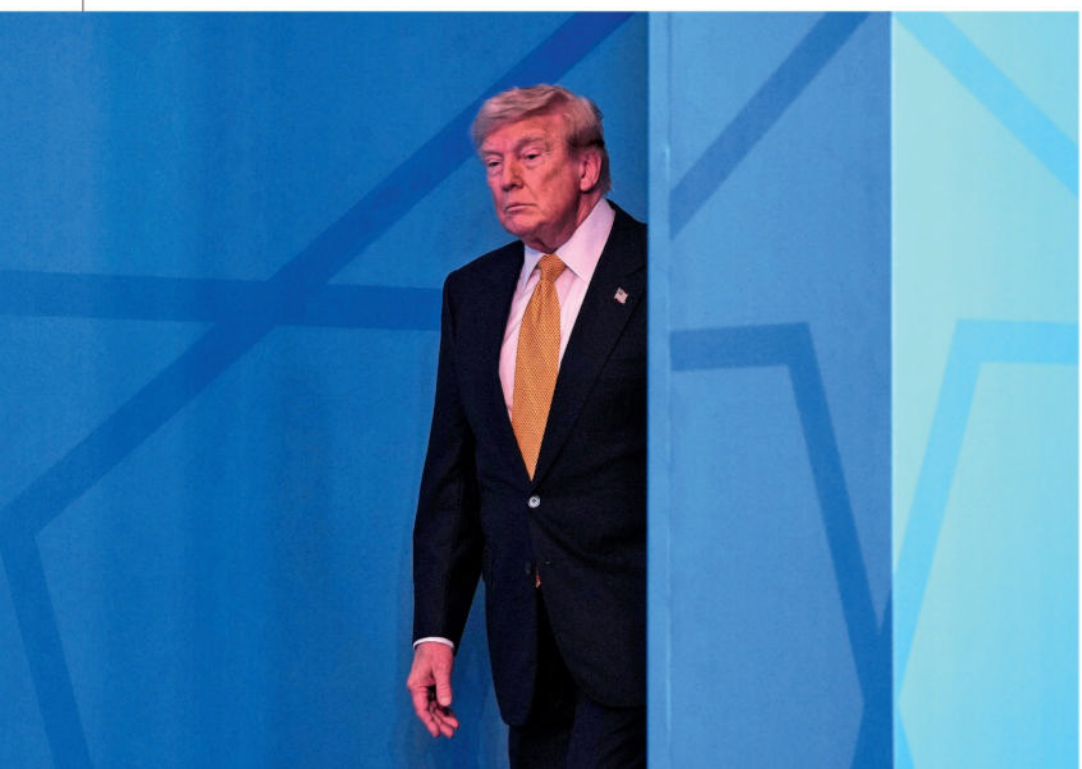
Despite the unexpectedly emollient finale, a school of thought has emerged that Trump's regular bashing of allies will leave a permanent mark.

Analysts predict that Nato will become a more Europe-led alliance as the US's European partners make good on their commitment - made at last year's summit - to spend 5% of GDP on defence by 2035.

Kupchan, author of a recent article entitled America does not Know its own Mind, warned that Trump was a symptom, rather than a cause, of a US foreign policy malaise. "The underlying problem is the collapse of the political centre - the reality that the United States doesn't really have a foreign policy," he said. "Every time there's a presidential election, we swing from one grand strategy to a completely different grand strategy.

"If you're the chancellor of Germany or the prime minister of Japan and have relied for decades on the US security guarantee, you have to plan for the worst, because the United States is passing through such a prolonged period of political dysfunction that you don't know whether you can count on Uncle Sam."

ROBERT TAIT IS A POLITICAL CORRESPONDENT FOR GUARDIAN US



▼ Donald Trump arrives for the Nato summit in Turkey
FRANCISCO SECO/AP

About-turn
Donald Trump's remarkable public change of heart towards Zelenskyy may be fuelled by disappointment in Putin for offering no concessions to help end a conflict that has now lasted longer than the first world war, as well as a consciousness of sentiments in US Congress, to which the president had paid little heed in other affairs.



Lindsey Graham was a cheerleader for the Iraq war, as well as Trump's war on Iran

BONNIE CASH/ SHUTTERSTOCK

ANALYSIS
UNITED STATES

Complex legacy

Graham put a hawkish spin on America's worldview

By *David Smith* WASHINGTON

It was revealing that one of the first tributes to Lindsey Graham, the US senator who died on Saturday aged 71, came from Itamar Ben-Gvir, Israel's national security minister, a far-right provocateur who recently caused widespread anger by sharing footage of himself taunting bound activists who had been trying to sail to Gaza with aid.

Benjamin Netanyahu, the Israeli prime minister, was not far behind, calling Graham a "great friend of Israel and a cherished friend of mine", and he was quickly followed by Ukraine's president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, who described him as "a true defender of freedom and the values that make our world safer".

With eulogies also flowing from Nato allies and Taiwan, it was evident that Graham, one of 100 senators in Washington, had a global reach that few could match. He travelled the world to advocate for a muscular US foreign policy, frequently visited American troops stationed overseas and was vital in shaping Donald Trump's worldview. But his legacy was complicated and often bloody.

"There's no doubt Lindsey Graham was a central figure in Republican foreign policy circles and played a significant role in broader conversations about America's place in the world," said Brett Bruen, a former director of global engagement in Barack Obama's White House. "He was certainly similar to his old pal John McCain and in many ways he inherited that mantle, albeit not with the same moral clarity that McCain seemed to hold on to despite the way that Trump had upended Republican politics."

A former air force lawyer and member of the South Carolina air national guard, Graham was a leading neoconservative hawk whose political career came full circle in the Middle East over two decades. In 2003 he was a cheerleader for George W Bush's war in Iraq. In 2026 he was a crucial influence on Trump's war in Iran.

The Iraq campaign saw hundreds of thousands of lives lost and no weapons of mass destruction found.

Undeterred, Graham promoted policies aimed at isolating Iran. He opposed Obama's nuclear deal and in 2015 called for pre-emptive military action that would leave Iran's military "a shell of its former self".

Those instincts often appeared incompatible with Trump's "America first" rhetoric, which cast suspicion on overseas military adventures. Yet once Trump's nomination for president became inevitable in 2016, Graham steadily transformed from fierce adversary to close ally, personal friend and golf partner. He became a frequent visitor to the White House and adviser to Trump on foreign affairs, especially Iran, Israel and Ukraine.

Adam Schiff, a Democratic senator for California, told NBC's Meet the Press programme last Sunday: "Many of us considered him the Trump whisperer. If we wanted to know what the president's thinking was or how he might be moved on something, you would go to Lindsey to discuss it."

Graham applauded Trump's decision to strike Iranian nuclear sites last year. Along with Netanyahu, he was arguably one of the most persuasive voices in encouraging Trump to go to war in February, despite the reported reservations of JD Vance and others.

It was a stance that reassured more traditional Republican foreign policy hawks but caused unrest in the Maga movement, which had supported Trump in part because of his promise to keep the US out of "forever wars".

Graham remained loyal to the point of sycophancy towards Trump. The senator's sudden death could remove a check on Trump's impulses and cut off access for foreign leaders who had come to depend on him as an interlocutor.

In April, Graham was among guests at a British embassy garden party in Washington attended by King Charles and Queen Camilla. Approached by the Guardian, he proved cordial and talkative and mentioned that he had spoken to Trump earlier that day. Evidently unburdened by doubts about the US interventions in Venezuela and Iran, he also cheerfully made a prediction: Cuba would be next.

DAVID SMITH IS THE GUARDIAN'S WASHINGTON BUREAU CHIEF

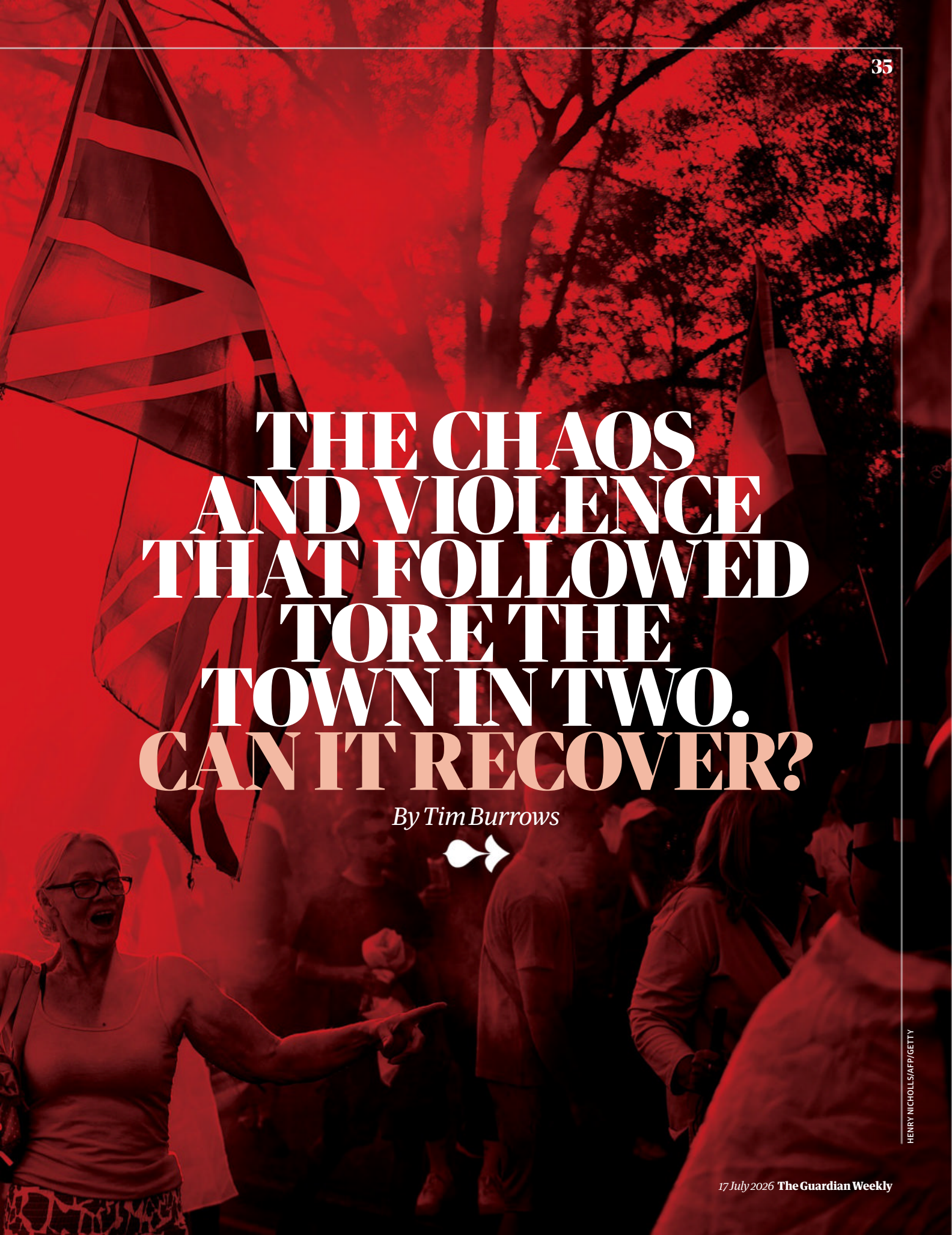
> *If we wanted to know what Trump was thinking, you would go to Lindsey to discuss it*



LAST SUMMER, EPPING'S BELL HOTEL BECAME THE FOCUS OF ASYLUM PROTESTS.

THE CHAOS AND VIOLENCE THAT FOLLOWED TORE THE TOWN IN TWO. CAN IT RECOVER?

By Tim Burrows



HENRY NICHOLLS/AFP/GETTY

When Sherzod* moved to Epping in 2025, he was dreaming of a little garden, long dog walks in the forest and more space to breathe. At 20, he had moved from Uzbekistan to the UK to study law, then lived in north London for decades. In his mid-40s, after establishing himself in a media job, he began visiting the forest – 2,400 hectares of green lung saved by the Epping Forest Act 1878. The pretty shops of the old south-west Essex town delighted him. "I just liked the high street, I liked the people," he says. "The people were really friendly."

Epping was created by the canons of Waltham Abbey in the 13th century as a market town on the road from London to Cambridge. Its high street is still thriving. There is a Gail's bakery and an M&S Food shop; the four-bed semis in the estate agents' windows are listed at just shy of £1m ($1.3m).

Sherzod settled on an area overlooking the rolling hills of west Essex and kept his eye on property sites "like a hawk" for years. Finally, in early 2025, a house came up in the exact spot he was hoping for. On moving day, in early August, he headed along the high road into town to buy some lunch. As he walked, a driver lowered their car window and shouted: "Go home."

Sherzod froze. At first, he wondered if he was the intended target, but he couldn't see anyone else the abuse would have been aimed at. A few days later, something similar happened. A motorcyclist rode close to him and sounded his horn to the rhythm of a football chant: "Do-do, do-do-do, do-do-do-do, Eng-land!" There was no tournament on at the time. By the winter, Sherzod had bought a long raincoat to protect himself from the drivers who deliberately drove too close to the pavement, through potholes, to soak him.

These provocations filled Sherzod with dread, but he wasn't exactly surprised. Just after he had paid the deposit on his new house, there had been a flurry of protests against a hotel housing asylum seekers situated a few minutes' walk away.

The Bell hotel began life in the 16th century as a roadside inn, serving merchants travelling in and out of London and farmers taking livestock to market. More recently, it was a low-rent hotel, before being repurposed in 2020 to house asylum seekers. During the Covid pandemic, passage to the UK via road and air stopped and the numbers of asylum seekers arriving by small boats grew.

'WE NEVER, EVER GO OUT. WE DON'T HANG AROUND EPPING ON THE DAYS OF THE PROTESTS'

Initially, the most vocal opponents of the hotel's change of use were two local far-right politicians: Eddy Butler, formerly the elections chief for the British National party (BNP), and Julian Leppert, then a For Britain councillor in Waltham Abbey. (Leppert once said he "ideally" wanted to keep Epping for white people only.)

According to one neighbour of the Bell, Steve*, most locals were "never really concerned" about the asylum seekers next door. "I've got two daughters," he says. "They've never had any problem walking past the hotel or into the high street." In the summer, the Bell residents used to have their dinner, then head to the cricket ground nearby. "I'd go over in the morning and walk my dog," says Steve. "There was no rubbish or anything. You wouldn't even know they'd been there."

But in July 2025, the largely cordial relationship between Epping and the asylum seekers ended abruptly.

Hadush Gerberslasie Kebatu had entered the UK on 29 June, travelling nearly 9,660 kilometres from Ethiopia, through Sudan, Libya, Italy and France, before crossing the Channel in a small boat. He was transferred to the Bell hotel on 7 July and on the same day approached a group of 14-year-old schoolchildren on a bench near the local Domino's. Kebatu asked if he could have some of their pizza.

Although the children had told him they were 14, Kebatu proceeded to tell the girls that "they were pretty [and] that he wanted to have babies with them", then invited them back to the Bell hotel, according to a court document recounting the events of that day. Kebatu followed the teenagers around Epping; at one point, he tried to get them to drink alcohol and attempted a kiss.

One witness told the court that Kebatu had asked the victim to "come back to Africa and [told her] that she would make a good wife". A witness "recalled that at one point after [the victim] had refused to let the defendant kiss her, he tapped his own cheek as if for her to kiss him". Kebatu was challenged by another victim, who was over 16 and had been touched by him on the thigh already. She called the police, but he ran away.

The next day, 8 July, the same group of children saw Kebatu sitting on a bench on the edge of the high street. This time, he encouraged the two 14-year-old girls to kiss. He also asked one of them to sit down with him and put his hand on her thigh. Later that day, he was arrested. On 4 September, he was found guilty at Chelmsford magistrates court of two counts of sexual assault, one of attempted sexual assault, one count of inciting a girl to engage in sexual activity and one count of harassment without violence.

The day after Kebatu was arrested, the leader of Epping Forest district council, Chris Whitbread, a Conservative, broke the news that the suspect in this case was from the hotel. The story exploded. Here, according to some, was exactly what the far right had warned of.

Whitbread asked local residents to "stay calm", but his statement was criticised for providing fuel for a potential fire. "Epping Forest district council has consistently opposed the use of the Bell hotel to house asylum seekers," he said. "It's totally unsuitable. It lacks the infrastructure and support services required, putting residents and asylum seekers at risk." Whitbread ended his statement by asking residents not to "rely on Facebook chatter or social media chatter". It was too late.

In August 2024, an innocuous-looking local Facebook group had been set up called Epping Forest Residents Group. On the day of Whitbread's statement, its name was changed to Epping Says NO. Three of the admins – Callum Barker, Adam Clegg and Andrew Piper – were members of Homeland, described by the anti-extremism organisation Hope Not Hate as "a fascist political party that splintered from Patriotic Alternative, the UK's largest neo-Nazi group".

They were joined by Craig Kitts, an Epping local who then ran a vehicle-recovery business and calls himself "the Flag Man". As part of the Raise the Colours campaign, which began last summer, he helped adorn the streets of Epping with St George's cross flags. When I visited Epping last month, a new round of union flags and St George's crosses had been put up by the same group, disguised as workmen.

The ringleader of Epping Says NO was Barker, who describes himself as the "Lion of Epping" and seems ambitious about how far his extreme political beliefs can travel. (Like many on the far right, he has recently thrown his weight behind the party Restore Britain.)

"I don't want integration, I want entire communities gone," Barker wrote recently on X, in a typical post. Epping Says NO presents itself as the voice of Epping. But its focus, rather than being on the town itself, seems to be far-right talking points about "migrants" who commit

crimes – particularly rape – and how these justify the deportation of entire communities on ethnic grounds.

Through this local media hub, far-right organisers planned a protest for Sunday 13 July 2025. Despite the organisers saying the event would be "peaceful", two of the hotel's security guards were assaulted and had to be treated for serious injuries after an attack described by the police as "racially aggravated". Far-right activists, including Barker and Leppert, were at the event – as were counterprotesters – but most were local people unaffiliated to any political movement.

Another protest was planned for the next Thursday, 17 July, the day of Kebatu's appearance at Chelmsford magistrates court. Police were informed that attendees had been advised on group chats to "mask up" and bring "rage". A pitched battle between protesters and the police ensued, with projectiles thrown by masked children, among others. The unrest left the high street blocked off for hours.

Ch Insp Terry Fisher said: "In my 20 years of policing, I have never witnessed disorder of this scale in Essex, and certainly not in a town like Epping." Razia Sharif, a Liberal Democrat councillor who now serves as the mayor of Epping, had her fence kicked down by protesters and broken beer bottles strewn across her driveway.

The men who lived at the Bell were trapped inside. Ali, an Arabic-speaking Kurd from Syria, arrived there about 10 days before Kebatu's assaults. At first, he says, "we were happy, our lives were stable, each of us waiting for our papers. But after he committed that heinous act – of course, this is unacceptable to anyone – protests began. We would stay in our room as if we had committed a crime. We couldn't study or go out."

Ali communicates with me by social media, as he doesn't trust his English (which seems to be very good). He came to the UK to flee Syria, which he describes as "almost completely destroyed". Before he left, he was an IT student facing mandatory military service. "I left Syria because it is difficult for me to kill and fight," he says.





A town divided Police and protesters scuffle outside council offices in Epping last August. Before the protests started, Bell residents would often go to the cricket ground near the hotel in the summer months

CHRIS J RATCLIFFE/ AFP/GETTY/ALAMY

Live ammunition passed over his head as he entered Turkey. He went two days without food while hiding inside a truck. When he finally reached the Channel, he was at sea for six hours in a small boat carrying 68 people – men, women and children – until the British police arrived. "Anything could have happened; we could all have died," he says. "I will not allow my family to take any illegal route, because it is a dangerous route; you will see death with your own eyes in the sea."

His father, mother and brother remain in Syria. He cannot talk to them often, as they don't have electricity or the internet. "Our lives were filled with worry," he says of being barricaded in the hotel during the protests. "We feared for our families, who were in the war and had no means of comfort, and we worried about our own fate."

THE ASSOCIATION OF THE PROTESTS WITH VIOLENCE and hooliganism alarmed some campaigners, including Orla Minihane, a financial services consultant who insisted they should be led by local mothers rather than masked men. She made her case through the social media channels of Adam Brooks, a local pub landlord turned hard-right citizen journalist. Minihane formed the Pink Ladies, a group named for the colour of their uniform.

Minihane wasn't just a concerned local mother, though: she had become the vice-chair of Reform UK's Epping Forest local branch in late 2024 and was selected as a candidate for the 2025 local elections (which were subsequently suspended). She has since defected to Restore Britain, becoming its spokesperson on women's and girls' safety. Her first foray into frontline campaigning at the Bell led her to share a stage with the then Homeland member Barker at an early protest. "We are not happy with these men in this hotel because we fear for our children," she told the BBC. "If that makes me far right then so be it."

The protests took place on Thursdays and Sundays for the rest of 2025. They increased in intensity, particularly after the council took the government to court, applying for an interim injunction to stop asylum seekers being housed at the hotel. This was seen by some as a populist David versus Goliath battle between the local people and the national government. Protests outside asylum accommodation spread across the country, leading to unrest and scores of arrests.

Aisha*, a 51-year-old British Bangladeshi who grew up in east London and moved to Epping in 2012 with her husband, who is white, had to start commuting from Chingford rail station to avoid the protesters arriving at Epping station. "We have made a bit of a cocoon for ourselves," she says of life since the protests started. "We never, ever go out; we don't hang around Epping on the days of the protests."

When Aisha was a child, the National Front and the BNP were active. She remembers her mother hurrying her away as racist taunts were shouted from passing cars. The atmosphere feels even more unpleasant to her now. "Having flags up, it's like going back in time to the 80s, except it's worse. In the 80s, whether somebody put up a flag or painted a swastika, you knew that generally these were horrible people and the politicians condemned it, the media condemned it. You knew they didn't have the public on side." She points to local Reform UK support for the Raise the Colours initiative.

The town was the centre of a dark and volatile moment in Britain in 2025. Fireworks were shot towards the hotel as the asylum seekers tried to sleep; dogs were brought to jump menacingly at the fences. A video posted on TikTok on 19 July 2025 shows

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a white man chasing a hotel resident, scaring him to the extent that he runs into the high road, to the laughter of those standing outside the hotel. When schoolchildren made a banner in late July that read: "Epping welcomes all … except racists. There's no place for hate here!" it was taken away and burned in a fire.

One protester I speak to says the only way to sort out the "migrant problem" may be insurrection. Lee Collinson, a 68-year-old retiree who has recently taken up bodybuilding, lives in a penthouse apartment on the high road featuring a novelty waterfall and portraits of Horatio Nelson and Winston Churchill (the MP for Epping from 1924 to 1945). Collinson says he went to the protests to protect "daughters" and "granddaughters" from people he says were sent to the UK by the investor and philanthropist George Soros to destabilise and take over western countries. Collinson says he has read a lot about it. When I ask where he gets his information, he replies: "YouTube!"

In August 2025, campaigners celebrated when Epping Forest district council was granted an interim high court injunction to temporarily block new arrivals to the Bell hotel and allow the removal of its occupants. The decision was soon overturned by the court of appeal – and all hell broke loose. "As goes Epping, so goes all of England," wrote Elon Musk on 29 August. Musk is known for his preoccupation with English politics, but the intensity of his interest in Epping still felt bizarre. The next day, he tweeted his latest call to arms: "Every village in Britain will become Epping unless the people of Britain take action now."

When Kebatu was accidentally released from jail in October, it only added to the hysteria. Epping's WhatsApp groups pinged with panic when a rumour spread that an asylum seeker had entered the grounds of a school while pupils were in attendance, leading the police to release a statement that day saying the reports weren't true. In fact, a homeless man had been looking for food in the bins at a school's playing field. Kebatu was found in London, arrested and swiftly deported.

"HOW AWFUL FOR THAT GIRL," SAYS JANE*, a financial worker who lives in Epping, of Kebatu's 14-year-old victim. "She's had a horrible encounter with a man. Many, many of us have had it – and it leaves a mark, because it makes us realise that we are vulnerable and that men pretty much can touch us and do what they want. That's a horrible thing to grow up with as a young girl and as a woman."

The fact the incident has been used to serve a far-right political point has probably made it worse. "Now, that incident has become rape," says Jane, referring to the many times protesters have described the incident in those inaccurate and more serious terms.

Jane and I speak in a side room of the local Quaker meeting hall, almost a year after the protests started. Epping for Everyone, a group Jane helped form as a result of the protests, has just held an event. It was supposed to be a community picnic, but sudden, squalling downpours meant it had to be moved inside. It doesn't seem to matter. Kids chat while filling paper plates with crisps and sandwiches, their parents nursing cups of tea.

Epping for Everyone grew out of righteous anger. "For me, it was absolute anger that these men could turn up in our town and speak for me, speak for women, and talk about our women and girls and do it in such a violent, misogynistic, abusive, aggressive way," says Jane. "I didn't know what to do with myself." At first, she started posting her views online to see if she could find any like-minded people. Her family warned her off saying anything, as the discourse had become so grim. "Obviously, I couldn't help myself," she says. She was met





Lifeline Bell hotel residents took part in a football tournament organised by charity Care4Calais. Below, counter protesters from Stand Up To Racism and local trade unions march through Epping

GUY SMALLMAN/GETTY

with abuse, but also got "lots of positive feedback from people saying: 'Thank God someone said it, we are too scared to'".

Around the same time, Amelia* found herself driving back from the shops, listening to Reform UK's Nigel Farage speaking about Epping on a news bulletin. "I don't think anybody in London even understands just how close we are to civil disobedience on a vast scale in this country," he said. Amelia pulled over and called the radio station LBC, which was hosting a phone-in about the Bell. "I'd never done that before," she says. "My hands were shaking, dialling the number."

Jane heard the phone-in, realised she and Amelia had mutual friends and texted her. They arranged an all-female meeting in a park. "I sat on the bench going: please make someone come – and 30 women came and we were all outraged," says Jane. "Most women who turned up would have had some experience of being sexually assaulted, abused, harassed, whatever, and we were being spoken about. How dare they tell my story?"

A WhatsApp group was formed, a Facebook logo designed. Epping for Everyone was a revelation for locals who felt isolated by the takeover of their town. Men soon joined, including Sherzod, and some members started volunteering at the hotel, helping the asylum seekers and teaching them English. "When I go into the hotel to volunteer, it's not uncommon for people to drive past and shout: 'Scum!' at me," says Jane.

The protests outside the Bell hotel dropped to once a week, every Sunday between 4pm and 6pm. In March 2026, Epping for Everyone posted a video on their social media channels showing the full effect of the disturbances on a woman and her family who lived close by: "The dog is very stressed out, the baby is stressed out, we can't sit in the garden because of these people that are full of hate," she says, as the sound of fireworks and loud shouting through megaphones

threaten to drown her out. Rebecca Fricker, a volunteer at the Bell hotel, talks of the gazebo put up on a patch of grass by protesters. "Sometimes they have prosecco," she says. "It's a real party, basically. But a very unpleasant party."

As winter turned to spring, the men in the hotel were still living under a kind of house arrest, afraid for their safety. But then came a lifeline: a football tournament organised by the charity Care4Calais, scheduled for May. An Epping for Everyone member, Dom, the coach of a local Sunday league team, had been organising some of the Bell's residents into a men's team for an occasional kickabout. He says the prospect of the tournament "galvanised the boys. Something quite normal for us, to go out and have a game of football, was massive for them."

They started training every day. It wasn't safe for them to congregate in large numbers to play in the nearby park, so they organised training in the hotel's concrete courtyard. "Drills, little games, learning from each other how they play," says Dom, whom the hotel residents call "coach".

They entered the competition as Bell FC. The tournament was held at the east London ground of Clapton FC, with six eight-a-side teams competing in 15-minute games. "It was a crazy day … we had thunderstorms, we had hail, then blazing sunshine," says Dom. "I said to the boys: 'Welcome to England.'"

Bell FC lost their first game, despite playing well. "The boys were devastated," says Dom. "Because, for them, it was just this. There wasn't a game next week. There wasn't a league or anything else to do better next time. To them, it was fundamentally important that they did well at this." That day, Ali had been told his application for asylum had been rejected. Dom says he looked despondent. But then he started banging a drum lying around the stands, chanting: "Bell hotel! Bell hotel! Bell hotel!"

Dom says: "They just got better and better and better." Despite the setbacks, the weather and everything they had been through, Bell FC took home the trophy.

Epping's high street may seem more affluent than others in the UK, but you don't have to be here long to hear familiar problems. Outside a greasy spoon cafe, as her kids finish their breakfasts, a woman worries about the lack of council housing. Inside another cafe, nearer to the Bell, the owner is concerned about high business rates and says "they need to sort out all the potholes".

'IT'S LIKE A DISEASE. IT'S SPREAD EVEN TO PEOPLE WHO WERE NOT RACIST BEFORE'

The irony of Epping is that people have every right to be angry, but the protesters have chosen the wrong target. "Lots of people are just like: well, my children don't have anywhere to live, there's no social housing," says Fricker. Epping has long been associated with the politics of Thatcherism and privatisation, since Norman Tebbit was its MP. "You've been boasting about having the lowest council tax for ever and then wondering why there's no money to fix the potholes," she says.

It is only in the past month or so that things have started to calm down in the town. The flags that ran all along the high road and high street have been taken down by residents. Those who were putting up the flags have been discredited by a spate of recent arrests. Kitts pleaded guilty in May to assaulting a woman, while Ben Cullen, a Raise the Colours organiser in Oxfordshire, has been charged with making indecent images of children. He denies the charges.

The battle of the Bell hotel is over. On 11 June, the residents – including Ali, who has appealed against his rejected asylum claim – were taken without warning to a processing centre in another part of the country. At first, the asylum seekers were told it was temporary, while some fire regulations were fixed, but it became apparent that it was part of a national strategy to empty asylum hotels. Restore Britain's Rupert Lowe, among others, has claimed victory, while pushing to make things even more hostile for asylum seekers.

Sherzod is mulling over whether to stay in Epping. Since the trauma of moving day last summer, half his boxes are yet to be unpacked. "The horrible genie has been let out of the bottle," he says. "It's like a disease; it's spread even to people who were not racist before, and I still feel that whenever I go into town."

I decide to go to Bell Common at 4pm on Sunday 14 June, where thousands once protested. As I approach, there are a handful of people standing by their parked cars on the side of the high road – but, three days after the hotel has been emptied, there are no placards, masks or prosecco. A middle-aged woman pulls an England flag from her car boot and drapes it around her shoulders.

Some are suspicious about whether the asylum seekers have been removed. I am told some of the protesters have gone around the back of the hotel to find out – filming their investigations for social media, naturally.

A year after the protests began, Epping is an English town torn in two. While Epping for Everyone has an alliance with the local Quaker church and focuses on community meetings, food bank collections, inclusivity and cohesion, the protesters meet on the side of the road, each arriving in their own car. They have forged their own sense of community that they can't seem to let go, even though the asylum seekers have left the hotel – a community built on paranoia, the feeling that something is wrong and they are being lied to. The belief in social cohesion and shared understanding on one side is derided as "woke" by the other. But it strikes me as our only hope.

I pass an electricity pylon and reach a wooded area, where an exasperated security guard warns people not to come too close to the hotel. A bearded guy from Romford in a cap covered in "patriotic" badges, who later introduces himself as a former electrician and aspiring YouTuber called Richard Strange, streams while articulating his doubts that the Bell is really empty.

I talk to James*, a mechanic in his 20s. I ask him what a political party could offer to young people in Epping. "Just better support," he says. "'Cause everyone remembers the good times, where you had a bit of extra money and you could go and buy that nice thing. You just want a better standard of living for everyone." James says solving the migration crisis is part of that. I wonder how that argument became so successful. Is it because of the lack of an alternative narrative of hope from Keir Starmer's Labour? I ask James if he would vote for Andy Burnham. "Possibly," he says. "I try to be open-minded."

Three young women dressed in black Juicy Couture hoodies are also sceptical that the Bell is empty; they creep up to the open windows for a closer look. One of them brandishes a stick to lift the curtains, while another films on her phone. When they see someone resting on a sofa inside, they all scream and run away. He is probably a security guard, but they say he is "a migrant". The resulting footage is clipped up and posted on a TikTok account, soundtracked by an AI-generated song called What the Fuck Has Happened to Britain?. On the way back, one of them shows off a prize she has found: Bell FC's football. ●

TIM BURROWS WRITES ABOUT SOCIETY, CULTURE AND PLACE

** Names have been changed*





Look of love Aaron and Rachael were together for 20 years before they met Kasey. They have been a throuple for seven years ZACK WITTMAN

The rules of three

From confessional memoirs to the movies, 'throuple' relationships are everywhere. Here, happy trios and jilted lovers share the truth about living with two other people *By Kitty Drake*

Priscilla can pinpoint the moment she realised that her throuple was falling apart. Her fiancee, Kiara, had started kissing their shared girlfriend, Olivia, for just a little too long. One night, after the three of them had gone out for a romantic dinner in Savannah, Georgia, where they live, Olivia and Kiara started kissing in the front seats of the family car and it seemed as if they were never going to stop. Priscilla tried to reach out and touch her fiancee's shoulder, but her seat belt was buckled. Unbuckling and leaning forward felt intrusive. And, anyway, Kiara and Olivia seemed to have forgotten all about her. Watching the kiss unfold, Priscilla thought about how by rights it was her turn to sit up front. She was always in the back seat. She felt a flicker of something competitive. "I worried, am I desired less than her?" she recalls now. "Will I be replaced?"

In the early days, Priscilla felt giddy with the excitement of

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‘When real emotions get involved, things can get more complicated’

being in a throuple. She and Kiara had been together for eight years, and adding a third person felt like a way of exploring non-monogamy without losing one another, because every new romantic experience would be shared. Olivia was an old friend, so Priscilla and Kiara’s children were comfortable with her. When the kids were in bed, they would walk to the beach holding hands as a three, to watch the sunset. At night, they would curl up to sleep together.

Sometimes, Priscilla would wake up alone on one side of the bed, and see Kiara and Olivia cuddling without her – at first this didn’t bother her. “I felt a little left out, but I was happy that Kiara was happy,” Priscilla says. The problems really began when both Priscilla and Kiara began to fall deeply in love with Olivia. “The thing about throuples is that when real emotions get involved, things get more complicated.”

IN A THROUPLE, THREE PEOPLE COMMIT to forming a romantic unit together – just like a couple, but with one extra person. In other forms of non-monogamy, you might have multiple partners, but you are typically only ever in bed with one partner at a time. Throuples date and have sex and sometimes even raise children as a three.

In Britain, 9% of adults are open to being in a polyamorous relationship, according to one recent poll, and while no official data about throuples exists, anecdotally they seem to be on the rise. In 2017, three men in Colombia became the first throuple in the world to form a legal union. Earlier this year, the author Lindy West released a memoir about falling in love with her husband’s mistress. The three currently live together in a 100-year-old log cabin in the woods outside Seattle – one of many cities in the US where activists are fighting for legal recognition for multi-partnered households. Eight cities across Massachusetts and the west coast of the US now have some form of protection in place to prevent polyamorous people from being discriminated against by their employers and landlords.

It used to be that the throuple was the kind of offbeat relationship configuration you would only see on television if it was being investigated by Louis Theroux. But today, the couple has fallen out of fashion, with films such as Passages (2023) and Challengers (2024) exploring the pleasures of experimenting with a third partner. One particularly tender representation was HBO’s DTF St Louis, in which David Harbour plays a suburbanite who finds out his wife is having an affair with a neighbour. Instead of flying into a jealous rage, Harbour’s character does something radically different: he tries to develop sexual feelings for this neighbour, so they can live and love as a three. This role was a telling choice for Harbour because his estranged wife, Lily Allen, released a tell-all album last year about their real-life open marriage (although in Allen’s account, Harbour’s actual experiments in polyamory were much less sweet and wholesome than in the show).

But as the throuple becomes more commonplace, there seems to be a growing backlash against this relationship structure. An analysis of sexual fantasies by the Kinsey Institute suggests that gen Z are turning away from polyamory, with 81% fantasising about monogamy instead.

Being happily polyamorous requires a daunting degree of patience and thoughtfulness, because you have to continually debrief with your lovers to check that their needs are being met – but throupledom



Shared feelings Priscilla and Kiara, left, are considering forming another throuple. Caitlin, above, is more wary KENDRICK BRINSON; KATE PETERS

seems to require even greater reserves of emotional maturity. Managing the desires and insecurities of three people at once is a feat, and even within polyamorous circles, throuples have a reputation for being fraught. In The Ethical Slut, a 1997 guidebook to polyamory, authors Janet W Hardy and Dossie Easton issue a specific warning about throuples, noting that lovers tend to compete with one another for affection within the triad, like "siblings in a family".

In Britain, about 42% of marriages end in divorce (in some European countries it's more than 50%). But what really happens when you attempt to settle down as a three? I have spent the past six months talking to people who have been in throuples that have gone spectacularly wrong (and some that are going spectacularly right) about how to manage infighting and rivalry in these relationships. How can you make a throuple work? And what happens when a throuple implodes?

In The Ethical Slut, the authors write that in any menage a trois "there are actually three couples, A&B, B&C and C&A". What makes the throuple unstable is that, at any time, there can be dramatic reversals in allegiances. In Priscilla's throuple, it was initially she and Olivia who were the closer pair – and Kiara who felt excluded. In the first weeks of the relationship, Kiara discovered that Priscilla and Olivia had been having sex while she was at work. Sex as a twosome wasn't technically against the rules of the arrangement, Kiara tells me, but "it was very hurtful and it broke a lot of trust".

Kiara – who is in her mid-30s – is an executive chef at a popular wedding venue, and the first time I speak to her, Priscilla, 28, is sitting on the bed beside her. The two of them pass the phone back and forth between them, talking about the betrayals that had rocked their faith in one another with the kind of honesty that the average monogamous couple can only dream of. At one point, Priscilla takes the phone to tell me there was a period of time when Kiara would call her from work multiple times a day because she felt so panicked that sex might be happening without her. "But then things changed," she says. As the months went by the dynamic shifted, and it became Kiara and Olivia who were closer, and whose kisses went on for longer.

ALISSA, 50, TELLS ME A SIMILAR STORY about the power-flip that happened in her throuple when she talks to me over the phone from her home in Connecticut. Alissa and her husband, Rob, have got five children aged 14 to 22, and, while the older children are aware that their parents have experimented with an open relationship, they don't know the details.

After 21 years of marriage, Rob revealed to Alissa that he was bisexual. Experimenting with another man together seemed like a way to cope with that revelation without it breaking their marriage. Initially when they met Michael, 33 , Alissa felt anxious. She worried that Michael was only pretending to feel an attraction to her in order to get to Rob, and remembers one awkward early date where Michael was all over Rob in a cab, and the two of them barely looked at her at all. But as the relationship progressed, Michael and Alissa developed an intense bond, and Rob felt increasingly threatened.

One night when the three of them were in bed together, Alissa and Michael started kissing, and Rob became so distressed he had a panic attack. Alissa had put on new underwear, and Rob started interrogating her about why he had never seen this lingerie before. "He was, like, 'Well, you haven't put that on for me lately!' – but the truth was that Rob and I hadn't been having sex with each other because we saw Michael two times a week, and who is having more sex than that?" Shortly after this incident Michael decided to leave the throuple because he couldn't stand the infighting any more.

Initially, Rob hadn't wanted to talk to me because he found the breakup too painful to revisit, but a few weeks later the couple call me together so that he can offer his perspective. "I was madly in love with this guy," Rob says. "Head over heels." He says that it wasn't simply the case that he was feeling possessive over his wife; he also felt horribly rejected by Michael.

Alissa says that her and Rob's marriage has survived the whole experience, but only just. Sometimes she feels resentful because dating another man wasn't originally her idea, it was Rob's. "I was pissed because I had this little tiny seedling that I didn't even want in the first place and I gave it all the sunlight and all the water, and then when it started to grow Rob was ready to end it."

Earlier this year, when Lindy West's memoir, Adult Braces, was published, much of the critical reception centred on the idea that West had been coerced into forming a throuple. Readers wondered whether West, who had previously identified as straight, was feigning sexual interest in her husband's affair partner as a kind of coping mechanism because she was so desperate to hold on to her husband. (In a since-deleted Substack post subtitled I Am Not the Victim of My Marriage, West refuted this claim.) The criticism of West's memoir was often cruel, but I think the intensity of the reaction speaks to a real fear many of us have that, as polyamory becomes more mainstream, terms such as "throuple" and "ethically non-monogamous" will be wielded by faithless partners who want to legitimise their desire to cheat. However, having spoken to real-life throuples, the picture looks more complicated because the dynamics in the triad chop and change.

Even within the polyamorous community, throuples are considered messy and potentially unethical – not necessarily because they disrupt an existing couple, but because they

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In a way, people who form throuples are just braver than the rest of us

exploit the third person who enters the relationship. On polyamorous online message boards, couples who post that they are looking for a third person to join their relationship are often criticised for being "unicorn hunters". A "unicorn" is a kind of shorthand in poly communities for a rare, bisexual person who is open to joining an existing relationship, whereas the couple are characterised as a pair of unscrupulous "hunters" who seek to use this unicorn as their sexual tool.

Lucy, a self-described "former unicorn" I connect with via Reddit, tells me that the hardest thing about her throuple experience was that she became a kind of second-class citizen in the relationship. Lucy was 33 when she began dating a married couple, and then moved into their home. She initially assumed that the love and care the husband and wife extended to one another would be extended to her, too. There was a schedule: on Wednesdays she had an individual date with the wife and on Thursdays one with the husband. "The rest of the week, it was, like, do they want to have a threesome, or do they just want to be together tonight?" Lucy says. She was forbidden from having any sexual contact with the husband outside her allotted days. Lucy was deeply infatuated with the couple, particularly the wife, who was 15 years older than her, so she went along with the arrangement – but she was essentially at their beck and call.

The wife also had a "veto power", which meant that at any moment – with no warning – she had the right to finish it with Lucy on her and her husband's behalf. Lucy says she was dumped twice during the year she was in the throuple, because the wife had become fixated on the idea that Lucy was going to run away with her husband.

Caitlin, 31, from London, tells me a similar story about feeling used and discarded by a couple she met while living in Marseille. The couple had been together for eight years and were entirely comfortable with one another, and that made Caitlin feel that she could be unguarded, too. Often, Caitlin found herself daydreaming about their shared future. "I could seriously see myself with them for the rest of my life – living in some gorgeous house with them in the south of France, in nature, kind of separated from the world."

The cracks started to appear when Caitlin began to develop more serious feelings for the girlfriend, Arlette. "I was deeply attracted to him but it was her who I really fell in love with." One morning, when the boyfriend had gone out, Arlette and Caitlin began to fool around in bed together, but Arlette abruptly cut things off. "I felt intensely rejected," Caitlin says. "I could tell from the way she was acting towards me that she wasn't into me like I was into her." The dream, in a throuple, is for all three members to feel equally committed to one another, but the dynamic between Caitlin and the couple disintegrated.

She says that Arlette started cancelling on her at a moment's notice, and telling her the couple needed their "one-on-one" time. After about six months, Caitlin couldn't cope with it any more and called things off. The three of them met for the last time, and Caitlin remembers being in tears. "I don't think I said, 'I'd fallen in love with you', because I had too much shame about saying that, but it was definitely what I felt." Arlette was crying, too, but the couple's reaction brought home to Caitlin – more than anything else could have done – the fact that she had never been an equal player in the relationship. "You know what they said to me? 'You were the best sex toy we ever had.'"

Caitlin is now single, and says she would only consider forming another throuple if everything was "completely equal". If there is an existing bond between two members of the throuple, she explained, they need to work to dissolve those bonds, so that everyone starts on a level playing field. Lucy, who says she would never go back to throupledom again, is more blunt: "If you are in a relationship and at some point you decide to open it up and include one other person, you effectively destroy and end that relationship as it was. It no longer exists." If two members of the throuple are married, she says, they have a duty to "grieve" that marriage. "A lot of couples who get into throuples think that nothing will change between them – there will just be an extra body around – but everything will change."

Olivia left Priscilla and Kiara in February of this year, because she found the intensity of being in a throuple too demanding. Kiara and Priscilla's relationship hasn't been destroyed – they are still together – but it isn't the same. Kiara tells me that in many ways their connection is actually deeper than it was before the throuple, because when she used to feel attracted to another woman, or jealous, she would bury it. "I was like a cis guy with my emotions. I didn't want to talk about feelings." Kiara and Priscilla are more honest with one another now, but as a result there is a lot more raw emotion on display, day-to-day, in the house. Priscilla said she will sometimes look at pictures on social media of Olivia with her new girlfriend and cry openly in front of Kiara, because she feels rejected and hurt by Olivia. Kiara is more restrained and doesn't allow herself to look at the pictures, but sometimes she cries, too. "I feel guilty having my heart broken by someone who is not my fiancee," Priscilla says. "It feels terrible. We both feel it. We are both, like, how are we hurting over this person when we literally have each other?"

I spoke to happy throuples while I was researching this article, and most of them told me that when you feel intensely heartbroken or hurt by a particular member of your triad, the key is to acknowledge it, you have to talk through the pain as it comes up.

Rachael, Aaron and Kasey are a throuple from the Tampa Bay area of Florida who have been living together for seven years. Rachael and Aaron are in their 40s, and were together for 20 years before they met Kasey, 35, but they have worked hard to make sure she has equal standing within the throuple. They apply an organised, thoughtful approach to hashing out emotional issues in the throuple. "We joke that if monogamous couples talked half as much about their feelings as we do in our throuple, the divorce rate would plummet," Aaron says.

The throuple have a weekly date night, but Rachael has a regular one-on-one night with Aaron, too. She also has a regular night with just Kasey. And Aaron and Kasey have their own scheduled one-on-one time. Rachael explains that she usually goes out for the evening when Kasey and Aaron have their couples night, and that re-entering the home at the end of the evening isn't always easy. She doesn't feel jealousy, she says: "It's almost more like I know that they've had a very connecting moment, and me coming back to it feels intrusive."

I wonder why Rachael had chosen to put herself through this. She told me that while we might like to believe that by virtue of being in a monogamous couple nothing can hurt us, that's just an illusion. "The monogamous mindset and the culture of just finding your person and settling down creates a false sense of security," she says. "We think that if we sign these legal documents then we are somehow committed and we have this sense of safety in a relationship – clearly that's not true. People cheat all the time, they're unfaithful, they end up divorced."

In a way, people who form throuples are just braver than the rest of us. The fear of the third haunts most relationships. Throuples choose to invite the third into the relationship and live through all the difficult emotions the rest of us are trying to bury. Recently, Priscilla and Kiara told me that they are thinking about trying to form a new throuple. Kiara is wary, but Priscilla is excited. "We're still discussing it," she says. "But I think it will be an adventure." ●

KITTY DRAKE IS A WRITER AND EDITOR

\Some names have been changed

Comment is free, facts are sacred CP Scott 1918

JOHN HARRIS

The murky web of crypto and politics

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Opinion



UNITED STATES

The Nato summit showed Trump's willingness to disregard all rules

Robert Reich

ILLUSTRATION: GUARDIAN DESIGN; GETTY

At last week's Nato summit, Donald Trump lashed out at other members of the alliance, saying he was "very disappointed with Nato" and asking: "Why are we spending hundreds of billions of dollars, and they're not there for us?" He reiterated his desire to take over Greenland, blasted European energy and immigration policies, insulted Spain, and worried allies by declaring that the fighting between Ukraine and Russia "doesn't affect us".

Yet throughout the proceedings, Trump was treated with as much courtesy and respect as any US president has ever received from Nato – perhaps more. "It was a great meeting, there was a lot of love in that room, a lot of unity," Trump said.

What happened? It's important to understand the source of Trump's power. His power doesn't come from his being president of the most powerful nation in the world. In fact, his arbitrary tariffs, absurd war on Iran, and outright abduction of Nicolás Maduro from Venezuela have reduced the US's standing in much of the world.

Nor does his power come from his Maga base, which is now having second thoughts about supporting someone who got the US involved in another Middle Eastern war, caused prices to rise, and whose administration still refuses to release the complete Epstein files.

Nor does his power flow from any kind of strategic brilliance or cunning. Trump's power comes from his willingness to violate all the norms, rules and laws about how US presidents are supposed to act – to do *anything* that helps him accumulate more wealth, power and glory, and wreak vengeance on anyone who has tried to get in the way.

The Nato presidents and prime ministers treated Trump with extraordinary deference because they're afraid of what he might do if he doesn't get what he wants.

Whether it's Nato, Iran, the World Cup, the 2020 election, making billions off his presidency – or anything else – he's unconstrained by norms, rules, treaties and laws.

When the global community of World Cup fans objected to his intervention to overturn a red card shown to a US footballer, Trump responded: "If [Belgium] beat us, then they can be really proud. The other way, if they beat us, we'll say it was – I'd say – it was rigged, just like the election was rigged in 2020."

> *Trump doesn't give a fig for the world's judgment about right or wrong. He doesn't think about right or wrong*

Note how he corrected himself – from *we'll* say to *I'd* say. Ethics is all about "we" – our collective judgment about what's right or wrong. Trump doesn't give a fig for the world's or the nation's judgment about right or wrong. He doesn't think about right or wrong.

We've been missing the boat by characterising Trump as breaching ethical standards. Ethics assumes some sort of agreed-upon standards against which a breach can be defined and measured. But Trump doesn't have any standards at all. His entire approach to life, to business, and now to the presidency, has nothing whatever to do with standards. It's about winning at all costs. Whatever it takes.

Trump isn't unethical. He's *non-ethical*. He isn't immoral. He's *amoral*.

It's hard for most of us to conceive of living in a Trumpian world without standards, norms, rules or laws – a world composed only of transactions and calculations in which the only test is what's in it for *me* and at what cost.

And that difficulty most of us have of imagining such a world is itself the key to Trump's power. Whether you're president of the United States or anyone else, it's always possible to extract personal benefits by being the first to break a widely accepted norm.

Think of a small town where people don't lock their doors or windows because of the unwritten rule that no one steals. Under these circumstances, the first thief to commit robberies operates at a huge advantage. He can effortlessly get into anyone's house.

This first-mover advantage disappears as soon as people catch on and start locking their doors and windows. But the thief doesn't bear the costs of the locks or the hassle of locking all the doors and windows. He exploits the community's trust. Then, once he destroys that trust, he leaves it to them to protect themselves against such future violations.

That asymmetry – small cost for the violator of trust, large costs for everyone who has to thereafter protect themselves – is the very essence of Trump's modus operandi. He gains wealth, power and glory for himself by shattering norms, after which everyone else has to pick up the pieces.

As president, he has far bigger norms to shatter than does a small-town thief, and at far greater benefit to himself.

As president, his thuggery has paid off, at least for him. But it has also damaged all sorts of institutions that the US and the world have relied on – from Nato to Fifa to the US Department of Justice – institutions based on the trust that no American president would ever do what he's done.

He'll be remembered as the most powerful president the US has ever had, but also the worst.

When he's gone, all of us will be paying to clean up the mess. We'll have to buy an infinite number of locks for an endless number of doors and windows, and spend huge amounts of our time installing them and then keeping them locked ●

✻ **Robert Reich** *is a former US secretary of labour, and a Guardian US columnist*

UNITED KINGDOM

Harry seems doomed to a sad life in the US, and he did it to himself

Stephen Bates



▲ Prince Harry, Duke of Sussex
SHUTTERSTOCK

It really wasn't a very good week for Harry. Britain's fifth in line to the throne retired to Montecito, his gated California fastness – not, as seemed at least possible at the start of the month, having visited his mother country to public sympathy and applause, mending a few broken fences and seeing his old dad again. Instead it was a retreat in confusion, not having stayed in a palace, or seeing his busy pater, and worst of all, bested at huge cost by the Daily Mail newspaper, the *bête noire* of all *bêtes noires*.

The prince might reflect that he has brought many of his troubles on himself. He left with the rightwing press chortling that, for a crusader for personal privacy, he has outed himself much more comprehensively than they ever managed with his rancorous TV interviews about how horrible his family has been to him, his glutinous Netflix series and, most of all, his memoir Spare, with its revelation, among much else, about his frostbitten penis.

Worse still, his obsessive campaign against the tabloid press has dragged other people, most notably Doreen Lawrence, with him into a legal case he was unlikely ever to win. As Mr Justice Nicklin pointed out last week in his 436-page ruling at the end of the three-month phone-hacking trial, inference and hearsay are not enough: hard evidence is needed. Perhaps his lawyers should have pointed that out and perhaps they did, and he didn't listen. It was unfortunate that the chief witness, Gavin Burrows, retracted his evidence that he had been paid to hack celebrity phones 20-odd years ago, but without him the case was fatally undermined.

Harry, or his lawyers, should have known that newspapers don't like to be challenged and employ their own legal teams to check details painstakingly closely before publication (the legal director was a former Labour shadow attorney general when I worked there). The Mail simply could not afford to lose, especially against the prince, and it was relentless in fighting the case. No wonder its former editor Paul Dacre was crowing week as the paper lavished the story across 11 pages with sententious moralising about the freedom of the press.

The ruling may well kick UK press regulation further into the weeds, so Harry's hopes of wielding the simple sword of truth – as Jonathan Aitken, a former, spectacularly unsuccessful litigant against the Guardian, once had it – would seem to be indefinitely delayed. Instead, on 29 July a hearing will begin to give a ruling on the reported £50m ($67m) legal costs of the action, much more than Harry alone can afford and enough to blast a large hole in Elton John's bank balance – let alone Doreen Lawrence's or Simon Hughes's. Dacre was particularly hurt by Lawrence after the Mail championed the family when their son Stephen was killed by white south London thugs in 1993.

There was talk last week of an appeal against Nicklin's judgment, but with the judge having dismissed all 97 allegations against the Mail, this would seem to be wishful thinking.

It is unlikely that King Charles will help to pay his estranged son's debts as the late Queen apparently did with his uncle Andrew's, after the Virginia Giuffre case. At least, the king may reflect, Harry did not learn the news while staying at Buckingham Palace.

Harry's rancour against all those he believes have persecuted him have long since cost him most public sympathy, in the UK at least. The world does not see him on his terms. His demands for special treatment, including police protection for his family while he is in Britain, are unlikely to be met while he is not performing royal duties, and his apparent spurning of the offer of a bed in one of the 52 state bedrooms at Buckingham Palace on his latest visit will not elicit much understanding.

He seems doomed to eke out a sad life in California, and we may not see either his wife Meghan or his children Archie and Lilibet back in the UK any time soon. Maybe the young ones will only see the family realm a decade or more hence if they come backpacking as students – but that might be good for them and the royal family. Perhaps Uncle William will put them up. Time heals ●

✻ **Stephen Bates** *is a former Guardian royal correspondent*



UNITED KINGDOM

The tangle of crypto and our politics goes far beyond Farage

John Harris

This week, the government's representation of the people bill was due to return to the House of Commons for its third reading. It bundles up a multitude of measures, including an extension of the franchise to 16- and 17-year-olds and welcome changes to voter registration. But thanks to the continuing furore around Nigel Farage and his extremely wealthy friends – such as the Thailand-based crypto-investor Christopher Harborne, who gave Farage a £5m ($6.7m) "lottery win" personal gift and has donated in excess of £22m to Reform UK – the aspects of the legislation that have suddenly become its headline measures are focused on big-money donations.

The government has already implemented a moratorium – but only a moratorium – on political donations in cryptocurrencies, the encrypted digital assets that, to quote the Electoral Commission, "present particular challenges and risks in meeting electoral law requirements in identifying donors and ensuring they are permissible". There is a new annual £100,000 limit on donations from British citizens living abroad. Other legislative moves will now take the form of amendments to the bill: they include new checks on whether companies making donations are above board by measuring their profit as well as their revenues, and a requirement for parliamentary candidates to declare any donation above £2,230 (although "personal gifts" will continue to be exempt).

There is also to be a somewhat pathetic cap on donations from people who have recently moved to the UK and become eligible to donate, which will limit them to £100,000 for their first year of residence. Labour backbenchers are reportedly poised with amendments.

Which brings us to the kind of people whom Farage spends a great deal of time with: that increasingly powerful class of high-rollers, often positioned on the hard or far right, who deal and invest in crypto.

Illustration *Sebastien Thibault*

Founded 1821 *Independently owned by the Scott Trust*

At its core is the support – and brazen personal enrichment – of the Trump administration, the constant hum of online transactions whose sheer scale is mind-boggling.

This is the bigger picture that is still overlooked: in the long wake of western governments handing the private sector whatever it fancied, cryptocurrencies simply represent the next step. But Farage is only one small fish in the big pool where much larger politicians and crypto insiders swim. Last year alone, Donald Trump raked in more than $1.4bn from crypto dealings. In the 2024 US election cycle, when Trump opened his campaign to donations in crypto and put out a press release claiming that Maga supporters would "build a crypto army moving the campaign to victory", the crypto industry spent more than $245m. Once again favouring Republicans over Democrats, it has so far found around $190m to influence this year's midterm elections, which (obviously) includes opposing anti-crypto candidates. That amounts to over a third of total corporate election spending.

Another exemplary story, closer to home: Ben Delo is the highly influential co-founder of BitMex, a crypto exchange and derivatives trading platform. Like Farage's embattled de facto chief of staff George Cottrell, he has a colourful history: in early 2022, Delo and his BitMex co-founder both pleaded guilty in the US to failing to establish and maintain an anti-money-laundering programme. As well as having to pay a $10m civil penalty in connection with a parallel case, Delo was sentenced to 30 months' probation, but last year, he became one of a long line of crypto insiders to be pardoned by Trump.

✻ **John Harris** *is a Guardian columnist*

He has a tangle of links to rightwing UK politics, and earlier this year made a £4m donation to Reform. Delo calls the government's new donation restrictions "tinpot" – and has pledged to move back to the UK from Hong Kong (Harborne has made similar noises) to get around them.

In the midst of the farce of the looming Clacton byelection, fresh allegations last weekend about Cottrell personally meeting some of Reform's office costs without his contributions being declared, and police questioning him and his mother about donations to Reform, it is easy to think that Farage's political stock is plunging. But whatever happens, the new British right will survive in some form, and its ties to the crypto world point to the kind of UK it would try to create, given the chance. The reinvention of London as a crypto capital could threaten to erode the barrier between crime and business. If it all ever happens, it will make rightwing Brexiters' visions of London as "Singapore-on-Thames" look like the dream of moderate centrists. And crypto donations, if they were ever allowed, would make that kind of country much more likely.

Right now, in fact, that prospect is one small part of a perfectly possible and completely nightmarish future for economies and societies across the world. And contrary to the Faragists' habitual implication that they are involved in some kind of huge anti-establishment jape, it is deadly, deadly serious ●

Albanians are standing up for nature – and against selling out to the super-rich

For over a month, thousands have taken to the streets of Tirana to protest against their government, in the biggest outbreak of unrest in Albania since the collapse of communism more than three decades ago. What began with environmental concerns about protecting a nature reserve and the more than 2,500 species it hosts has become the flamingo revolution, questioning the very direction of the country.

Albanians are angered that multibillion-dollar luxury developments backed by Jared Kushner and Ivanka Trump threaten one of the last wild areas on the Adriatic – Zvërnec, its lagoon and the nearby island of Sazan – and are furious at the lack of transparency surrounding the projects. The government says deals are not finalised. But videos of bulldozers on beaches triggered the mass protests.

Now demonstrators are demanding the resignation of their prime minister, Edi Rama, who won a fourth term only last year, albeit on a turnout of just 45%. Mr Rama has insisted "there is absolutely no chance that the investment will stop as long as I am here". The Socialist party leader has enthusiastically courted business and foreign wealth, arguing it is essential for one of Europe's poorest countries to prosper.

Mr Rama blames anti-Trump sentiment for the backlash. But the movement is much more about disenchantment with both Mr Rama's government and the conservative opposition leader, Sali Berisha – a former president and prime minister who was at one time banned from the US under the Biden administration for alleged corruption.

The Zvërnec development is made possible by a 2024 law amendment allowing construction in nature reserves for five-star developments. For many, there is no clearer evidence of ordinary people being sold out for the benefit of the super-rich. As one older Albanian protester told the Guardian: "It's been more than 30 years and still our hospitals are terrible, our education system is shit, there are no jobs and everyone is leaving … We've learned from experience that similar projects only ever benefit a wealthy few."

Albanians are demanding that politics offers them something better. There are echoes of the long-running protests in Serbia against cronyism and unaccountability. Strikingly, a country known for its high levels of emigration has seen young, educated citizens fly back to play a part in the protests. Albanians who previously feared there was little future in their country are trying to shape one.

MEPs have called for an immediate halt to construction in fragile areas and have warned that the resort project puts Albania's EU accession plans at risk. That should be a chastening message for Mr Rama, who has promised to deliver membership by 2030. But the prime minister should listen first and foremost to his fellow citizens. This is not only a battle to protect nature, important as that is. It is about whether the country can find a better course than short-term growth that enriches the few via opaque deals ●



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Starmer was never popular in the first place
Jonathan Freedland makes the common mistake of considering the 2024 election as "a landslide Labour victory" (Where did it all go wrong for Keir Starmer?, Big story, 26 June). It was not.

Less than 20% of citizens eligible to vote voted for him, probably an historical record low. Labour under his leadership obtained fewer votes than at the previous election. The result in terms of MPs elected gave Mr Starmer, his MPs and some media the impression they had been "handed a resounding mandate" to implement their policies but this was not so.

The low electoral support and the low popularity of Mr Starmer reflect the fact that he and his policies were never popular to start with. Even a top notch politician would have found it difficult to solve this problem.
Francois P Jeanjean
Ottawa, Canada

The vicious circle of rising heat and air conditioners
The main reason for concern over the large-scale roll-out of air conditioning to protect people from heatwaves (A hot mess, Big story, 3 July) is that, globally, 57% of electricity is still generated by burning fossil fuels, irrefutably causing global heating through carbon dioxide emissions.

This drives the need for more air conditioners to cope with heatwaves, and more fossil-fuelled electricity to power them, which in turn exacerbates global heating, requiring yet more air conditioning and so on, making the mountain to be climbed to reach net zero carbon emissions even higher.

A second reason is that air conditioning pumps heat out of buildings into the environment and wastes energy as heat, worsening the heat island effect in cities.

Two responses are needed to slow the growth of air conditioning. Proper urban planning and building regulations to ameliorate heat islands, plus retrofitted air conditioning, will save lives in wealthy cities in the short term. But to stop heatwaves becoming ever more dangerous for everyone, we must deal with the real culprit and stop emitting carbon dioxide into the atmosphere.
Prof Evan Gray
Brisbane, Australia

● Your feature on the need to adapt to climate change was timely and informative, but I was disappointed that you did not point out the equally urgent need to reduce carbon emissions.

While the continent is burning, we are still (almost literally) pouring petrol on the fire. The dire state of US politics has emboldened rightwing actors in Europe to row back on the existing net zero targets that were not adequate in any case. Protesting to raise awareness has been manipulated by the press to make the protesters the villains.
Martin Murray
Telford, England, UK

Jam tomorrow if everyone opted for driverless cars
Gabriel Stewart points out that driverless cars will make it possible for visually impaired people to use cars (Driverless cars offer disabled people like me a different future, Opinion, 3 July). He is correct, but the problem is that, if all those currently unable to access cars take up this option, traffic levels will double, creating unacceptable congestion. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, however, has calculated that if driverless cars are used only on a shared basis, as part of a public transport system, mainly serving as feeders and filling in gaps, traffic demand could fall by 90%, thus eliminating the problem.
Stephen J Watkins
Co-chair, Transport and Health Science Group
Oldham, England, UK

Could the UK have its own Independence Day?
Congratulations to the United States for 250 years of independence from the British empire (America at 250, Big story, 10 July). Now is surely the time for the UK to declare independence from the American empire.
Anthony Matthew
Leicester, England, UK

CORRECTIONS

An article in our North America edition described Brantford as being about 100km south-east of Toronto (Sites bear witness to horrors of residential schools, 10 July). It is south-west of Toronto.

BECKY BARNICOAT ON MILLENNIAL LIFE



MUSIC

Bonnie Tyler, the queen of power ballads

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Culture



A man for all seasons

Why the epic saga of the Odyssey remains as relevant today as it was in ancient Greece

By *Charlotte Higgins*

CHRISTOPHER NOLAN'S ODYSSEY MOVIE has all the hopes of a summer blockbuster pinned to it, and all the promise of magnificent effects, shocks and thrills. You will be taken inside the cave of the one-eyed giant, the Cyclops Polyphemus, who likes to dine on human flesh. You will visit the misty shores of the land of the dead, where no warm-blooded human should ever tread. You will flee the pounding tread of cannibals. You will be tossed on stormy seas sent surging by vengeful gods.

And all of this spectacular adventure, for sure, is part of the Odyssey, one of the first great works of world literature, which was written down in the 600s or 500sBC. The ancient Greeks attributed the poem to a man called Homer, often described as a blind bard from the island of Chios.

In recent centuries, though, the idea that the poem can be called the work of one single creator has been firmly called into question. Particularly after the 1930s, when the American classicist Milman Parry studied the composition techniques of nonliterate epic singers in the Balkans, it became clear that the Odyssey, and the other Homeric Greek epic, the Iliad, were written forms of poems that drew on a long oral tradition. That means that versions of what we call the Odyssey were – perhaps for centuries, long before they were consigned to writing – performed by bards, using a combination of memory and on-the-hoof improvisation.

Imagine then, not the darkness of the cinema so much as the darkness of the king and queen's pillared hall, where guests are gathered for feasting and for telling stories. Against the flickering fire, the bard strikes up his harp and starts to sing, performing tales of adventure and loss, return and homecoming, of war and death and the fragile, tender threads that hold a husband and wife and a family together.

I have a feeling that the bard's performance might have been a more thrilling and overwhelming experience even than that created by Nolan's cinematic imagination. Had we been there, in that shadowy hall, we might now be weeping together at the emotional force of the stories of the bard. I think this is the case because within the Odyssey – a poem that is so knowing and alert about its own status as an artwork that, at times, it can feel more postmodern than ancient – there are several scenes in which bards in palace halls tell stories, and these stories are sometimes stitched seamlessly into the epic itself. And, hearing these stories, the listeners in the poem weep to hear their own experiences – or experiences they fear, or long, to have – turned into song.

Why are we still connecting with stories that were told in those ancient halls, their animating sparks perhaps as old as the Greek bronze age? Why has the director of Inception and Oppenheimer been so determined to adapt them, and why will so many people want to experience his vision of them?

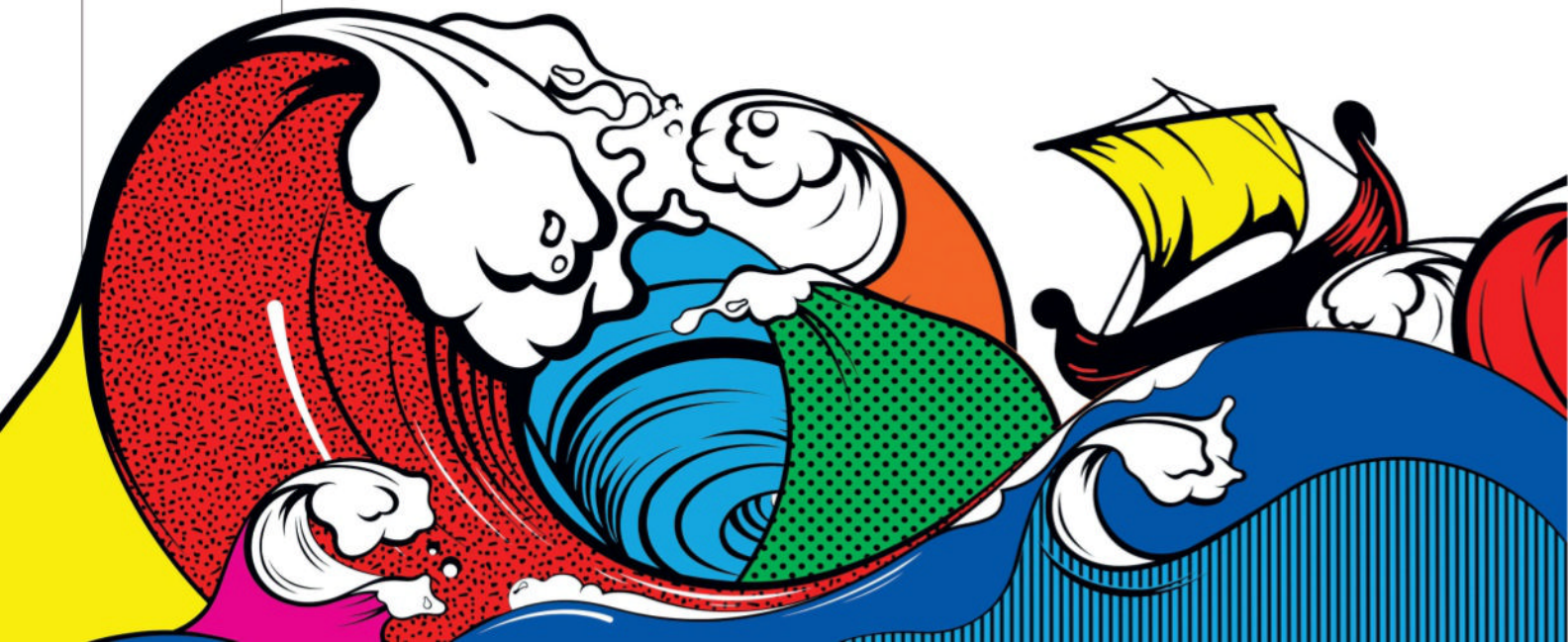
The answers partly lie in the fact that the Odyssey – the story of a warrior's long and tortuous journey to reintegrate himself within his own household – has passed into the bloodstream of many storytelling traditions. In his introduction to his translation, classicist Daniel Mendelsohn lists Dante's Inferno, Star Trek, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, The Wizard of Oz, Finding Nemo, The Catcher in the Rye, Gladiator, Pride and Prejudice, and Game of Thrones as works in which the Odyssey's ideas and motifs resurface.

More obviously still, there's James Joyce's Ulysses, which maps the events of an epic day in Dublin on to specific episodes from the Odyssey; Omeros, Derek Walcott's long poem about colonialism and the slave trade; and a whole host of contemporary novels from Madeline Miller's Circe to Margaret Atwood's The Penelopiad. You could add: The Lord of the Rings, Homeland, The Return of Martin Guerre, and cinematic adaptations of Homer, such as the 2000 Coen brothers film O Brother, Where Art Thou?

I have read the Odyssey many times – starting with storybook adaptations as a child, through to plunging through it, imperfectly, in Greek as a teenager, to rereading it in different English translations as a young, then middle-aged adult. I began with my father's battered postwar copy translated by EV Rieu. Then it was Robert Fagles's translation, then George Chapman's, then Emily Wilson's, then Mendelsohn's. My most recent reading is ongoing: a long and lingering journey through Wilson's fleet-footed version, in fortnightly discussion with the classicist Mary Beard. This is our Odyssey book club podcast (which runs alongside Instant Classics, which Mary and I also co-host).

The 12,000-line poem that is the Odyssey endures not because it is perfect, but because it flexes and bends into different shapes when it is reread. My reading now is different from my earlier readings; and I know the next will be different again. We read through our own lives and experiences: this time, because I have reported often from Ukraine over the past four years, I can't help reading the Odyssey through the stories of the soldiers of today who return from

> ***"The Odyssey flexes and bends into different shapes when it is reread***



the front transformed by experience, and as strangers to their families. So many stories that I hear – about the relationships that don't survive, those that have to be carefully built up again, those that are completely transformed by disability or trauma – chime strongly with the Odyssey.

HERE IS WHAT THE POEM IS "ABOUT", at least in terms of its plot. It begins on Mount Olympus, among the gods. Zeus and his daughter, the goddess Athena, discuss the fate of Odysseus, the cunning and resourceful Greek who was one of the leaders who won the 10-year-long siege of Troy. The gods agree that Odysseus – whom we encounter weeping for home on the shoreline of a remote island, where he has been trapped for years by the loving but possessive deity Calypso – can at last be allowed to reach home. But the action now cuts to his home island, Ithaca, where his wife, Penelope, is being pressed to choose a new husband from among a set of unruly and violent men who have taken up residence on the family property.

Penelope and Odysseus's son Telemachus, a teenager on the brink of adulthood, is inspired by Athena to set out in search of news of his father. On his journey he encounters some of his father's old companions at Troy: the ageing warrior Nestor, and Menelaus, who is now reunited with his magnetic wife, Helen, whose abrupt departure was the cause of the Trojan war. Along the way he hears many stories, including about how Agamemnon, the leader of the Greeks, was murdered by his wife, Clytemnestra, and her lover when he returned home from Troy, but avenged by his son Orestes: a warning, about the dangers of homecoming, and an example of how to be a loyal son.

We return to Odysseus, who is helped by a reluctant Calypso to build a boat to get him home. But a storm brews, and he barely survives it to be washed up on an unknown island – that of a distinctly strange but broadly friendly people, the Phaeacians. The self-possessed young princess Nausicaa, encountering the naked, battered warrior on the beach, helps him to reach her parents' palace, where he recounts the stories of what happened to him after the victory at Troy: how he was prevented from reaching home by angry gods, how he encountered the Lotus-Eaters, the flesh-eating Laestrygonians, the Cyclopes, the witch Circe, the deadly Sirens, the sea monsters Scylla and Charybdis. His last remaining men, he tells them, were killed in a storm after, against explicit instructions, they had slaughtered and eaten the Sun God's cattle, leaving Odysseus alone to make it to Calypso's island. So: a large part of this looping, nonlinear poem is told in the first person, in flashback, by the hero himself, a cunning man and a liar.

The Phaeacians get him home, unloading him on Ithaca from their ship while he's sleeping, so that he awakes in despair and confusion, not recognising where he is. Unlike Agamemnon, the leader who was murdered on his return from Troy, he arrives home not in pomp and arrogance, but in disguise as an old beggar, testing his household – the slaves, his son, his wife – for their loyalty. Gradually, he is recognised as the head of the household, as a father and, at last, as a husband. He and Telemachus turn the tables on the suitors, and the story becomes one of violence and revenge.

You can try to tame the Odyssey into familiarity, to unsee its darker aspects in favour of the good old spectacular adventure of it all. It will be intriguing to see how unsettling a version of the story Nolan is willing to offer. The entire poem might be said to be "about" the taming of a disordered home into equilibrium – thus providing the underlying DNA of everything from Shakespearean comedy to the TV soap opera. But its long, spiralling, circuitous motion from social disruption to social order is also marked by many fundamental questions.

Some of these are moral; others penetrate into the dark recesses of the relationships that make us human. To what extent does our fate lie in our own hands? What makes a good leader, a good man, a good husband? What are the acceptable limits of revenge? What does a marriage consist of, and how can it survive the shocks of separation, of bifurcated experience and of ageing? How should you treat strangers when they arrive on your shores? How can a soldier returning from the blood-letting of the battlefield reintegrate into peaceful civilian life?

None of these are abstract questions. Every day, humans are tackling them. Whatever Nolan's spectacular take on the Odyssey – whether his film is a triumph or disappointment – they will keep on being asked, and the Odyssey will remain a poem for the moment.

CHARLOTTE HIGGINS IS THE GUARDIAN'S CHIEF CULTURE WRITER

The Odyssey is on general release

"What makes a good leader, a good man, a good husband?



Bonnie Tyler 1951–2026



The singer totally eclipsed her power-ballad peers. After toying with country, disco and soft rock, she found her groove with Jim Steinman-penned epics

By *Alexis Petridis*

▲ **Bright eyes** Bonnie Tyler at a festival in Montreux, Switzerland in 1984
REDFERNS

Bonnie Tyler, who has died aged 75, had a peculiar career: two bursts of global success that seemed to have nothing to do with each other. Her first big British hits, 1976's Lost in France and 1977's It's a Heartache, were superior examples of what writer Pete Paphides dubbed "medium wave pop", the largely forgotten stuff that actually filled the charts and Radio One's playlists at a time when reductive rock histories would have you believe the entire nation was gripped by punk. Tyler's voice changed dramatically between the two releases: possessed of a rather sweet tone on Lost in France, an operation to remove nodules on her vocal cords had caused her to develop a striking huskiness by the time of It's a Heartache.

It looked like It's a Heartache would turn Tyler into a huge star, but said success proved difficult to sustain, compounded by the fact that her record label seemed unsure what to do with her. Get her to cover Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers, as on Louisiana Rain? Or encourage her to go disco, as on the fabulously camp (The World is Full of) Married Men?

None of it really worked and that might have been that, had Tyler not taken matters into her own hands. A rock fan, she had the great fortune to approach Jim Steinman at precisely the right moment. The producer and songwriter's relationship with Meat Loaf was on the outs after 1981's Dead Ringer had failed to replicate the sales of Bat Out of Hell. Steinman evidently felt he had something to prove, and the best way to prove it was by doubling down: the songs he presented Tyler were grandiloquent even by his standards.

He suggested they cover Creedence Clearwater Revival's Have You Ever Seen the Rain?, Steinman's version of which transformed the rootsy acoustic original into a mass of mock-classical piano and squealing, metal-adjacent guitar solos.

Total Eclipse of the Heart went on for seven minutes, featured a pipe organ solo and was punctuated by explosions that were supposed to represent the sound of nuclear bombs being dropped. It would have sounded completely ridiculous, were it not for the fact that Tyler sang it as if her life depended on it.

The end result couldn't have been further from It's a Heartache if it tried. It went platinum in nine countries, hit No 1 on both sides of the Atlantic, propelled Tyler's album Faster Than the Speed of Night to sales of 3m, and proved impervious to the vagaries of fashion. In 2026 it surpassed a billion streams on Spotify.

It was success on a scale that Tyler would find impossible to repeat, although she came close with Holding Out for a Hero, another Steinman extravaganza, this time from the soundtrack of teen movie Footloose. It was another huge hit.

But Total Eclipse of the Heart might have scuppered her partnership with Steinman, precisely because it was so successful: his career revitalised, Steinman found himself in demand once again, which meant he seemed only partly present on 1986's Secret Dreams and Forbidden Fire.

Thereafter, her career in the UK and America slumped, and she was unlucky not to enjoy a career resurgence with The Best, the lead single from 1988's Hide Your Heart. It's hard to work out why it wasn't a big hit anywhere other than Norway: clearly it wasn't anything to do with the song, as evidenced by the fact that, when Tina Turner covered it the following year, it sold millions of copies and became her signature song (modest to a fault, Tyler suggested Turner had "done it much better than me").

Still, she continued to score platinum albums in Europe well into the 90s, and her tours never stopped taking in arenas. Her musical approach remained incredibly varied: she seemed just as happy making prog rock with Rick Wakeman or gamely singing Britain's 2013 Eurovision entry as she did collaborating with David Guetta, rerecording her vocal from Total Eclipse of the Heart for his 2025 single Together. Once more, she sang it as if her life depended on it.

ALEXIS PETRIDIS IS THE GUARDIAN'S HEAD ROCK AND POP CRITIC

Festival reforges Beckett's Irish roots

An ambitious season of plays, run by Arts Over Borders, explores the playwright's troubled and complex relationship with his homeland

By *Holly O'Mahony*

In 2036, the actor Samuel West will take to the stage to perform Krapp's Last Tape – Samuel Beckett's pensive monologue in which an old man, hunched over a reel-to-reel recorder, listens back to the voice of his younger self. West will be 69, the age of Krapp in the play. And remarkably, the tape he plays will feature the sound of himself as a younger man, recorded in 2006, when he was 39 – the age Krapp was on the night he made the recording. Two years later, another actor, Richard Dormer, will do the same, using a similar recording that's currently locked away in a BBC vault.

These are the most improbable commissions of the Samuel Beckett Biennale, which promises to deliver experimental "performed readings" of the playwright's works in pockets of Ireland and Britain over the next 12 years. It is organised by Seán Doran and run through his cross-border organisation Arts Over Borders. Events will unfold at locations of significance to Beckett's life and legacy – from Enniskillen, Belfast and Dublin to Folkestone, Reading and Snodland – tracing his footsteps across Britain and Ireland.

That the Biennale should claim him on both islands is apt. Best remembered for his absurdist and teasingly obscure stage plays – Waiting for Godot, Endgame, Krapp's Last Tape and Happy Days – Beckett is considered one of Ireland's finest exports, but a question mark has always hung over how Irish Beckett really was. After graduating from Trinity College Dublin in 1927, he emigrated to Paris, never to live permanently in Ireland again. He didn't set foot in the country for the last 21 years of his life, and is buried at Paris's Montparnasse Cemetery. Remaining in France during the second world war, he wrote to his mother that he preferred France at war to Ireland at peace. He subsequently wrote several of his most-loved works, including Waiting for Godot and Endgame, in French before translating them into English – a fact that led the Irish literary critic Vivian Mercier to quip "Samuel Beckett is an Irishman but not an Irish writer".

Beckett's rejection of Ireland was likely driven by the country's theocracy. When clerical censorship demanded the removal of works by his contemporaries Seán O'Casey and James Joyce from the 1958 Dublin international theatre festival, Beckett responded by banning the country from staging his plays for two years.

Still, scholars have pointed out the distinctly Irish traces in Beckett's characters and landscapes. His 1956 radio play All That Fall is unquestionably set in Ireland. And when the first Gaelic translation and subsequent staging of Waiting for Godot was mounted in 1971, it was with the playwright's blessing.

For most of Beckett's life, the only Ireland on offer was the one he had fled: Catholic, censorious, hostile to the godless and difficult modernism he practised. But from the 1980s onwards, that Ireland was in retreat.

In 1985, Dublin's Gate theatre staged a trilogy of Beckett's postwar novels under the name I'll Go On. But it was the following year, when the Gate's artistic director Michael Colgan discovered that there was not a single Irish representative at a conference organised to mark Beckett's 80th birthday in Paris, that he decided to take more definitive action. In 1991, the Gate held a Beckett festival staging all 19 of his plays.

With Beckett having died two years earlier in 1989, there could be no objections to such an initiative – so long as the plays were staged by the book. His estate is strictly managed by his nephew Edward. Not so much as a stage direction can be changed in professional productions of his works. "That doesn't restrict the possibilities of doing it differently," says Doran, who established a trusting relationship with Edward while running the Biennale's predecessor, the Happy Days Enniskillen international Beckett festival, from 2012 to 2022.

Doran has managed to get around the rigidity thanks to the experimental, "laboratory" approach to the projects in his festival – "performed readings" rather than full-scale productions. While the programme is still being fleshed out, two events have already taken place: a Krapp's Last Tape held in Greystones in County Wicklow, in which Malcolm Sinclair performed opposite an AI-generated recreation of his own younger voice, and an Ulster-Scots translation of Waiting for Godot performed in Derry.



Memory lane James Hayes in Krapp's Last Tape at Jermyn Street theatre in 2020
TRISTRAM KENTON

> ***An Irish literary critic quipped 'Beckett is an Irishman but not an Irish writer'***

Among the highlights still to come are Samuel West and Richard Dormer's performances of Krapp's Last Tape. "Beckett would never have expected it," Doran says.

It was Doran who commissioned the pre-recorded tapes, asking the BBC to look after them over the 30-year wait. He'd originally wanted to record three actors. "I was hedging my bets," he chuckles wryly. It's a wise approach, not least because the third actor he approached was Philip Seymour Hoffman, who turned the request down long before his death in 2014. To plan a production three decades out is to gamble on the health of those involved.

"Richard is worried about that … He's told me he smokes and drinks too much," Doran half jokes. While he acknowledges they're "over the halfway mark" now, 10 to 12 years is still an anxious wait.

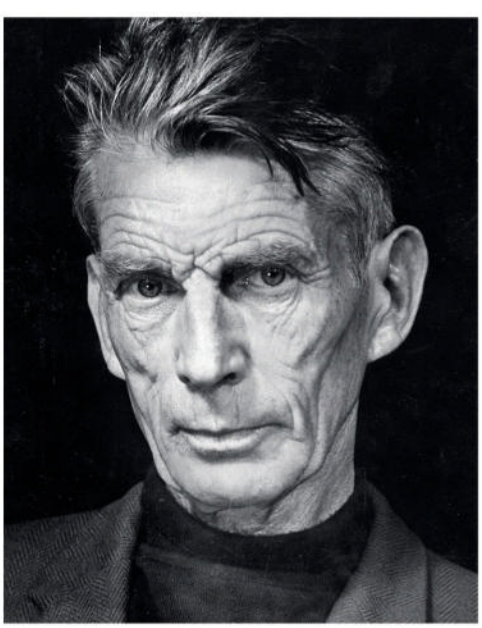
In the meantime, you can watch the breathless monologue Not I, performed by the disembodied mouth of opera soprano Claire Booth, directed by the former artistic director of the National Theatre Rufus Norris. The production is running at Reading University, where Beckett's archive is held, in September. Another talking point will be Love, Sam, a staging of Beckett's letters in Wexford.

▼ Celebrated Beckett in 1976
ROSEMARIE CLAUSEN/ ULLSTEIN BILD/GETTY

With his work still staged across the continent – and now claimed, in his own Biennale, by Britain and Ireland at once – perhaps Beckett is best remembered not as Mercier's "Irishman but not an Irish writer", but as something the man himself might have found easier to live with: a quintessential Irish European.

HOLLY O'MAHONY IS A CULTURE JOURNALIST

Not I is on at Reading University, 19 to 20 September. Krapp's Last Tape is on at the Théâtre de la Ville, Paris, 3 to 7 November





TELEVISION

Abandoned

Disney+

★★★★☆

This series centres on the story of three siblings who were found by a station guard as they wandered around Barcelona's Estació de França in 1984. They carried no luggage or ID. The oldest of them was five. They had been driven there by a man they knew only as Denis, who then left, ostensibly to buy them sweets, and never returned, so they found themselves in the Spanish childcare system.

At this point, the mystery deepened. Although the trio were healthy, well-dressed and articulate for their age, they were a closed book in terms of concrete leads.

At times, Abandoned plays out like a true crime series. There's a certain open-endedness to it: as was the case with series such as Making a Murderer, it's easy to imagine meeting this family again, new facts having emerged as a result of the show. While the many journalists who have got involved generally suspect the parents are dead, the case isn't officially closed.

Maybe the trio will never learn everything about their parents and their exact motivations for leaving them. But they aren't going to stop trying. *Phil Harrison*

MUSIC

BTS

Tottenham Hotspur Stadium, London ★★★★★

BTS are the biggest K-pop group in the world. With more than 40m albums sold, they have a fanbase so fervent it is called the Army. This is the band's first tour since a three-year hiatus for each member to complete 18 months of compulsory military service – marked by a new album, Arirang.

A cynical mind might behold the light-up "Army Bomb sticks" wielded by the crowd and think … "Are those mind-control devices?" But the Arirang tour makes it as hard to be cynical about the BTS operation as it is to hear after two hours of the Army's eardrum-bursting screams.

No matter how drilled we know K-pop bands to be, BTS's versatility is still astonishing. The stands literally shake as they thunder through pop-rap crossover Hooligan, while the Tame Impala-indebted Like Animals cements their prowess with balladry. The industrial-level bangers mid-show are a thrilling energy release and the surprise songs that aren't usual setlist fixtures seem to delight even the band, who grin and sing along to each other's parts.

The joy onstage is reflected back approximately one million-fold. It reverberates through the wall of screams. They end on a gentle note, motioning to each other to take out their in-ear monitors to hear fans sing Into the Sun back to them. I started the show ambivalent and by the end I had a favourite member (Jimin) and an urge to learn Korean. I didn't even have a Bomb stick, so if they were controlling my mind it was through other means. Whatever BTS has, it's potent. *Kate Solomon*

Touring to March 2027

Podcast of the week *Speaking in Tongues*

This official Rolling Stones podcast, hosted by Norah Jones, charts the making of the band's new album, Foreign Tongues. It's a polished PR exercise. Its first episode is also something of a tribute, as it considers how Mick, Keith and Ronnie returned to the studio after the death of drummer Charlie Watts in 2021. *Hannah J Davies*



ILLUSTRATION BY ELIA BARBIERI

THE BIG IDEA

Feeling stuck? Try bite-size tasks

If you're low on motivation, 'productivity snacking' can help you reach goals

By *David Robson*

You could call it the tamest of midlife crises, but as I turned 40 last year, I decided to devote myself to a long-neglected ambition – learning the guitar. I dutifully set myself the intention of practising for 30 minutes a day, with the aim of strumming my way through the Bob Dylan songbook by my 41st birthday.

What stood in the way, of course, was life. With work and family commitments, I was lucky to find a free half-hour of uninterrupted practice time more than once or twice a week. Each day that went by without practice left me feeling more demotivated.

Then I came across the idea of productivity snacking: splitting goals into bite-size chunks that we slot in between our other responsibilities. Looking into the research, I found that we can achieve far more in tiny bouts of activity than we might imagine. Most importantly, those small wins can do wonders for our motivation.

My first source of inspiration came from the world of physical fitness. The World Health Organization advises that we do at least 150 minutes of moderate exercise, or 75 minutes of vigorous exercise, a week. Yet many people struggle to meet this threshold. Some research even suggests that the mere existence of such an ambitious goal is actively discouraging. Put simply, they feel that if they cannot reach the recommended dose, they may as well not bother at all.

As a result, sports scientists started to consider ways to make fitness regimes more approachable by breaking them down into very short bursts of physical activity. If you're working from home, you might do a few press-ups after an hour of sitting at your desk, for instance; in the evening, you might jog on the spot during the ad break while you watch TV.

A recent review concludes that these very short bouts of exercise can improve a range of health outcomes, including peak oxygen uptake, resting blood pressure, and insulin levels. There's even new evidence that "exercise snacking" can enhance cognitive function and mental health. Crucially, these interventions have extremely low dropout rates, of just 12%.

In sheer terms of practicality, it's easier to fit short exercises into the "between times" of our day rather than carving out a full hour. But there are also motivational benefits. Research has shown that the mere act of dividing things into chunks can help make an activity feel less daunting, so that we're less likely to procrastinate.

Finally, there's the "progress principle". Each small win enhances our self-efficacy – our belief in our capacity to enact personal change. By giving ourselves more easily achievable targets, we feel that confidence boost more often – a pleasant buzz that means we're more likely to continue.

The principle should extend to many other spheres of life, including creativity and learning. That may seem surprising, given the well-known advantages of deep concentration and the apparent dangers of multitasking, but a bite-size approach can bring its own cognitive benefits. When generating ideas, for instance, the brain may benefit from returning to a problem again and again, since this allows the issue to incubate between the brainstorming sessions. If you're a writer experiencing creative block, it may help to return to the draft in short bursts rather than sit in prolonged frustration.

In education, meanwhile, short-and-sweet study sessions could help avoid "overlearning". That can happen if you're lucky enough to make substantial progress in a single sitting – after that, the benefits may plateau. That's why psychologists tend to encourage "spaced practice", consisting of briefer lessons separated by a suitable time interval. The extra effort involved in remembering what you learned in the last session helps your brain to consolidate the knowledge.

As I discovered, it was surprisingly easy to apply this approach to the guitar. Over the course of a working day, there are lots of opportunities to pick up my instrument for a few minutes. It certainly can't replace extended sessions; sometimes, I really do need to immerse myself. But I can make better use of that time if I've kept my skills fresh with bite-size bursts of activity.

Perhaps most importantly, I've found that microdosing my musical goals is a pleasure in its own right. Learning an unfamiliar chord or finger-picking my way through a new melody leaves me more energised than scrolling on social media, which is how I might have otherwise whiled away those odd moments between tasks. Whatever other frustrations I'm facing, I can look forward to the sense of achievement that comes from picking up my guitar and inching closer to my goal. The productivity snacks are a treat in themselves.

DAVID ROBSON IS THE AUTHOR OF THE LAWS OF CONNECTION

FURTHER READING
Three books for a deeper dive

- **Hyperefficient**
  By Mithu Storoni
- **Drive**
  By Daniel Pink
- **Guitar Zero**
  By Gary Marcus

HISTORY

Locking lips

From appalled Vikings to anxious mothers, a story of passion, power and puckering up

By *Tiffany Watt Smith*

Book of the week
The Kiss
By Katie Barclay



If, on a European holiday, you get flustered greeting people – should you kiss? how many times? – spare a thought for Dutch theologian Desiderius Erasmus. Visiting England in 1499, he found a nation of enthusiastic kissers. "Wherever you go, you are received on all hands with kisses; when you take leave you are dismissed with kisses," he wrote in surprise, or possibly, alarm. On the continent, the fashion for greeting with a peck on the lips had long fallen by the wayside (probably because of sexual propriety), but the English held firm. It didn't matter if the other person was of the opposite sex, everyone puckered up.

Whether you like to snog, smooch, suck face or osculate (the scientific term), kissing seems so natural and instinctive, it's hard to imagine it having a history at all. But just as kissing is not seen in all cultures, so, historian of emotions Katie Barclay writes, its meanings have changed across time too. From foot-kissing knights to baby-kissing politicians, to the "shut-up kiss" of Hollywood romcoms, this rich and fascinating history reminds us that kissing is, and always has been, a contested public gesture as well as a private pleasure.

Barclay, a professor at Macquarie University, Sydney, begins in medieval Europe, with the *osculum pacis*, or kiss of peace. A kiss on the lips, usually shared between two powerful men, it marked the conclusion of any legal or diplomatic negotiation (the clincher, if you will). This ritual was based on medical beliefs that held, since the breath carried the spirit, a kiss on the lips caused two souls to mingle and equalise. For this reason, vassals and their lords also kissed lip-to-lip in the ritual of fealty, as did worshippers in church. As the wealthy began to complain about locking lips with their servants, though, churches introduced the pax, a ritual object that could be passed around and kissed instead.

Not all symbolic kisses were so egalitarian. The foot kiss, used to venerate, could also humiliate and degrade. In 911, when the Viking leader Rollo finalised a peace treaty with the Frankish king, he was instructed to kneel and kiss the king's foot in loyalty. The appalled warrior, who would bow to no man, offered a proxy to deliver the crucial kiss instead. The Viking stand-in reputedly grabbed the king's foot so violently he tipped him backwards.

The day-to-day kisses that Erasmus witnessed in 1499 seem to have disappeared from English social life by the 18th century. By then, men were shaking hands. Close male friends, however, continued to greet with a kiss on the lips.

As Barclay writes, by the end of the 19th century, with kisses of fealty and peace a distant memory, and a growing emphasis on romantic marriage, lip-kissing became almost exclusively associated with the private world of love and especially sex. But this did not mean kisses disappeared entirely from public and political life. In 1908, an outbreak of diphtheria caused the London county council to ban kissing games in schools. A new era of parenting advice in the 1920s prompted further debates – was it right to kiss children, or, as the American behaviourist John Watson argued, did it lead to "coddling" (beware the "dangers lurking in the mother's kiss" he warned, in 1928).

Above all, anxieties about sex kept kissing on the agenda. Between the wars, with audiences flocking to picture palaces, censors became alarmed by the frank portrayals of desire on screen. In 1934, the notorious Hays Code banned "excessive and lustful" kisses, as well as interracial and same-sex ones. In the 1970s, defiant gay civil rights activists embraced the "kiss-in", reclaiming a vision of queer life that was as much about love and tenderness as sex. Later, amid the Aids epidemic and the deluge of misinformation about its transmission, the radical potential of a kiss became even greater.

Today, the public debate centres on consent. In 2023, Luis Rubiales, a former Spanish football federation president, sparked outrage when he kissed captain Jenni Hermoso on the lips following Spain's World Cup victory (he was found guilty of sexual assault). Even the most apparently spontaneous of kisses can be shot through with power and politics. As Barclay's timely book reminds us, it was ever thus.

The Kiss is richly illustrated with fascinating examples. Readers looking for a fast-paced narrative history may find its style a little academic in places, but Barclay's central point remains persuasive: "When we kiss, we kiss with the weight of history."

TIFFANY WATT SMITH IS A CULTURAL HISTORIAN AND AUTHOR



Audiobook of the week
The Odyssey
By Homer

A blockbuster adaptation of The Odyssey, directed by Christopher Nolan, is out now in cinemas. However, an audiobook allows listeners to deploy their imaginations to conjure dark sorcery, supernatural beasts and epic storms, rather than leaning on CGI. This recording, first published in 2006, is based on Ian Johnston's much-admired translation. It is narrated by the Game of Thrones actor Anton Lesser, who brings gravitas and texture to this tale of Odysseus, king of Ithaca, and his efforts to get home after the 10-year Trojan War.
Fiona Sturges

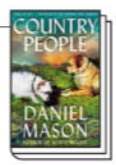
FICTION

Escape to the country

A fantastical journey that weaves together family, folktales and a world beneath our feet

By *Sarah Crown*

Country People
By Daniel Mason



Daniel Mason's latest novel sees him return to the verdant New England landscape that so captivated readers of 2023's acclaimed North Woods. In Country People, Mason turns his attention to literature and mines the rich seams of text, from myths to Milton to Shakespeare to Tolstoy and all points in between, that make up his novel's foundations. This is, at its core, a story about stories; a tale about the tales we tell each other, and our children, and ourselves.

Miles Krzelewski – uxorious husband, adoring father, owner of a truffle-hunting Italian dog – is 45 years old. When his wife, a Milton scholar known for the brilliance of her seminars, is offered a visiting professorship in Vermont, the family (Miles, Kate, their children Wesley and Olive, and Giuseppe, the dog) up sticks from California and drive across country to

"a new house, in a faraway forest". For this band of west coast city-dwellers, Vermont's brooks and conifers and deep, deep green appear mythic, even magical; and the lives they step into seem, at first, to be similarly charmed. Kate settles smoothly into her new college. The children start school and make friends. The new house "holds no untoward surprises". The forest is filled with wildlife and birdsong, while at its edges, just as enchantingly, are baseball fields. The family is happy, and Miles is happy too.

But he is not, perhaps, fully grounded. The plan had been for Miles to use the year to finally finish his PhD on Russian folktales – now 12 years overdue, thanks to his tendency to switch focus every time a new enthusiasm grabs him – but for a man given to diving down "rabbit holes", Vermont offers a wealth of distractions. The countryside calls to him and he can't help but answer: striding through woods and fording streams like a modern-day Walt Whitman.

Over the course of a few months, Miles falls in with a band of picturesque eccentrics, each in the grip of their own enthusiasm. Among them are a local exterminator ("the Rat Man of Vermont") who waxes lyrical about "Super-Rat-Lines"; a biochemist turned orchardist who introduces Miles to the joys of scything; a scooter-riding photographer of snowflakes; and a trekking guide by the name of Hugh who believes that the Earth is hollow, and that hidden in their corner of Vermont is a portal to a fabulous world beneath our feet, first discovered by a 19th-century pastor, Jeremiah Wilkes. Initially, Miles scoffs, but it turns out that the Wilkes legend has, in fact, a whole society devoted to its investigation. This is a rabbit hole of epic proportions and Miles is drawn in.

The risk with material as fantastical as this, of course, is that it collapses under the weight of its own whimsy. This is a pitfall Mason sidesteps with ease. The surface structures in Country People may be sugar-spun, but the novel's foundations are solid, and its roots – the tangled and interconnected web of stories that gave rise to its new stories – are deliciously deep. This is, put simply, a joyful book – and the deeper you dig, the more joyful it becomes.

SARAH CROWN IS DIRECTOR OF COMMUNICATION AT ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND

TECHNOLOGY

Man v machine

What will the future of labour look like and can dignity in work survive alongside AI?

By *Mythili Rao*

We Are Not Machines
By Sarah O'Connor



In June, the number of job vacancies in the UK fell to a five-year low; headlines warn of a looming AI-employment shock. What might the future of work look like – and who or what will shape its terms?

This clash between human and machine – and the fight to secure decent working conditions – is nothing new. Although this book looks to the future, many of the threats AI poses look a lot like reconfigurations of old battles. The book takes its title from the signs striking Swedish miners carried in 1969: *Vi är ej maskiner* (We are not machines).

That may be true, but we increasingly *share* our work with machines. O'Connor visits the EMA4 Amazon Warehouse in England's West Midlands where robots and humans labour side by side, "picking" and "stowing" items. EMA4 is supported by remote workers in Costa Rica and India, whose jobs are to monitor video feeds of shelves, auditing the accuracy of the AI camera systems that track where items are placed. They work nine-hour shifts, screening up to 8,000 videos a week: a new online production line has been created. Is this really progress?

Frederick Winslow Taylor, the father of management consulting and patron saint of maximising productivity, figures prominently in this book. His idea that production workflows can be broken into discrete components, subdividing any process into a series of measurable systems – lives on in most workplaces today.

The real issue, as O'Connor sees it, isn't necessarily new technology but the assumptions that accompany it – the way "seemingly neutral technological tools can smuggle powerful ideas into a marketplace by the back door".

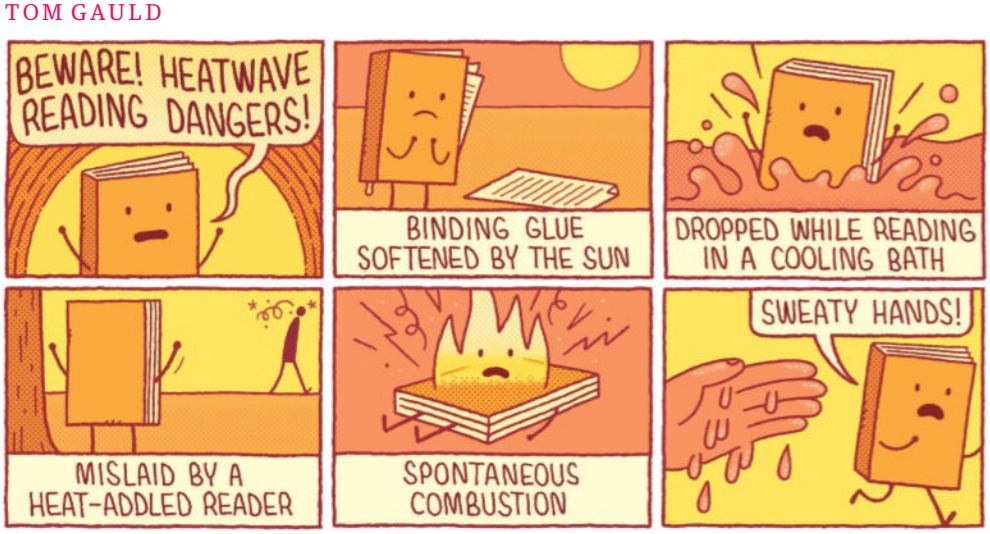
But employees and consumers aren't powerless. The most hopeful stories in the book show workers taking things into their own hands: such as the Writers Guild of America screenwriters who strike to set the terms of when and how AI can be used in scripts.

We Are Not Machines concludes on a note of caution: "The goal might be to make machines in our image. But what I fear is that … we remake ourselves in theirs." The good news? These are not yet settled questions, and the future of work is still something we can shape.

MYTHILI RAO IS JOINT EXECUTIVE PRODUCER ON THE GUARDIAN'S TODAY IN FOCUS PODCAST

'It's more than just fairy smut'
Inside the UK's first romantasy bookshop

TOM GAULD



MODERN LIFE
Tim Dowling



I do have some principles. One is to avoid DIY at all costs

It would be fair to say that none of the maintenance issues I've faced this year have fixed themselves. But many of them have become conveniently irrelevant – a testament to my DIY philosophy: First, Do Nothing.

The collapsed brick wall is now overgrown with ivy, and all but invisible. The partially collapsed pergola remains in the same condition, but the wisteria it was holding up died, so it can carry on collapsing for all I care.

The stuck garden door did sort of fix itself – one day it just opened. It then unfixed itself a fortnight later, fusing shut and staying that way, but in my opinion this one setback does not justify a refutation of the entire First, Do Nothing philosophy.

At times I have contemplated doing Something. I've thought about taking an axe to the pergola. I've watched a few bricklaying videos, and then rummaged through the toolbox in search of my trowel. But I'm aware of the harm my past interventions have caused.

Then my wife and I embark on the labyrinthine and dispiriting process of trying to get an electrical car charger installed in our drive. Nothing, apart from the bit where you pay a lot of money, is simple: I have to upload photos of the site of installation, and the fuse box.

"Now it wants us to make a video of the journey between the two," I say, "and send that."

My wife makes the video. I have to upload a hand-drawn floor plan of our downstairs. I make a poor job of it on purpose, thinking: I don't work for you people.

I wake up early the next morning with an idea. As soon as I am dressed, I find my trowel. I take it out to the stuck door in the garden.

I slide the trowel's leading edge between the frame and the latch while applying pressure; the door opens easily. Evidently the latch doesn't retract far enough to clear the hole. It's an easy fix – removing the strike plate and chiselling away a few millimetres of wood should do it. But I think: never mind that – I have the trowel now.

A week later an electrician arrives to install the charger. He's unhappy – he doesn't see an obvious cable route between charger site and fuse box. I figure it's not my problem – I've paid – but he's talking about running unsightly trunking along the walls. I tell him my wife won't accept that.

"This is just the worst job," he says.

"What about," I say, "running it under here, through the wall, and – follow me …"

> ***"Nothing, apart from the bit where you pay a lot of money, is simple***

I take him out to the garden door, reaching for the trowel that now hangs on a hook beside it.

"Through here," I say, tripping the latch. "And just on this wall is where the charger goes. Much shorter, no trunking."

"We'd have to lift some floorboards," he says.

"Yeah," I say, thinking: we? Don't you mean you?

The first board comes up easily. But removing it offers an unsettling glimpse of the brick piers on which the whole house rests. Having seen it, I will not sleep well.

The second board is longer and securely nailed. I have to move the piano. When pried with a screwdriver, it cracks and splits.

"We need to lever it from either side," says the electrician.

"Hang on," I say, stepping into the garden and coming back with a second implement.

"A trowel?" he says.

"It's good for everything," I say.

When my wife gets home we're pulling up board number four.

"You've removed the sitting room floor, I see," she says.

"There's still a joist in the way," says the electrician.

I can sense he is losing heart, but I feel a strong urge to press on in hope that the installation process won't spread itself over a period of days or weeks. In this, of course, I will fail.

I slide my trowel blade between two boards and press down on the handle, thinking: we're a long way from First, Do Nothing.

STEPHEN COLLINS



KITCHEN AIDE
By *Anna Berrill*



Here's a burning question: what can I serve at a vegan barbecue?

I've recently turned vegan. How do I have a great barbecue?
Nia, by email

Most vegetables benefit from a bit of barbecue action, but the key is not to get too carried away, says Genevieve Taylor, author of How to BBQ: "There's a real leaning for people to overdo barbecues, but you should approach it just as you would any meal, with one central star and a few sides. After all, there's no other meal where you'd be expected to eat a chop, a sausage, a kebab and a chicken wing." Not a meal you'd find Nia devouring, but you get the idea.

Shaun McAnuff, author of Original Flava: Easy Caribbean, would kick things off with tostones. "Boil green plantain … peel and cut into thick circles," he says. Smash those flat, then barbecue until crisp and serve with guacamole or salsa. Or grab some aubergines, Taylor says. Slice lengthways, brush with oil, season and grill until soft. "Spread a filling, such as walnut paté with spices, herbs and pomegranate molasses, over the slices and roll up." Those would be nice at room temperature.

For mains, plant-forward chef Bettina Campolucci Bordi has been known to hedgehog aubergines and courgettes and marinate them in olive oil, salt, pepper, miso and soy, or jerk seasoning. Stuffed vegetables are another option, Taylor says. Halve courgettes lengthways, criss-cross the cut side, drizzle with olive oil, season and grill until soft. Scoop out the flesh, chop it all up, then mix with cooked puy lentils. Spoon the lot back into the courgette shells, then return briefly to the barbecue: "I'd normally serve those with mint sauce and ricotta, but you could easily use coconut yoghurt or vegan cheese." Peppers are another route to stuffing fulfilment, and Taylor would fill them with chickpeas, harissa and coriander. "Roast just off to the side of the heat until softened and cooked through, then bring over the fire to crisp." Serve with a dollop of harissa-spiked coconut yoghurt.

You'll also need a few sides. "I love sweet potato wedges with lemon-tahini dressing and roast chickpeas for crunch," Taylor says. Otherwise, layer grilled carrots with the likes of pecans, spring onions, herbs and lots of olive oil. It's worth tossing any spare little gems on the fire, too: "They need just a few seconds on each side with a bit of oil and salt, then drizzle with pesto [use a vegan cheese] and sprinkle over some pine nuts caramelised with sugar and smoked paprika."

For afters, griddled pineapple with maple syrup and chilli is a real winner in Campolucci Bordi's book. "Or cut a slit in ripe unpeeled bananas, stuff with chocolate and peanut butter, and barbecue until everything melts."

ANNA BERRILL IS A FOOD WRITER
Got a culinary dilemma?
Email feast@theguardian.com

ALAMY

THE WEEKLY RECIPE
By *Meera Sodha*



№ 374 Apple muffins

Prep	10 min
Cook	45 min
Makes	12

Ingredients
200g wholemeal self-raising flour
100g mixed seeds
65g rolled oats
50g raisins
½ tsp bicarbonate of soda
1½ tsp mixed spice
¼ tsp fine sea salt
3 large eggs
150g full-fat cottage cheese
125g demerara sugar, plus 1 tbsp extra
100ml extra-virgin olive oil, plus 1 tbsp extra
200g skin-on grated apple – ie from about 2 large braeburns

You'll be able to see the curds of the cottage cheese in the finished muffins. This doesn't bother me, but, if you prefer, you can mash the cottage cheese before adding it to the mix. Muffin liners are a bit taller than cupcake liners, but if you can't find them, just use cupcake liners and run a knife around the cooled muffins to remove them from the tin.

Method
Line a 12-hole muffin tin with muffin liners and heat the oven to 195C (175C fan)/gas 5½. Put the flour, 80g of the seeds, 50g of the oats, and all the raisins, bicarb, mixed spice and salt in a large bowl and mix well.

In a large jug, whisk the eggs, cottage cheese, sugar and 100ml of the oil. Pour the wet ingredients into the flour bowl, add the grated apple and mix to combine.

Next, make the topping. Put the remaining 15g oats, the extra tablespoon each of oil and demerara sugar, and remaining 20g of the mixed seeds in a small bowl and stir to combine.

Distribute the batter between the 12 cases, then sprinkle a teaspoon of the topping over each one. Bake for 25-30 minutes, until a skewer inserted into the centre of one muffin comes out clean.

Remove and leave to cool in the tin before eating. The muffins will keep well in a cake tin for a couple of days, or freeze them and eke them out.



Notes and Queries
The long-running series that invites readers to send in questions and answers on anything and everything

QUIZ
Thomas Eaton

1 Betsy Ross is traditionally credited with designing and making what?
2 Based in Cambridge, which geographical research organisation is the BAS?
3 Which wetland sedge is important in the history of writing?
4 What did Nasa borrow from the 1929 Fritz Lang film Woman in the Moon?
5 What 1,000-year-old Sherwood Forest resident died this year?
6 Which magazine was named after the sound of a "guitar being struck with force"?
7 Which country's national museum burned down in 2018?



▲ What links Robert De Niro to Robert Mitchum and Javier Bardem?
CHRISTOPHER LANE

What links:
8 E, H, I and S; June Brown; Kendrick Lamar, formerly?
9 White (bow); red (sword); black (pair of scales); pale (nothing)?
10 Robert Mitchum, 1962; Robert De Niro, 1991; Javier Bardem, 2026?
11 Hetty Feather; Tom Jones; Oedipus; Oliver Twist; Superman?
12 Abhakshya; haram; tabu; treif?
13 Maracanaço; Miracle of Bern; Battle of Santiago; Disgrace of Gijón?

Answers
Quiz 1 First (or early) US flag. **2** British Antarctic Survey. **3** Cyperus papyrus. **4** Launch countdown to zero. **5** Major oak tree. **6** Kerrang! **7** Brazil. **8** Dots: Dot Cotton in EastEnders; former stage name K Dot. **9** Four horsemen of the apocalypse (what they're carrying). **10** Played villain Max Cady in Cape Fear. **11** Fictional foundlings. **12** Terms for prohibited/forbidden things: Hinduism; Islam; Polynesian culture; Judaism. **13** (In)famous matches in World Cup history: Brazil v Uruguay, 1950; West Germany v Hungary, 1954; Chile v Italy, 1962; West Germany v Austria, 1982.
Puzzles 1 Wordpool d). **2 EPU** DECLINATION. **3 Dropouts** WILDFOWL. **4 FFT** CHIPS and TOASTIE. **5 Cryptic** HATRED.

PUZZLES
Chris Maslanka

1 Wordpool
Find the correct definition: *ANAPHIA*
a) beelessness
b) lack of words
c) lifting aloft
d) loss of the sense of touch

2 E pluribus
Rearrange *ANCIENT IDOL* to make a single word.

3 Dropouts
Identify this word in which each asterisk marks a missing letter:
**I*D*O*L*

4 Food for Thought
Find two foody things in *SOPHISTICATE* using each letter once and once only.

5 Cryptic
Detest headgear colour (6)

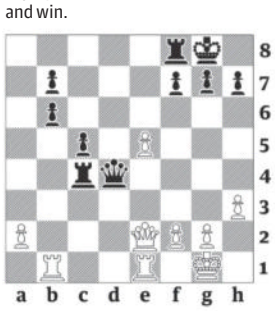
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CHESS
Leonard Barden

Alireza Firouzja is shaping up to be one of the nearly men of grandmaster chess. The Iran-born Frenchman, 23, won the St Louis-organised Croatia Super Rapid and Blitz in Zagreb last week. He was far ahead at the start of the last day, but had a poor run of 2/7 during the final rounds before a successful Armageddon tie-break.

Firouzja's career has been limited by his below-par performances in the Candidates. In 2022, he spoiled his chances by playing blitz into the small hours; in 2024, he finished seventh out of eight. He made a major effort to qualify in 2025, hiring Daniel Naroditsky, who died later that year, as his coach for the Grand Swiss in Samarkand. He finished third when only two qualified.

4032 Eric Lobron v Pablo Ricardi, Germany v Argentina, Yerevan Olympiad 1996. White to move and win.



There is now a fresh incentive. The new Norway-organised Total World Championship will include fast classical (45 minutes), rapid and blitz sections. A pilot event will be staged in October 2026, followed by a full Tour in 2027. This format should improve Firouzja's chances of a global crown.

However, Javokhir Sindarov, who won the 2026 Candidates, has reaffirmed that he is the outstanding player of his generation by winning both the rapid and blitz tournaments at the Naroditsky Memorial.

4032 1 Rbd1 Qc3 2 e6! fxe6 3 Qxe6+ Kh8 4 Qf7! Rf4 5 Qxf4! wins.

COUNTRY DIARY
STOKE-ON-TRENT
Staffordshire, England, UK

I have two summer earworms right now. The first is O Sole Mio, the jingle of our local ice-cream van, the second is a particular phrase that our resident blackbird keeps singing. Four notes, moving down the scale but ending slightly on the minor. He likes to bellow it from the tallest tip of the conifer tree that sways over the road, and I can't stop whistling it.

He will have developed this refrain over years and, like all musicians, he will have started off shakily. If I didn't notice it last season, it was probably because he was still a shy apprentice, as he practised quietly to work out his preferred combination of notes.

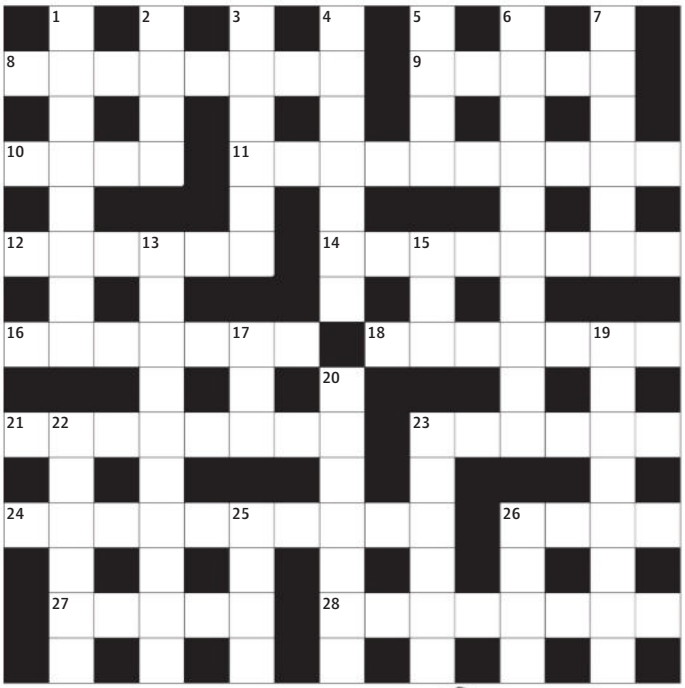
Perhaps it is only this year that he's come into his own, confident enough in his territory to sing them loud and proud. I imagine the wordless "yes" that he must have felt as he perfected his routine, and wonder if it is the same feeling I get when writing or painting.

This performance will also be unique to him. Although males copy from each other and draw on sounds from their environment (including mimicking other birds), each individual builds his own setlist from scratch, with an average of 44 distinct motifs per bird. A trip to the east of town last week gave me blackbirds with songs like ringing telephones and car alarms. The joy I felt coming home to my one's familiar refrain marked a deep, personal relationship.

What makes his song all the more precious is that I know it will end soon, when breeding ends and our birds move into their reclusive moult. It may be six months until I hear my blackbird sing again. In a culture where we have grown used to getting what we want, whenever we want it, there is something sacred in that. *Josie George*



ILLUSTRATION: CLIFFORD HARPER



All solutions published next week

The Weekly cryptic
No 30,052



By *Qaos*

Across

8 Fine food store providing meals 50% off (8)
9 Wordplay by church magazine in the past (5)
10 Release knot after cycling (4)
11 50 leave prayers over 10 school punishments? (10)
12 Lord caught being unproductive (6)
14 Half of them plot to protect cricket match represented (8)
16 Prepare to deal in Harlem, maybe (7)
18 Ruler deports 1,000 to win vote, say (7)
21 Occasional cricket sides (3,3,2)
23 Wearing white, England finally get 500 with sweep (6)
24 One in court sent in criminal to get shot (6,4)
26 Wide initially given following batting side (4)
27 Perhaps Hamlet seizes Claudius's crown in play (5)
28 'Beats drinking alcohol' – aristocrat on reflection with slice of lemon (4,4)

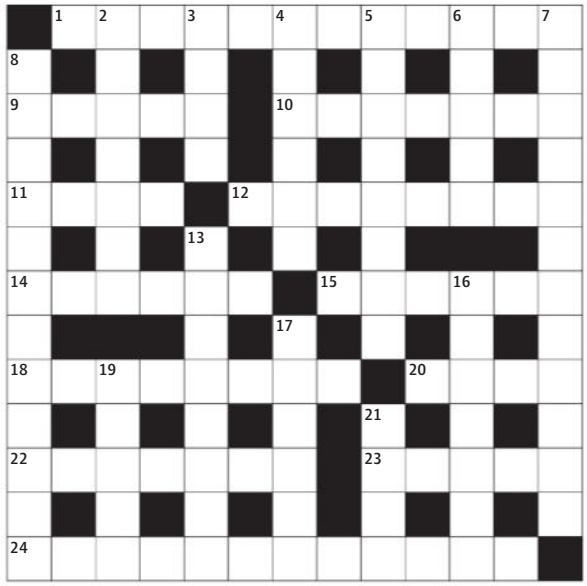
Down

1 Scold or preach conversion (8)
2 Magazine's obligation to describe source of material (4)
3 What even number is divided by 5000? (6)
4 Iron Lady's bored by acting Tory leader's 'soft touch' (7)
5 Country rejects American PR (4)
6 10 hide under end of divan, trembling (10)
7 Transfer money (6)
13 Stopping official education ignoring tense (10)
15 Beauty product to go in container (3)
17 Guided light (3)
19 Foolish to steal ten pounds without a sound (8)
20 Take defensive position as grenade's thrown (2,5)
22 Demons? Companions, run away! (6)
23 Stop going both ways? (4-2)
25 Society backing favourite way to go up in the world (4)
26 Creature of indeterminate gender? (4)

Solution No 30,046



Quick crossword
No 17,525



Across

1 Double (12)
9 Relative (5)
10 Broadway entertainment? (7)
11 Miss (4)
12 Hypothetical (8)
14 Seasonal tipple (6)
15 Way (6)
18 Best – last (8)
20 Interrogate – trivia test (4)
22 Trainer (anag) (7)
23 Front, back or pub? (5)
24 Wellington lady? (3,9)

Down

2 Intro (7)
3 I escaped, but only just! (4)
4 Seminar (6)
5 San Diego (anag) (8)
6 West Central African republic (5)
7 10ac (6-6)
8 Target sometimes sought in the morning? (6,6)
13 Occupant of same chamber (8)
16 Lorry transportation business (7)
17 Without a key (6)
19 Worth (anag) (5)
21 Study (4)

Solution No 17,519



Sudoku
Easy

Fill in the grid so that every row, every column and every 3x3 box contains the numbers 1 to 9.

Last week's solution

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

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

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