

Mandelson, Starmer
and a morass for the
UK prime minister

SPECIAL REPORT 22

The Guardian Weekly

A week in the life of the world | *Global edition*
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Holier than thou

HOW TRUMP
AND VANCE MET
THEIR MATCH
IN THE POPE

PLUS

DAVID SMITH ON AN
UNRAVELLING PRESIDENCY

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Eyewitness
Germany

PHOTOGRAPH:
MARTIN MEISSNER/AP

Hats off

Trainee police officers throw their hats in the air after being sworn in at a ceremony in Cologne. Around 3,000 trainees took their oath of office in the Lanxess arena last Wednesday. The police are one of the most popular employers in North Rhine-Westphalia, with 11,000 people applying each year.



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A week in the life of the world
24 APRIL 2026



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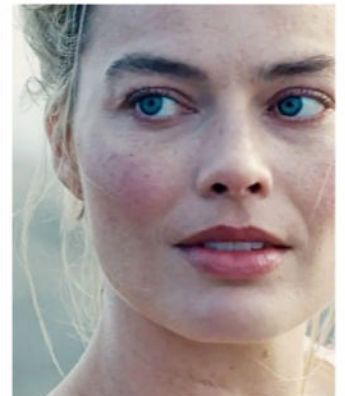
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SPOT ILLUSTRATIONS:
MATT BLEASE



On the cover Donald Trump's criticism of the pope, after Leo had spoken out against his threats against Iran - followed by JD Vance's advice to him to "be careful when he talks about matters of theology" - landed badly with many US rightwing religious conservatives. Has Trump picked an argument with the wrong pontiff?
Illustration: Guardian Design; Simone Risoluti/Vatican Media/Getty

Global report

Headlines from
the last seven days

GW

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1 US/IRAN

Spending on war could have saved 87m lives, says UN

The \$2bn a week that Donald Trump has been spending on his reckless war in Iran could have funded saving more than 87 million lives, the head of the UN's humanitarian agency said.

Tom Fletcher is wrestling with a humanitarian aid funding crisis he described on Monday as cataclysmic, amounting to a 50% cut in his budget. This is driven not just by the US but also by international cuts to overseas aid driven by a mix of ideology and demands from defence budgets.

He predicted that, with food and fuel inflation reaching close to 20%, "we will feel the impact for years in sub-Saharan Africa and east Africa pushing way more people into poverty".

As the deadline for a 10-day ceasefire in the war expired this week, efforts were being made to resume further talks in Islamabad. The US vice-president, JD Vance, was expected to head a US diplomatic delegation. Iran's president, Masoud Pezeshkian, warned there remained a "deep historical mistrust" of the US.

However, one senior Iranian official told Reuters news agency that Tehran was "positively reviewing" its participation.

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2 UNITED STATES



Eight children killed in 'domestic violence incident'

Eight children were killed, and two adults were wounded in a mass shooting in the Louisiana city of Shreveport last Sunday, in what police called a "domestic violence incident".

Police said that the suspect, Shamar Elkins, killed seven of his own children and wounded their mother, as well as killing another child. The mother and another woman were reported to be in a critical condition. Elkins died after a police pursuit. He had been arrested in 2019 in a firearms case.

Wayne Smith, Shreveport's police chief, said the suspected killer was shot and killed by police after he committed a carjacking. Investigators did not discuss a possible motive for the killings but said it appeared to be domestic in nature.

3 UNITED STATES

Pope has 'no interest' in debating war with Trump

Pope Leo XIV said that it was "not in my interest at all" to debate with the US president, Donald Trump, about the Iran war, but that he would continue preaching the gospel message of peace.

Leo spoke to reporters last Saturday aboard the papal plane flying from Cameroon to Angola as part of his 11-day tour of Africa, addressing the saga of Trump's critiques of his peace message. But the American pope also sought to set the record straight, insisting that his preaching isn't directed at Trump, but reflects the broader gospel message of peace.

The big story Page 10 →

4 BULGARIA

Moscow-friendly Radev's party is clear election victor

A Moscow-friendly former president won a majority in parliamentary elections. With more than 97% of ballots counted, the Progressive Bulgaria party of Rumen Radev, a former air force chief, had scored 44.7% of the vote, giving it an estimated 131 of the 240 seats in the national assembly.

Last Sunday's election was Bulgaria's eighth since 2021, when anti-corruption rallies brought down the government of the pro-European prime minister Boyko Borissov, and Radev's majority is the first for a single political formation since 1997. The left-leaning Progressive Bulgaria's tally put it far ahead of Borissov's conservative GERB party with 13.4%. The pro-European We Continue the Change-Democratic Bulgaria came third.

Radev said Bulgaria would make "every effort to follow its European path", but added: "A strong Bulgaria and a strong Europe need critical thinking and pragmatism. Europe has fallen victim to its own ambition to be a moral leader in a world with new rules."

5 UNITED STATES

FBI director sues Atlantic for 'heavy drinking' claim

The FBI director Kash Patel has sued the Atlantic and the author of a story that included allegations of "excessive drinking" as well as "conspicuous inebriation and unexplained absences". Patel's defamation lawsuit seeks \$250m in damages. His legal team accused the magazine and reporter Sarah Fitzpatrick of publishing "a sweeping, malicious and defamatory hit piece" on 17 April.

"We stand by our reporting on Kash Patel, and we will vigorously defend the Atlantic and our journalists against this meritless lawsuit," a spokesperson for the Atlantic said.

6 UKRAINE

Fears lone gunman's Kyiv attack directed by Moscow

Investigators were examining whether a terrorist attack in Kyiv was directed by Moscow after a man shot dead six people and injured about 14 others last Saturday. The gunman, 58, opened fire on passersby before taking hostages in a supermarket. Detectives sealed off the area in the Holosiivskyi district and tried to negotiate with him. He refused and was killed after a 40-minute standoff.

President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said police and the security services were trying to establish a motive for the "tragic" attack. Local media named the perpetrator as Dmytro Vasylychenkov, a Ukrainian citizen who was born in Moscow. He had a criminal record, Zelenskyy said.

7 MEXICO



Sheinbaum voices most open criticism of Trump yet

Claudia Sheinbaum hardened her approach to the White House after a 49-year-old Mexican citizen, Alejandro Cabrera Clemente, died in an ICE detention centre in Louisiana. The incident was the 15th death of a Mexican citizen in US custody in little over a year.

Sheinbaum said she had requested investigations into the deaths of the 15 migrants, and instructed Mexican consulates to visit detention centres daily. She also pushed back against the Trump administration's decision to impose an energy blockade on Cuba.

9 EUROPE

Europe faces jet fuel shortage, says energy chief

Europe has only six weeks of jet fuel left before shortages will hit because of the Iran war, according to the head of an energy watchdog.

Fatih Birol, executive director of the International Energy Agency, said there would be flight cancellations "soon" if oil supplies from the Middle East were not restored. "I can tell you soon we will hear the news that some of the flights from city A to city B might be cancelled as a result of lack of jet fuel," he told the Associated Press.

KLM said it would cut 160 flights - less than 1% of its schedule - in the coming month because of high kerosene jet fuel prices. However, the Dutch airline said: "There is no kerosene shortage."

8 CULTURE



Rapper's shows cancelled over antisemitic comments

Kanye West's upcoming concerts in Poland and Switzerland have been cancelled, as a growing number of European countries have stopped or postponed his performances amid a furore over his past antisemitic comments.

Poland's culture minister, Marta Cienkowska, earlier said West's "promotion of nazism" was in "manifest contradiction with Poland's values", and condemned West as an artist who "openly declares he loves Hitler [and] who promotes Nazi ideology".

The decisions of Poland and FC Basel came days after the 48-year-old US rapper postponed a show in Marseille, France after local authorities voiced opposition.

10 FRANCE

Musk summoned to Paris amid investigation into X

Elon Musk was summoned to Paris, where investigators are looking into allegations of misconduct related to the social media platform X, including the spread of child sexual abuse material and deepfake content.

Musk and Linda Yaccarino - the former X chief executive - were on Monday summoned for "voluntary interviews", while other X employees were due to be heard as witnesses this week. It was unclear whether Musk and Yaccarino would travel to Paris.

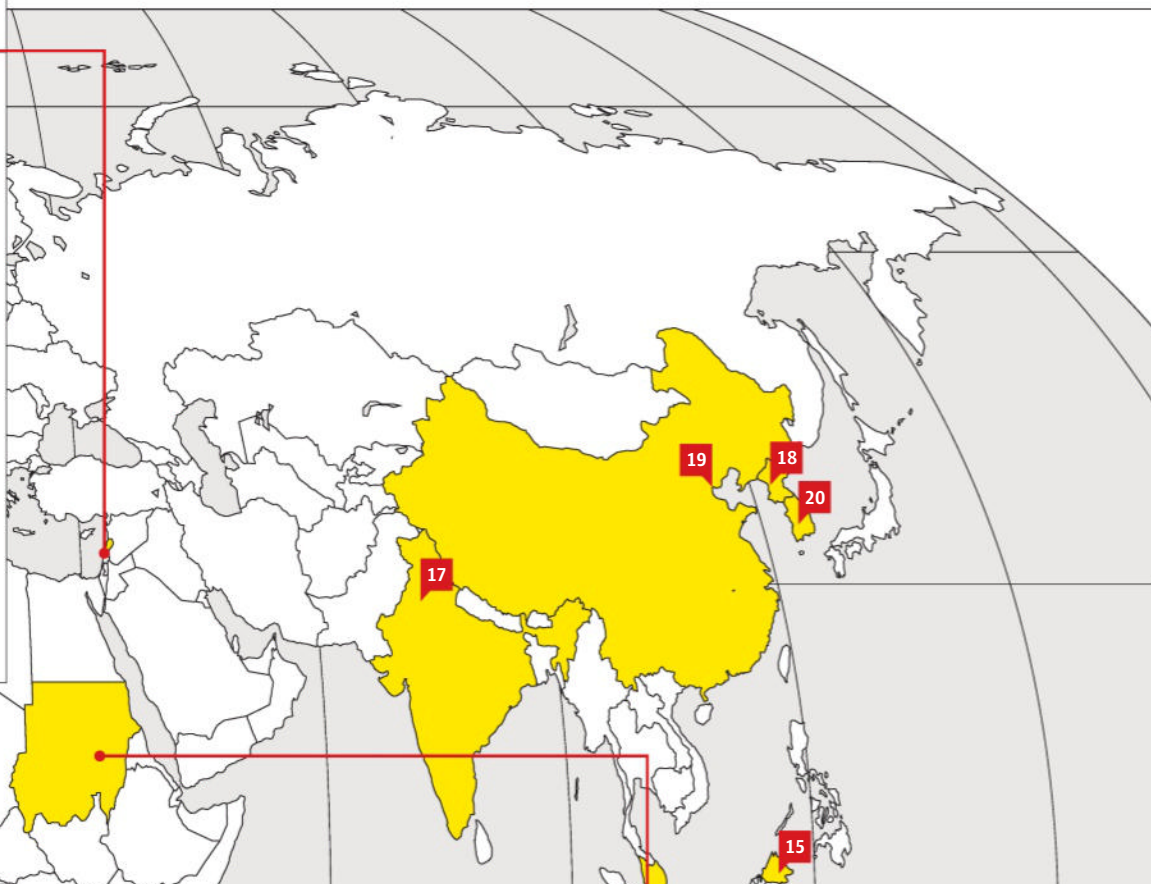
Musk was summoned after a search in February at X's French premises as part of an investigation by the cybercrime unit of the Paris prosecutor's office.

Israeli military investigates defacing of Jesus statue

The Israeli military is conducting a criminal investigation after a soldier was photographed striking a Catholic statue of Jesus with a sledgehammer in Debl, a Christian village in southern Lebanon. Israel's military officials said they had determined that an image circulating on social media showing the incident was authentic.

Benjamin Netanyahu condemned the defacing of the religious symbol and said "harsh disciplinary action" would be taken against the individual responsible. The Israeli military said it was working with people in the village to "restore the statue".

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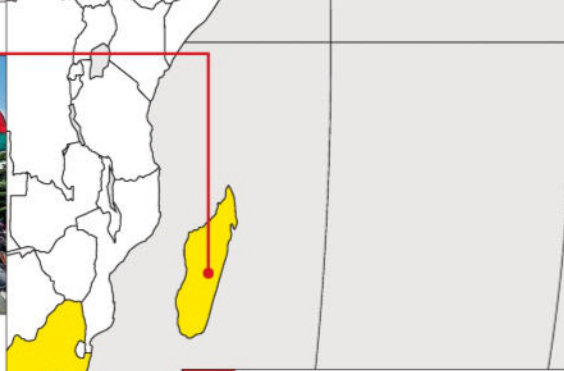


Arrests after protest calls for election date to be set

Fears increased among young people that the military regime that took power last year after huge gen Z demonstrations is following a similar path to the government it overthrew, after four young activists were arrested.

They are accused of offences related to undermining state security and criminal conspiracy after taking part in a protest that called for an election date to be set. One of the four was still in custody last Friday.

Col Michael Randrianirina came to power in a coup in October 2025.



Leftwing leader sentenced for firing weapon at rally

The leader of the Economic Freedom Fighters, Julius Malema, was sentenced to five years in prison for firing a rifle in the air at a political rally in 2018.

Lawyers for the leftwing politician have appealed, and Malema will remain free while the proceedings are under way.

Malema was convicted last year on five charges, including unlawful possession of a firearm, after an incident at the EFF's fifth anniversary celebrations in KuGompo City, then known as East London.

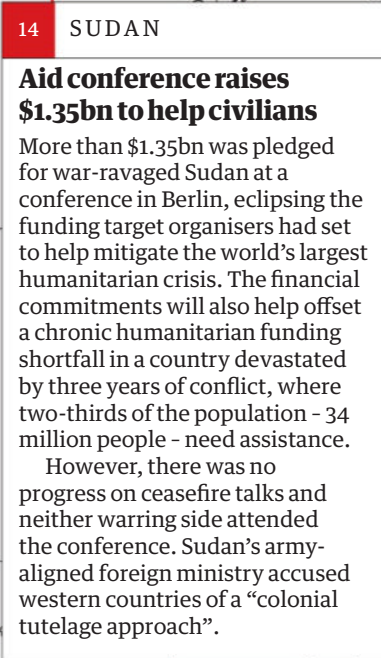
Malema's lawyers had argued the shots were intended just to be celebratory and that no one was harmed.



Aid conference raises \$1.35bn to help civilians

More than \$1.35bn was pledged for war-ravaged Sudan at a conference in Berlin, eclipsing the funding target organisers had set to help mitigate the world's largest humanitarian crisis. The financial commitments will also help offset a chronic humanitarian funding shortfall in a country devastated by three years of conflict, where two-thirds of the population - 34 million people - need assistance.

However, there was no progress on ceasefire talks and neither warring side attended the conference. Sudan's army-aligned foreign ministry accused western countries of a "colonial tutelage approach".



Global report

15 MALAYSIA

**Fire in 'water village' destroys 1,000 homes**

A huge fire destroyed about 1,000 makeshift homes, many of them built on stilts over water, and displaced thousands of people in a coastal village in Sabah state.

The blaze broke out early last Sunday morning in a "water village" in Sandakan district in Sabah's north-east, where some of Malaysia's poorest residents, including indigenous and stateless communities, live in closely packed, wooden stilt houses.

Sandakan police chief George Abd Rakman was quoted by local English-language daily the Star as saying that the "very large-scale and heartbreaking incident" affected 9,007 residents.

No injuries or fatalities were reported, the Sabah fire and rescue department said, adding that "there is no more danger".

16 NEW ZEALAND

Embattled prime minister survives leadership vote

The prime minister, Christopher Luxon, survived a leadership vote on Tuesday. Luxon, who has served as prime minister since November 2023, said he had called for the vote at a caucus meeting.

The meeting in Wellington ran for more than two hours, fuelling speculation that he might be forced out amid poor polling and leaks from MPs about alleged leadership challenges.

After the meeting, Luxon said the vote proved support for his leadership. He condemned reporters for creating a "media soap opera". A national election is due to take place in November.

17 INDIA

Opposition unites to hand rare defeat to Modi's BJP

The government failed to pass a bill to increase female representation in parliament after being accused of using the plan as a guise to redraw the country's electoral map. It was the first time in 12 years in power that a constitutional amendment proposed by Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata party (BJP) government was not passed by parliament.

The failure followed a fierce debate, with the government accused of an "attack on democracy" after it tethered a bill reserving one-third of parliamentary seats for women to a wider, controversial exercise of "delimitation". The process would redraw parliamentary constituencies along population lines based on the 2011 census, and would increase the number of MPs in the lower chamber from 543 to about 850.

As a constitutional measure, the bill required a two-thirds majority. In the final tally, 298 MPs voted in favour and 230 against. India's often fragmented opposition parties showed rare unity in fighting the bill.

18 NORTH KOREA

'Very serious' progress made on nuclear weapons

Pyongyang has made "very serious" progress in its ability to produce more nuclear weapons, Rafael Grossi, the head of the UN's nuclear watchdog, said.

North Korea is thought to have assembled about 50 nuclear warheads, although some experts are sceptical of its claims that it is able to miniaturise them so they can be attached to long-range ballistic missiles.

Grossi said work had intensified at Yongbyon's 5MW reactor, reprocessing unit, light water reactor and other facilities, and the country was believed to possess several dozen nuclear warheads.

19 CHINA

Robot runner bests human record in half-marathon

A robot has beaten a human runner's record for the first time in a half-marathon last Sunday. The machine that won the 21.1km race in Beijing also eclipsed the human world record, set last month. Lightning, made by Honor, a Chinese smartphone maker, completed the half-marathon in 50min 26sec, according to a WeChat post by the Beijing Economic-Technological Development Area. The human world record-holder, Uganda's Jacob Kiplimo, finished the same distance in 57min 20sec in March in Lisbon.

The performance by the robot marked a significant improvement from last year's inaugural race, during which the winning humanoid finished in 2hr 40min 42sec.



20 SOUTH KOREA

Cries over wolf escape turn to relief as he is captured

A two-year-old wolf that escaped from a zoo was captured safely after a nine-day search that had gripped the nation and made the animal a national celebrity.

Neukgu burrowed out of his enclosure at the O-World zoo in Daejeon on 8 April. Animal rights activists questioned whether the wolf could survive outside the zoo and also worried he might be killed during capture, something that happened to a puma that escaped from the same zoo in 2018.

Neukgu was finally found and tranquillised early last Friday. He has been returned to the zoo.

DEATHS



Desmond Morris
British zoologist who wrote bestselling studies of human behaviour. He died on 19 April, aged 98.

Moya Brennan
Lead singer of Irish folk group Clannad. She died on 13 April, aged 73.

Nathalie Baye
French actor best known for her film roles in Catch Me If You Can and Downton Abbey. She died on 17 April, aged 77.

Angela Pleasence
British stage and screen actor. She died on 6 April, aged 84.

Andy Kershaw
British broadcaster who was a BBC Radio DJ. He died on 16 April, aged 66.

Alex Manninger
Austrian goalkeeper who helped Arsenal win the Double in 1998. He died on 16 April, aged 48.

Adriano Goldschmied
Italian fashion designer known as the "godfather of denim". He died on 5 April, aged 82.


POLITICS
PM faces scrutiny over Mandelson vetting scandal

Keir Starmer accused Olly Robbins, who was the most senior official at the Foreign Office before he was sacked last week, of deliberately and repeatedly obstructing the truth over a scandal about how Peter Mandelson was appointed UK ambassador to Washington despite failing security vetting.

After the Guardian broke the story, Starmer said he was only told about the vetting advice last week, but admitted his decision to appoint Mandelson had been a fundamental mistake. In a sombre address to parliament, he insisted the Foreign Office was to blame for a “staggering” and “incredible” decision not to brief him, or anybody else in Downing Street.

Labour MPs have been furious at the resurfacing of the scandal at a time when the prime minister had rebuilt some goodwill over his handling of the Iran crisis.

Starmer has ordered an investigation into any security concerns over Mandelson’s tenure in the top diplomatic role amid concerns over potential leaks.

Robbins, who was sacked after the revelations, overturned the United Kingdom Security Vetting (UKVS) decision to fail Mandelson. The Foreign Office has now been stripped of this power. On Tuesday Robbins told the government foreign affairs committee that the Foreign Office had been “under constant pressure” to push through the appointment.

Starmer claimed that he had not misled the Commons, despite admitting his previous version of events was wrong.

Spotlight Page 22 →



15m

Number of juvenile oysters to be released into the North Sea in one of the biggest rewilding projects in UK waters. The scheme will use a unique rearing process, and hopes to re-establish a huge oyster bed around Orkney

CRIME
Two teens arrested over synagogue arson attack

Two teenagers were arrested over an arson attack at a synagogue in north-west London last weekend, the Metropolitan police said.

Matt Jukes, the deputy commissioner of the Met, said a 17-year-old boy and 19-year-old man had been detained, as he confirmed officers were investigating claims a series of antisemitic attacks in the UK were linked to Iranian-backed proxies.

“We’ve made, over the last weeks, 15 arrests in relation to a series of six incidents that have targeted Jewish premises, the Jewish-led ambulance service and a Persian media organisation,” Jukes said on Monday.

Police say most of the incidents have been claimed by the group Harakat Ashab al-Yamin al-Islamia.

HEALTH
Caught short: public toilets decline by 14% in a decade

The number of public toilets in England has fallen by 14% in a decade, creating vast swathes of lavatory “deserts” and unpleasant environments, a report says.

The analysis by the Royal Society for Public Health found a “significant shortfall” in provision, with 15,481 people for each public toilet in England. There are 8,500 people for each toilet in Scotland and 6,748 in Wales.


TRAVEL
Domestic breaks set to surge amid doubt on flights

Holiday companies have predicted a surge in bookings for UK summer breaks after a jump in interest from Britons fearful of flight cancellations linked to the Iran war, which has led to warnings of possible jet fuel shortages.

Travel spending fell in March for the first time since the pandemic travel restrictions lifted in 2021, dropping by 3.3%, according to data from Barclays. Spending on travel agents fell by 4.6%, airlines by 4.1%, and public transport by 2.9%.

Sinead O’Connor of analysts Mintel said its research showed 52% of Britons surveyed planned to holiday in the UK.


LAW
Women convicted over abortions to receive pardons

Legislation to pardon women who have been convicted of illegal abortions has passed its final parliamentary hurdle, paving the way for a landmark change in the law in England and Wales.

The amendment to the crime and policing bill, which will also expunge the police records of those arrested and investigated over illegal abortions, was considered in the House of Lords during a phase of parliamentary ping-pong, where a bill passes back and forth between the Lords and Commons.

The bill is expected to receive royal assent - meaning it will become law - in the coming weeks. The same legislation will also put an end to prosecutions of women who terminate their own pregnancies, with a clause in the bill introduced in the Commons last year by the Labour MP Tonia Antoniazzi. She said: “I’m very pleased that parliament has approved a protection for women already harmed by outdated criminal law related to abortion.”



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Eyewitness

Spring time
A Morris side performs the English traditional folk dance dating back to the 15th century, in which dancers use handkerchiefs and sticks and wear bells on their legs, in Pinner, London, as part of festivities to celebrate St George's Day, 23 April.

By James Veysel/
Shutterstock



SCIENCE AND ENVIRONMENT



CLIMATE CRISIS

Atlantic current much more likely to collapse than thought

The critical Atlantic current system appears significantly more likely to collapse than previously thought after new research found that climate models predicting the biggest slowdown are the most realistic. Scientists called the finding “very concerning” as a collapse would have catastrophic consequences for Europe, Africa and the Americas.

The Atlantic meridional overturning circulation (Amoc) was already known to be at its weakest for 1,600 years as a result of the climate crisis.

Dr Valentin Portmann, at the Inria Centre de recherche Bordeaux Sud-Ouest in France and who led the new research, said: “We found that the Amoc is going to decline more than expected compared to the average of all climate models. This means we have an Amoc that is closer to a tipping point.”

The new research is published in the journal *Science Advances*.

MEDICAL RESEARCH

Effect of gamechanger Alzheimer's drugs ‘trivial’

Drugs that have been hailed as a gamechanger for the treatment of Alzheimer's disease make no noticeable difference to patients, according to an extensive review.

The analysis of clinical trials found that the effects of anti-amyloid drugs on cognition and dementia severity over 18 months were “trivial”.

The Cochrane review, co-authored by Edo Richard, professor of neurology at Radboud University medical centre in the Netherlands, drew on gold standard methods to assess data from 17 published clinical trials, but was criticised by some researchers and charities for combining results from older, failed drugs with those from newer, more effective medicines.

EVOLUTION

Red hair gene top for natural selection over millennia

The gene for red hair has been actively selected in Europe for more than 10,000 years, a Harvard-led study found. By analysing DNA

2.2k

Number of ants found in a Chinese national's luggage at Nairobi airport in Kenya. The insects are prized by collectors in Europe and Asia



from nearly 16,000 ancient human remains and more than 6,000 living individuals, the research found 479 genetic variants that appear to have been favoured by natural selection.

Previous research has shown that people with red hair and fair skin can produce vitamin D more efficiently, for instance, which may have conferred survival benefits in northern climates. The latest findings are published in *Nature*.

MARINE LIFE

Sperm whales' ‘talk’ closely parallels human language

Sperm whales' vocalised communications are very similar to humans', researchers have discovered. Not only do sperm whale have a form of “alphabet” but the structure of these vowels behaves in the same way as human speech, the new study has found.

Sperm whales communicate in a series of short clicks called codas. The structure has “close parallels in the phonetics and phonology of human languages”, the paper, published in the *Proceedings B* journal, states. The findings are the latest discovery about the lives of sperm whales by Project Ceti.



The president has opened widening fissures in his base by starting a war he couldn't finish with Iran, stoking inflation and offending Christians. Barred from running again, he may feel he has nothing to lose *By David Smith*

Meltdown

Is Trump's presidency spiralling?

PLUS

'Popesplaining' Vance out of his depth

By PETER BEAUMONT

How much more punishment can Trump's fall guy take?

By SIMON TISDALL

LANCE

JOHNSON VOTED FOR DONALD TRUMP THREE TIMES. Now he is feeling buyer's remorse. "I haven't been too happy with the third time around," said the 47-year-old contractor, sitting at a bar in Crescent Springs, Kentucky. "We're supposed to not start any new wars. Prices were supposed to come down. We were promised a lot of things and we're not getting them."

Johnson is not the only Trump voter having doubts about a US president who, after defying political gravity for a decade, finally seems to be crashing back to earth. This month has arguably been the most bruising of Trump's two terms in office, suggesting that his tried and trusted playbook could finally be falling apart.

Having launched an unpopular war with Iran, the president was scrambling for a way out as fuel prices climb; he insulted the pope and posted an AI image of himself as Jesus Christ on social media; he lost in a court hearing over a lawsuit against the Wall Street Journal relating to the Jeffrey Epstein files; and his intervention on behalf of an autocratic ally in Hungary was rebuked by that country's voters.

Just 38% of voters approve of the way Trump is handling his job as president, while 55% disapprove, according to a poll released last week by Quinnipiac University. A mere 36% of voters approve of the way the president is handling the situation with Iran, while 58% disapprove. Two in three voters blame him for the recent rise in petrol prices.

Elaine Kamarck, a former official in the Bill Clinton White House, said: "He's in the most serious trouble he's been in, and that includes his first term, where there were some constraints on him. It's hard to tell whether it's the absence of constraints or the fact that he's getting old and cranky but he seems to have a dramatic loss of judgment. The best description of Trump - apparently it's British slang - is shambolic." →

'This is the first time we've seen cracks in his support from the base and that's a big, big shift'

Since he ran for president in 2016, Trump has cultivated an aura of invincibility, memorably declaring that he could shoot someone on New York's Fifth Avenue and not lose any voters. Insulting war veterans or being caught on tape boasting about grabbing women's private parts could not derail him; if anything, his coarse, taboo-busting style animated a support base sick of establishment politicians.

The aura was punctured by the Covid pandemic and election defeat in 2020, only for Trump and his allies to spend years spinning a false narrative that the election had been stolen. He survived an assassination attempt in 2024 and roared back into power, claiming that he had been "saved by God to make America great again".

Although the honeymoon did not last long as Trump imposed sweeping tariffs, federal government cuts and hardline immigration enforcement, his support base kept the faith. But now the unlikely coalition that put Trump back in the White House is unravelling as he alienates *Maga* influencers, religious conservatives, anti-interventionists who wanted an end to forever wars and anyone who craves relief from years of inflation.

A majority of Catholic voters supported Trump in his 2024 presidential victory. But last week he launched an unprecedented verbal assault on Pope Leo XIV, the first US-born pope, calling him "WEAK on Crime, and terrible for Foreign Policy" after Leo spoke out against Trump's bellicose threats to Iran. The president was swiftly condemned by Catholic leaders, including conservative-leaning bishops.

Then Trump posted an AI image seeming to depict himself as Jesus healing a bedridden man, surrounded by bald eagles and the US flag, on his Truth Social platform. The backlash was swift.

David Brody, a prominent Trump-supporting commentator with the Christian Broadcasting Network, responded: "TAKE THIS DOWN, MR. PRESIDENT. You're not God. None of us are. This goes too far. It crosses the line."

By midday last Monday, the image had been removed. The president claimed that he never intended to liken himself to Jesus when he posted the picture. "How did they come up with that?" he asked unconvincingly. "It's supposed to be me as a doctor, making people better. And I do make people better. I make people a lot better."

But last Wednesday Trump posted a new image of himself being embraced by Jesus while bathed in an angelic light against a US flag backdrop.

Kamarck, a senior fellow in governance studies at the non-partisan Brookings Institution thinktank in Washington, observed: "Taking on the pope, allowing memes to go out that pretend he's Jesus Christ: that is absolutely blasphemous. It's even offensive to people who are not religious but it's particularly offensive to religious people and many of them - Catholics and evangelicals - have been part of his base."

"Between the war cracking up the America First part of his base over no foreign entanglements, and this religious stuff cracking up the religious

part of his base, I'd say that this is the first time we've seen cracks in his support from the base and that's a big, big development."

Conservatives agree that the voters' patience is wearing thin. Erick Erickson, a radio host based in Atlanta, Georgia, told Politico: "They're not getting what they voted for to begin with. On top of that, whether he's mocking their religion intentionally or not, he still is. I think we are looking not really at a *Maga* crack-up per se but a lot of the base becoming exasperated enough to start looking beyond Trump."

Trump purports to despise nothing more than losers. But his own losses continue to pile up. Last week a federal court dismissed his defamation lawsuit that claimed Rupert Murdoch's Wall Street Journal tarnished his reputation with an article describing a birthday card to deceased sex offender Epstein bearing Trump's signature.

District judge Darrin Gayles said the president had not come close to meeting the "actual malice" standard that public figures must clear in defamation. Trump has said he will refile the lawsuit.

Meanwhile Trump suffered a setback on the global stage with the election result in Hungary. His vice-president, JD Vance, travelled to the country in a late bid to bolster Viktor Orbán and put Trump on a speakerphone to address a rally but it was all in vain, as rival Péter Magyar stormed to victory. The journalist and historian Anne Applebaum wrote in the Atlantic: "Orbán's loss brings to an end the assumption of inevitability that has pervaded the *Maga* movement."

From left, Pope Leo XIV; Donald Trump's AI-generated image of himself as a Christ-like figure; an airstrike on an oil depot in Tehran; Trump at the White House

LUCA ZENNARO/EPA; @REALDONALDTRUMP/REUTERS; SASAN/MIDDLE EAST IMAGES/AFP/GETTY; ANNABELLE GORDON/REUTERS



But perhaps nothing threatens that support more than the war in Iran, launched with Israel on 28 February without any evidence of an imminent threat. Trump has claimed victory several times but the Iranian regime remains entrenched and radicalised, its nuclear ambitions still intact, emboldened by its ability to choke oil commerce in the strait of Hormuz. The US has also lost credibility with European and Middle Eastern allies.

His frustration boiling over, Trump lashed out in an Easter Sunday social media post: "Open the Fuckin' Strait, you crazy bastards, or you'll be living in Hell - JUST WATCH. Praise be to Allah." Two days later, he warned Iran that "a whole civilization will die tonight". The genocidal threat and mocking use of religious language were too much for podcasters such as Tucker Carlson, Alex Jones and Candace Owens, all former allies.

Some warn that the Iran war could become Trump's equivalent of Hurricane Katrina, the catastrophic tropical cyclone that killed 1,392 people in and around New Orleans in 2005 and inflicted huge damage on President George W Bush's reputation, from which he never fully recovered.

Olivia Troye, a former intelligence official in the first Trump administration, said: "This will follow him because he did run on a platform of no wars and clearly there is no end to this conflict in sight and it's only getting worse. This is a conflict that he started that no one on his team in that cabinet knows how to get out of. I don't know how you look at this man and not truly see him for what he is: a fraud."

Trump ran for president promising to lower prices but his approval rating on the issue of inflation is lower than Jimmy Carter and Joe Biden's at the same stage of their presidencies.

Earlier this month he admitted that the cost of oil and gasoline may remain high beyond November's midterm elections, telling Fox News: "It could be, or the same, or maybe a little bit higher, but it should be around the same."

Troye, who last week launched a run for Congress as a Democrat, added: "The longer this war goes on, the more it impacts us here at home. Gas prices are going up. We haven't even seen the impact on our grocery store prices yet because that's going to have longer-term effects. Farming communities are upset right now because it's going to hurt them in terms of their access to fertiliser."

T

RUMP HAS FACED POLITICAL CRISES BEFORE and bounced back, most notably after the January 6 insurrection at the US Capitol in 2021, when the Republican party seemed ready to abandon him - only to nominate him for president again three years later.

This time he is constitutionally barred from running, which could mean he feels like he has nothing to lose.

Anthony Scaramucci, a former White House communications director, wrote on the X social media platform: "Here's the real question: Does he care about any of this? I would submit to everybody - he does not. He's entered the nihilistic stage of his political career. The polls don't matter. The people don't matter. The consequences don't matter. That is the most dangerous version of this man."

An approval rating hitting the lowest levels of his second term in office is raising concern among Republicans that his party is poised to lose control of Congress in the midterm elections. A Democratic majority in either chamber could launch investigations into the Trump administration while blocking much of his legislative agenda. That could make the president more unhinged than ever as he refuses to accept lame duck status.

Larry Jacobs, director of the Center for the Study of Politics and Government at the University of Minnesota, said: "Donald Trump is a wounded political animal. There's no fading away for this guy. The more damaged he gets, the more reckless he gets and he is someone who is so consumed with a delusion of his grandeur that he's a politically dangerous existentially threatening figure in America and the global scene. He is unbound. This is a reckless force moving through America with enormous global complications." ●

DAVID SMITH IS THE GUARDIAN'S WASHINGTON CORRESPONDENT

'Does he care about any of this? I would submit he does not. He's entered the nihilistic stage of his political career'

'In war, greens now look like true patriots'
George Monbiot
Opinion
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ANALYSIS
RELIGION

'Just war' doctrine Popesplaining Vance merely exposes his own lack of knowledge

By Peter
Beaumont

During his visit to Africa, Pope Leo XIV - the first American pope, and the first from the Augustinian order - has been drawn into a row with the US vice-president, JD Vance - a recent convert to Catholicism with no academic background in the history of Catholic thinking - who has been accused of "popesplaining" theology to the pontiff.

At the heart of the issue is the idea of what constitutes a "just war" - an argument that theologians, philosophers, and military theorists have debated for centuries.

The intellectual and ethical standoff has been intensified by the increasingly bizarre efforts by leading figures in the Trump administration to imbue their efforts with an incoherent Christian militancy.

At its pinnacle, that strategy led Donald Trump to repost an image of himself as a Christ-like figure healing the sick, while his defence secretary, Pete Hegseth, has conducted himself like a modern crusader, claiming the mantle of a righteous violence that had already been implied by his choice of far-right tattoos.

Despite all of this, it has been an exchange of views between Leo and Vance that has been the most consequential, as the vice-president essentially suggested the pope be "careful" and stay in his lane when he "talks of matters of theology".

Vance's comment was prompted by a series of interventions by Leo, beginning last month in an address to military ordinaries and then in a homily delivered on Palm Sunday in Rome where, in remarks that referenced "looming war", he said Christ's teaching rejected war. Leo added that Jesus "does not listen to the prayers of those who wage war, but rejects them".

Most pointedly, however, the pontiff denounced as "truly unacceptable" the threat from Trump on 7 April that "a whole civilisation will die tonight" unless Iran made



a deal with the US. He said such attacks would violate international law.

Vance delivered his reply at an event for the conservative group Turning Point USA at the University of Georgia.

"When the pope says that God is never on the side of people who wield the sword, there is more than a 1,000-year tradition of just-war theory," he said. "How do you say that God is never on the side of those who wield the sword?" he asked, citing the example of US troops that had liberated France from the Nazis and freed prisoners in concentration camps.

◀ Saint Augustine, the Christian thinker central to just-war theory, depicted in a 17th-century painting

LOS ANGELES COUNTY
MUSEUM OF ART





▲ JD Vance, an adult convert to Catholicism, meets Pope Leo at the Vatican in May 2025, before their recent clash

SIMONE RISOLUTI/
REUTERS

Vance added: “I think it’s very, very important for the pope to be careful when he talks about matters of theology.”

At the heart of the issue is how the fourth-century thinker Augustine framed the idea of a just war after centuries in which the early Christian tradition had rejected war and violence, even in self-defence.

A just war, he argued, was the business of the state.

It could be justified if it was fought with the “right intention” and in pursuit of restoring peace. “Actions motivated by revenge, wrath or greed invalidate any claim to justice in war.”

The tests set by Augustine and the thinkers who followed remain the guiding principles of conflict law. Cardinal Robert McElroy of Washington DC said the war failed the criteria for a just war.

“You cannot satisfy the just war tradition’s criterion of right intention if you do not have a clear intention,” he said in an interview discussing the war in Iran.

Last Wednesday, Bishop James Massa, chair of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops’ committee on doctrine, intervened to make clear that Leo’s comments were not a question of the pope’s “opinion” but rather Catholic teaching.

In a statement, Massa said: “For over a thousand years, the Catholic church has taught just-war theory, and it is that long tradition the Holy Father carefully references in his comments on war. A constant tenet of that thousand-year tradition is a nation can only legitimately take up the sword ‘in self-defence, once all peace efforts have failed’. That is, to be a just war it must be a defence against another who actively wages war, which is what the Holy Father actually said: ‘He does not listen to the prayers of those who wage war.’”

The row has inevitably drawn in the president’s most reliable defenders. Among them is the House speaker, Mike Johnson, who identifies as a Southern Baptist and appears as foggy as Vance about the point Leo was making. “If you wade into political waters, you should expect some political response,” Johnson said.

Others, such as the conservative Catholic New York Times columnist Ross Douthat, have found themselves straddling the fence, at once complaining that the church can seem hostile to conservatives, while conceding that the Trump administration’s justifications for the war are ever-changing.

“Is the war just or is it not?” asked Douthat, offering arguments about why it may be just. “The administration simply has not made a coherent and consistent case for the justice of the conflict.”

PETER BEAUMONT IS THE GUARDIAN’S
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Pulp friction Defence chief Hegseth channels his inner Tarantino

By Richard Luscombe

It was perhaps inevitable that a braggadocious Christian nationalist defence secretary elevated from his role as a Fox News television host would pluck a fake Bible verse from a violent Hollywood blockbuster and present it at a Pentagon prayer session to rally the troops for the “holy war” in Iran.

Among a glut of stories swirling around Pete Hegseth last week, the bizarre allegation that he was passing off a fire-and-brimstone script by Quentin Tarantino as the word of the Lord was far too compelling to ignore.

Last Wednesday, at the latest of his new series of worship services at the Pentagon to bless the Iran war effort, Hegseth delivered a prayer for search and rescue crews he said was based on a Bible passage in the Old Testament book of Ezekiel. But the prayer appeared instead to be a bastardised version of a speech by the actor Samuel L Jackson in the 1994 movie *Pulp Fiction*.



▶ Samuel
L Jackson
as Jules in
Pulp Fiction

In the film, just before Jackson’s character, Jules Winnfield, executes a crooked business partner of his mob boss, he declares: “The path of the righteous man is beset on all sides by the iniquities of the selfish and the tyranny of evil men. Blessed is he who, in the name of charity and good will, shepherds the weak through the valley of darkness, for he is truly his brother’s keeper and the finder of lost children.

“And I will strike down upon thee with great vengeance and furious anger those who attempt to poison and destroy my brothers. And you will know my name is the Lord when I lay my vengeance upon you.”

Hegseth said he thought the military prayer he read “is meant to reflect Ezekiel 25:17”, and made no mention of Tarantino’s script or Jackson’s near-identical recital.

“The path of the downed aviator is beset on all sides by the iniquities of the selfish and the tyranny of evil men,” he said.

“Blessed is he who, in the name of camaraderie and duty, shepherds the lost through the valley of darkness, for he is truly his brother’s keeper and the finder of lost children.

“And I will strike down upon thee with great vengeance and furious anger those who attempt to capture and destroy my brother. And you will know my call sign is Sandy One, when I lay my vengeance upon thee.”

The defence department did not immediately reply to an inquiry about the origin and content of Hegseth’s retelling.

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COMMENTARY
POLITICS

Trump's fall guy Vance was *Maga's* great hope. How much more of this can he take?

By Simon Tisdall

For a would-be president, JD Vance has a habit of getting into fights he cannot win. Three losing battles in a single week - with Iranian negotiators, Hungarian voters and Pope Leo - brought censure, humiliation and mockery raining down on his head. None were of Vance's choosing. All were fought vicariously on Donald Trump's behalf.

The vice-president is paying a high price for sycophantic loyalty to his boss. His poll ratings are plunging. His *Maga* succession hopes falter. He suffers by association - although his own inflammatory statements and misjudgments often make matters worse. Yet amid growing doubts about Trump's mental health and fitness to govern, Vance remains the White House's next-in-line.

Given he's expected to seek the presidency in 2028, the question arises: will Vance continue to meekly act as Trump's fall guy for another bruising two-and-a-half years and hope to survive, as Claudius survived Caligula? Or, faced by career-ending disaster as the "mad king" drags everyone down, will the worm turn, as Brutus turned against Caesar?

Vance's loyalty is not reciprocated. Remember the fate of Trump's first vice-president, Mike Pence, who refused to block the 2020 election result. Trump reportedly backed Capitol Hill rioters who wanted Pence hanged for treason. If the mood takes him, Trump will happily throw faithful followers under the bus. Ask Pam Bondi. Yet Vance's loyalties and beliefs are flexible, too. Until he

jumped on the *Maga* bandwagon, he was a fierce critic of Trump, warning he could become "America's Hitler". He reinvented himself as an immigration hawk.

Vance once passionately opposed overseas military adventurism. In office, he has supported attacks on Venezuela, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Somalia, Nigeria and now Iran. He converted to Catholicism in 2019 and has since used it to widen his appeal to religious conservatives. Yet he frequently, arrogantly challenges the church's authority and papal teachings.

In short, Vance is a crude opportunist, a self-proclaimed hillbilly peddling political moonshine. But his position is stronger than other cabinet members in one key respect. Trump cannot fire an elected vice-president - though under the 25th amendment to the constitution, Vance could help fire Trump. A group of Democrats in Congress wants him to join a special commission that would do exactly that if Trump were judged unfit.

Vance will bide his time. But Trump's Iran fiasco and increasingly unhinged behaviour is eroding grassroots support - and that hurts his deputy, too. Vance's lead over the secretary of state, Marco Rubio, in the notional contest for the Republican nomination is slipping. Among the wider public, according to one poll, he is the most unpopular VP in modern history. Big Democrat gains in November's midterm elections could see him (and many other Republicans) turn on Trump.

Vance has been triply screwed over during the past couple of weeks. Viktor Orbán, heading for defeat in Hungary's election, wanted the president to stump for him. But Trump abhors losers, so he sent Vance instead. This thankless mission made no difference to the outcome, which delivered a body blow to the European ethno-nationalist Christian right.

Likewise, when Trump - desperately trying to talk his way out of his Iran disaster - needed someone to shoulder the risk, he picked on hapless Vance who, with zero experience as a high-stakes negotiator and zero personal knowledge of Iran, had no authority to cut a deal. Now he is the public face of Trump's failure to impose instant peace.

Trump's ongoing, offensive attacks on Pope Leo are, perhaps, even more deadly for Vance's standing and reputation. As the administration's most senior Catholic, he might have been expected to defend the Holy Father. Instead, revealing a stunning lack of political savvy, Vance questioned Leo's truthfulness. He told the pope to stop expressing pro-peace sentiments and "stick to matters of morality". This was crass.

Trapped in self-harming subservience to his master, Vance hadn't finished alienating core religious voters. He claimed a sickening image posted by Trump, in which the president was depicted as a Jesus Christ figure, was just a "joke". And Leo has since called out Vance and his boss big time. Once again, the veep is on a hiding to nothing.

As a professed Catholic, Vance ostensibly believes in the forgiveness of sins. If, between now and November 2028, he can learn statesmanship, practice humility and moderation, and heed what Abraham Lincoln called the "better angels of our nature", he may yet find redemption. At 41, Vance still has time to reinvent himself again. But it will take a miracle.

SIMON TISDALL IS A WORLD AFFAIRS COMMENTATOR FOR THE GUARDIAN

◀ JD Vance could be Brutus to Trump's Caesar

ILLUSTRATION:
GUARDIAN DESIGN;
GETTY

“Until he jumped on the *Maga* cause, Vance was a fierce critic of Trump

COLOMBIA

The country's first Black VP on four tough years

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Spotlight



LEBANON



Bittersweet return south to villages destroyed by airstrikes

By Abbas Abdelkarim
SOUTH LEBANON and
William Christou BEIRUT

Mohammed Ashour was on the road at 5am, speeding towards his hometown of Shaqra. The Lebanese army, the Israel Defense Forces and Hezbollah had all told residents of south Lebanon not to return, that it was still dangerous despite a ceasefire. But the 60-year-old had been displaced for 44 days - he had counted each day - and he would not wait another hour before seeing his home.

At 3pm, Ashour was still on the road. The normally two-hour drive turned into 10, as the line of cars returning south stretched down the coastal highway. The Lebanese army had

worked through the night to repair the Qasmieh Bridge into Tyre, bombed by Israel hours before the ceasefire, and cars were inching over the ad-hoc crossing one by one.

"They told me my house was destroyed. But I wanted to come and see it for myself," said Ashour. He had left his family in Beirut, wanting to shield them from the destruction that awaited them in their village.

Ashour was one of thousands of Lebanese who rushed back to their villages in south Lebanon last Friday in the hours after the shaky 10-day ceasefire between Israel and Lebanon took effect. People returned to south

▲ Excavators remove rubble from buildings destroyed by Israeli airstrikes while rescuers search for victims in the city of Tyre
BILAL HUSSEIN/AP

Continued





Lebanon despite the rubble-strewn roads and collapsed bridges, crossing dirt roads and even driving through the Litani River, and despite a ceasefire that promised no permanent peace.

"It's our land. Whether the truce is short or long, even if it's just for an hour, we will come back," Ashour said, before driving off to see Shaqra.

Families, packed two to a seat, drove cars saddled with mattresses down the highway, accompanied by crowds waving Lebanese and Hezbollah flags, cheering on the returning residents. Some held up their fingers in a V sign for victory. But the festive atmosphere turned sombre when residents reached their villages.

Hassan Najdi, a 28-year-old electrical engineer, returned to a heavily damaged home in the town of Srifa. He stood outside and looked at the remains of his backyard, strewn with rubble and the roof of his neighbour's house and at his own home scorched black by flames. The windows had been blown in and the metal bars bent from the force of an airstrike nearby.

"Honestly, everything has changed a lot. The features of the place are completely different. When you first enter the village, you can't even recognise that this is the Srifa it used to be," said Najdi as he began to clean the entry way to his home.

The 44 days of war had a heavy toll on Srifa. In the hours before the ceasefire was announced, the Israeli airforce carried out about a dozen airstrikes on the town. Three-quarters of the homes in Najdi's neighbourhood had been flattened. Srifa had suffered many losses, some of the more than 2,100 people killed by Israel over six weeks of war in Lebanon.

Najdi's uncle, Wadih Najdeh, a surgeon who had spent the war

▲ Children in a damaged shop in Srifa, southern Lebanon

KAWNAT HAJU/AFP/GETTY

▼ UN peacekeepers patrol near Qasmieh Bridge as people return to their homes

MAHMOUD ZAYYAT/ AFP/GETTY

working in the governmental hospital in Tebnine, also returned to find his and his wife's clinic damaged. The windows were all shattered and the surgical chair was covered in debris.

Still, despite the damage, it was a relief to be home. Tebnine hospital had been damaged in two nearby Israeli strikes last week, blasts that injured 11 members of hospital staff.

"Returning brings both joy and pain. The pain comes from losing young people - friends and companions - and also from seeing the destruction on the road and in the village, especially in Srifa, where the damage is very extensive," Najdeh said. "But God willing, all this destruction can be repaired."

The return to their towns and villages was bittersweet, not only because of the damage, but also because residents were unsure how long they would be able to stay. The 10-day ceasefire came with warnings from both Israeli and Hezbollah officials that hostilities could resume at any time if either party violated the truce.

The war that began on 2 March when Hezbollah launched rockets at Israel in retaliation for the killing of Iran's supreme leader Ali Khamenei and led to the Israeli bombing campaign and invasion was frozen, but only barely. The same issues that ignited the war - Hezbollah's presence in the south and

continued Israeli bombing of Lebanon - still remained.

The Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, said last Friday: "One way or another, we will restore security to the residents of the north," adding: "One of our hands holds a weapon, our other hand is extended in peace."

Residents of south Lebanon were well aware that this ceasefire might not be a permanent peace, but had decided to exploit the truce, however brief, to get a glimpse of home.

"We've come back during these 10 days to see what the situation is with this truce, whether there will actually be commitment from the Israeli side," said Hassan Najdi.

Other residents of the south could not even get a glimpse of their homes. Israeli troops maintained positions in border villages, and residents who approached were met with gunfire. Over their month-long occupation in south Lebanon, the Israeli military flattened entire villages along the border with controlled demolitions and bombings. In that sense, both Najdi and his uncle felt lucky to have seen their villages - even if damaged, even if they could not stay.

"Of course, we in the south, we have a saying: we can live in tents, even if we don't have houses," Najdi said.

ABBAS ABDELKARIM IS A JOURNALIST BASED IN LEBANON; WILLIAM CHRISTOU IS A BEIRUT-BASED JOURNALIST





◀ Pakistan's chief of defence forces, Field Marshal Asim Munir (centre left), welcomes JD Vance to Islamabad
GETTY

ANALYSIS
PAKISTAN

Global player Islamabad pushes for peace and raises its profile

By Saeed Shah ISLAMABAD



As Pakistan works to narrow differences between Iran and the US as a global peacemaker, it is seeking to recast its diplomatic standing and attract business.

Pakistani officials, mediating between an unpredictable US president and hardliners in Tehran, were on Monday trying to coax both sides to put conditions in place for a second round of talks in Islamabad this week.

At stake is not only regional peace, but also Islamabad's concerns about becoming dragged into the war and its dependence on energy supplies shipped from the Gulf.

A three-day visit to Tehran last week by Pakistan's military chief, Field Marshal Asim Munir, helped produce a ceasefire in Israel's

attacks on Lebanon, and a short-lived breakthrough in reopening the strait of Hormuz.

Pakistani officials expect concessions from the two camps, including on Iran's nuclear programme, the trickiest dispute. If an agreement is reached, Pakistan is hopeful that Trump and the Iranian president, Masoud Pezeshkian, will fly to Islamabad to sign the deal.

The only nuclear-armed country in the Muslim world, Pakistan believes it has been punching below its weight. As a new multipolar order takes shape, Pakistan is seeking greater sway, using its military heft to counterbalance the longstanding weaknesses of an anaemic economy and tumultuous politics.

The opening was provided by the Trump administration's need for an interlocutor with Iran, a task Munir took on after a surprise June 2025 White House meeting with Trump. For Iran, Islamabad's diplomatic support during last year's 12-day conflict with Israel cemented ties.

Ali Sarwar Naqvi, a former senior Pakistani diplomat now heading the Centre for International Security Studies, a thinktank in Islamabad, said Iran did not have faith in traditional European diplomatic venues to host the talks. "Pakistan has the confidence of all the permanent members of the [UN] security council. And Pakistan also has the trust of Iran," said Naqvi.

For decades, Pakistan has managed to balance close ties both with Beijing and Washington, and

High stakes
A delicate balance

12
Number of days last year's Israel and Iran conflict lasted, a battle that strengthened ties between Islamabad and Tehran

\$3bn
Amount recently loaned by Saudi Arabia to Pakistan to help with its vulnerable economy

has maintained a deep partnership with the Gulf states. Pakistan was able to call on China to provide assurances to Iran to enter into peace negotiations.

Zamir Akram, a former Pakistani ambassador, said Pakistan's embassy in Washington had represented Iranian interests there since the 1979 revolution, while Pakistan had set up secret talks in 1971 that led to the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and the US. "Pakistan's role today does not come out of the blue," said Akram. "Pakistan's job now is to make sure that both sides believe they are getting an honourable exit."

Even in the midst of its high-wire diplomacy, Pakistan's economic vulnerability has been on display in recent days, with daily power cuts to save money and an emergency \$3bn loan taken from Saudi Arabia. There is hope that with greater global stature, Pakistan could attract more investment, though that would also depend on economic reforms such as lower taxes and more robust laws.

Joshua White, a former White House official who is now a professor at Johns Hopkins University, said Washington's traditional policymaking process would have flagged that Pakistan had a difficult relationship with Iran and that it lacked leverage.

"Pakistan has been sophisticated and obsequious in engaging the Trump administration," said White. "The decision-making process in Washington today is highly personalised, and highly dependent on the president's instincts, perspectives and proclivities. And the Pakistani leadership, to their credit, have taken full advantage."

Elizabeth Threlkeld, a former US diplomat who is director for south Asia at the Stimson Center, a Washington-based thinktank, said Pakistan's stock had risen in the US.

"So long as Pakistan does not set unrealistic expectations for the outcome of talks and is able to host them without incident, it stands to gain from simply providing an opportunity for the two sides to come together and has little to lose in the process," Threlkeld said.

SAEED SHAH IS A JOURNALIST COVERING SOUTH ASIA



ANALYSIS
ISRAEL

Shifting ties Is the EU about to change its stance on Gaza?

With Orbán gone and Meloni pulling back, the prospect of sanctions on trade and settlers is edging closer

By Guardian reporters



It was a bad week for Israel in Europe: the country lost its staunchest regional ally when Viktor Orbán was toppled from power in Hungary, and Italy suspended a key defence pact.

The shifts are likely to pave the way for long-delayed sanctions against violent settlers in the occupied West Bank, and add to pressure for the EU to reconsider its relationship with Israel over its wars in Gaza and the wider region.

“Hungary’s veto was the only thing preventing the package of sanctions against violent settlers,” said Maya Sion-Tzidkiyahu, the director of the Israel-Europe relations programme at the Mitvim thinktank and a lecturer at the European forum of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

“I expect once the [new] Tisza government is in place, that would be one of the first things the EU

would like to push, and it should be easy for [Péter] Magyar to say yes. Netanyahu is on the wrong side of history from the perspective of many Europeans, and he is a symbol for Orbán.”

EU officials expect to revive sanctions targeting a small number of extremist settlers once a new Hungarian government takes office next month. Ireland, Spain and Slovenia - among the staunchest supporters of the Palestinian cause in Europe - called for a discussion of Israel’s human-rights obligations under its association agreement with the EU at a planned meeting of EU foreign ministers this week.

“The EU can no longer remain on the sidelines,” wrote the foreign ministers of the three countries in a letter to the EU foreign policy chief, Kaja Kallas, referencing “unbearable” conditions in Gaza and “escalating violence against Palestinians” in the West Bank.

▲ A man waves flags at the resettlement ceremony of Sa Nur, south of Jenin, in the Israeli-occupied West Bank

MATTEO PLACUCCI/
ZUMA PRESS WIRE/
SHUTTERSTOCK

Passing sanctions could strengthen confidence to consider broader action, including suspending parts of the deal underpinning EU-Israeli ties.

The EU is Israel's top trading partner, most popular travel destination and a vital source of research funding through the multibillion-dollar Horizon programme, but it has never managed to turn that into significant political influence inside Israel.

"Now the discussion about leverage and pressure is back on the table," said Martin Konečný, the director of the European Middle East Project, in Brussels. "If you take one step, and the situation doesn't improve, then the pressure to take the next step rises very quickly."

Last week more than 390 former EU ministers, ambassadors and top officials urged the EU to suspend the EU-Israel association agreement in whole or part. Signatories included the former EU foreign affairs chief Josep Borrell, the former Swedish foreign minister and UN weapons inspector Hans Blix, and the former European Commission vice-president Margot Wallström.

Freezing all or part of the EU-Israel association agreement would require support from either Germany or Italy, because it must have a "qualified majority" of at least 15 member states representing 65% of the EU's population. An attempt to halt trade provisions last September, in response to the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza, never passed that threshold. After the October ceasefire, plans stalled.

EU sources suggested that forthcoming talks between Israel and Lebanon are likely to restrain any immediate EU action, because many European countries are wary of disrupting delicate negotiations.

Italy's abrupt political shift, signalled by the decision to suspend the defence cooperation deal, means a renewed proposal may have a greater chance of passing.

Italy's prime minister, Giorgia Meloni, had been among Israel's closest friends in Europe, one of several far-right leaders to cultivate a close personal relationship with the Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu. She regularly defied public sentiment in a country that has had some of Europe's largest

protests against Israel's wars, and a political climate where pro-Palestinian sentiment extends across the political spectrum.

That was based on a separation between foreign and domestic policy that is no longer sustainable, said Lorenzo Castellani, a political historian at Rome's Luiss University. "For the first time since the second world war, foreign policy has become a central concern for Italian public opinion," he said. "This is a conflict with direct geopolitical and economic consequences for Italy and for Europe as a whole."



The suspension of the defence memorandum appears to be more symbolic than

substantive, as it provided a framework for defence deals that will remain in place – but it served as a "clear warning" to Israel, one European diplomat said.

Israel has been effective at using its closest bilateral relationships to block or blunt hostile EU policy, in an approach that Sion-Tzidkiyahu describes as "divide and thwart".

It can still count on support from longstanding allies, including the Czech Republic's Andrej Babiš, and if Netanyahu loses power in elections due this year Magyar may build a closer relationship with his successor.

But political ties with Israel are increasingly costly for European leaders. The impact of regional wars has been amplified by Netanyahu's close alliance with the US president, Donald Trump, who regularly attacks Europe, derides its culture and values, undermines its economy and has even threatened to invade.

Many Europeans calling for stronger action against Israel say core European values are at stake, and failure to act will undermine the international rule of law.

"The absence of meaningful measures against Israel, contrasted with extensive sanctions imposed



If you take one step and things don't improve, the pressure to take the next rises quickly

on Russia, has raised concerns about double standards and risks undermining the EU's international credibility," said Pasquale Ferrara, a former Italian diplomat and scholar.

Concern about Israel's European alliances may have contributed to an unusual public spat last week, in which Israel's ambassador to Germany, Ron Prosor, denounced Israel's finance minister, Bezalel Smotrich, for attacking the German chancellor, Friedrich Merz.

After Smotrich posted a tirade referencing the Nazi regime, Prosor "unequivocally condemned" the comments, accusing the minister of eroding the memory of the Holocaust. Sion-Tzidkiyahu commented: "When Israel is dependent on so few countries, and Germany is the main one because Meloni has turned her back, you have to protect that relationship."

Since the war on Gaza, German public opinion has diverged from the government's staunch support of the Israeli government. Most voters are now critical of the Netanyahu administration, but Germany's responsibility for the Holocaust means it would never lead criticism of Israel.

Merz has criticised violence and settlement expansion in the occupied West Bank and largely avoided his predecessor Angela Merkel's formulation that Israel's security is a "Staatsräson" or "reason of state" for Germany. However, he said in an interview last year that Israel's security remained at the core of German foreign policy.

The loss of Orbán and Meloni's distancing got limited attention in Israel, where wars in Iran and Lebanon and the relationship with the US dominate foreign policy discussion. Few Israelis appreciate the extent to which ties with Europe underpin their standard of living. Two-thirds of Israelis see the EU as an adversary, and only 14% as a friend, an August 2025 survey by the Mitvim thinktank found.

"All Israelis know that we are dependent on the US for security issues, but they don't understand that we are dependent on the EU for economic issues," Sion-Tzidkiyahu said. "We have managed to diversify trade, but the EU is still the largest block we are exporting to and importing from."

390

Number of former EU ministers and top officials pushing for the suspension of the EU-Israel association agreement in whole or part

14%

Proportion of Israelis who see the EU as a friend, while two-thirds see the bloc as an adversary, according to an August 2025 survey

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IN BERLIN

► Keir Starmer's political future is on a knife edge

HENRY NICHOLLS/GETTY

ANALYSIS

UNITED KINGDOM

Under pressure *How safe is* *Starmer after* *the Mandelson* *vetting failure?*

By Jessica Elgot



Labour MPs frustrated with the lack of a clear mission from Keir Starmer's No 10 have often urged the prime minister to be more forceful in his arguments, to prosecute his values, to find an enemy to define himself against. The prime minister has found one: Olly Robbins.

After last week's revelations in the Guardian that Starmer's pick for Washington ambassador, Peter Mandelson, had failed security vetting, Starmer on Monday admitted his decision to appoint him had been a mistake.

But in a sombre address to parliament, Starmer insisted the Foreign Office was to blame for a "staggering" and "incredible" decision not to brief him, or anybody else in Downing Street, about the vetting advice.

On Monday, Starmer prosecuted his case against Robbins, the former Foreign Office chief, with the vigour of his former life at the bar. He came

armed with timelines and letters and the promise of a new inquiry. He insisted that, had he known Mandelson had failed the vetting, his original sin of appointing him as US ambassador would not have been committed. But what he did not deliver was any admission that he had inadvertently misled the House of Commons. That seemed too painful an admission for Starmer to make, after having so

expertly prosecuted Boris Johnson for misleading the Commons over Partygate when he had stood at the opposite dispatch box.

One senior MP described Starmer as having a chronic case of "good guy" syndrome, making it hard for him to admit his failings.

So he blames the vetting system, his officials, his advisers and Mandelson's lack of candour. He is firm in his mind that he would never

“
There was clearly a view that this was a post where risks had to be taken



have made the appointment had he known about the failed vetting.

Perhaps that is correct. But there was clearly a pervasive view in No 10 and the Foreign Office that this was an appointment where risks had to be taken; and Starmer has not yet publicly accepted that he was a part of creating that imperative.

Most MPs arrived in Westminster on Monday with a sense of ennui rather than gunning for revolution. Even then, cack-handed questions handed out to MPs by whips almost accidentally lit the bonfire again.

The briefing enraged what was previously a sullen but resigned parliamentary Labour party (PLP). "I came in this morning prepared to hear him out and then they hand out this absolutely outrageous bollocks," one MP said. "I don't think this is what contrition looks like." Another called it "despicable".

Those speaking from the government benches on Monday were mostly MPs who are serial critics. Many other MPs had stayed away, campaigning for the local elections in their constituencies.

So, how at risk is Starmer? Two things, MPs say, are simultaneously true. First, it is not the right time to change the prime minister. Starmer was right not to join the US offensive against Iran and it would be a risk to oust him as the country faces a potential economic shock.

Second, they say, the fundamentals have not changed. Starmer is a deeply unpopular prime minister with a lacklustre vision of how to govern, and the party is flirting with fourth in the polls. This is not a sustainable position.

On Tuesday, the witness for the defence took the stand: Robbins at the foreign affairs select committee.

Prime ministers have been undone by former permanent secretaries before. The former head of the Foreign Office Simon McDonald sealed the fate of Boris Johnson with proof that the then-prime minister misled MPs. There will be no saving Starmer if anything he said on Monday is found to have been on the wrong side of the line.

JESSICA ELGOT IS THE GUARDIAN'S DEPUTY POLITICAL EDITOR

Keir Starmer's fate lies in who knew what, and when

[Page 24 →](#)

'Staggering' How the vetting scandal unfolded

20 December 2024 Mandelson named US ambassador

Despite his known links to the sex offender Jeffrey Epstein and having been forced to resign twice as a minister in previous governments, Mandelson is appointed as US ambassador. Keir Starmer reportedly favoured George Osborne, the former Tory chancellor, but was persuaded by Mandelson protégé Morgan McSweeney to appoint the Labour peer.

28 January 2025 Mandelson failed vetting

Weeks after being selected for the role, Mandelson is denied clearance by UK Security Vetting (UKSV).

30 January 2025 Foreign Office overrules vetting decision

Mandelson is told by the Foreign Office that his security clearance has been "confirmed". An unknown official, suspected of being the now sacked permanent secretary Olly Robbins, took the decision to overrule UKSV.

2 September 2025 First batch of Epstein files released

In one email, Mandelson describes Epstein as "my best pal". In another, from 2008, Mandelson tells Epstein to "fight for early release" when the disgraced financier was facing charges of procuring a child for prostitution.

10 September 2025 Starmer says he has 'full confidence' in Mandelson

Starmer is challenged by the Conservative leader, Kemi Badenoch, over whether he still has confidence in Mandelson. The PM replies: "I have confidence in him and he is playing an important role in the UK-US relationship."

11 September 2025 No 10: 'Vetting done in normal way'

The Independent asks Downing Street to comment on claims by two sources that Mandelson was not cleared by vetting. A spokesperson replied: "Vetting done by FCDO [Foreign Office] in normal way."

11 September 2025 Mandelson fired as ambassador

A day after defending his appointment in the Commons, Starmer fires Mandelson.

16 September 2025 Foreign secretary: 'Vetting to usual standard'

A joint letter to the foreign affairs select committee from Robbins and the foreign secretary, Yvette Cooper, says: "Peter Mandelson's security vetting was conducted to the usual standard set for developed vetting in line with established Cabinet Office policy."

30 January 2026 More files released

The US Department of



▶ Olly Robbins is suspected of overruling UKSV vetting



◀ Mandelson was sacked in September 2025 REUTERS

Justice releases 3.5m Epstein files, including emails suggesting Mandelson passed market-sensitive information to Epstein while serving in Gordon Brown's government.

5 February 2026 Starmer: 'Vetting cleared Mandelson'

Starmer says: "Security vetting, carried out independently by the security services, which is an intensive exercise that gave him clearance for the role." Starmer tells the Commons: "Full due process was followed during this appointment, as it is with all ambassadors."

8 February 2026 Chief of staff takes blame

McSweeney resigns as Starmer's chief of staff, saying he takes full responsibility for advising Starmer to appoint Mandelson.

16 April 2026 The Guardian reveals Mandelson failed vetting

No 10 says "neither the prime minister nor any government minister" was aware that Mandelson was granted developed vetting against the advice of UKSV. Robbins is forced out of his job.

17 April 2026 Starmer furious

Starmer says it is "staggering" and "unforgivable" that he was not told that Mandelson had failed vetting.

UNITED KINGDOM

'Pure shock'

Revelations about Peter Mandelson's vetting failure will be pored over in coming weeks, and inquiries into who knew what, and when, could decide Keir Starmer's fate

By Kiran Stacey, Paul Lewis and Pippa Crerar

When the Guardian revealed last Thursday that Peter Mandelson had failed his vetting checks before being appointed as British ambassador to Washington, members of Keir Starmer's cabinet, who were scattered around the world on government business, were caught by the same element of surprise.

In Washington for the spring meeting of the International Monetary Fund, the chancellor, Rachel Reeves, had just come out of a meeting with the Ukrainian finance minister when she was told the breaking news.

"I didn't know anything about the vetting process," she told reporters. "I'm the chancellor, I'm not the foreign secretary and I'm not 10 Downing Street, so I can't give you any more information on that."

David Lammy, the deputy prime minister, was on a military flight back from the Middle East when he was summoned to the cockpit by the captain who told him that No 10 needed to speak to him over the radio. Aides told him about the story and asked whether he had been aware of the vetting process given he had been foreign secretary at the time. He said he had not.

Yvette Cooper, the current foreign secretary, was sitting in her office in

London, about to start a meeting. When an aide received a message from the Guardian about the story and relayed it to Cooper, her reaction was "pure, unbelievable shock", according to one person who was there.

Darren Jones, the prime minister's chief secretary, was knocking on voters' doors in Southampton when a Downing Street aide called and told him to get on a train back to London.

One cabinet minister happened to be travelling with a Guardian reporter when the news broke. After the journalist showed them the story on their phone, they simply replied: "Gosh."

The sense of shock felt by senior members of the UK government gives a sense of how few people knew that Mandelson had been appointed against the advice of senior security officials.

Downing Street insisted last week that no minister, including the prime minister, knew about it at the time. Whether that is true, and the exact sequence of events will be pored over in the coming weeks. The outcome of those inquiries will decide whether or not the British prime minister - who is already unpopular and faces heavy losses in the local elections next month - can remain in his job.

The story begins in January 2025, a month after Keir Starmer



📷 Pictures from the Epstein files show Peter Mandelson (clockwise from far left): shopping with Jeffrey Epstein; the pair with a birthday cake; in his underpants

US DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE, PA

had announced Mandelson as his controversial pick for the most important post in the diplomatic service: the British ambassador in Washington, the UK's Trump whisperer.

It had been more than a decade and a half since Mandelson was last in government, and during his post-ministerial career he founded a lobbying firm, Global Counsel, which had clients with connections to China, raising questions around a potential conflict of interest. There was also the question of his relationship with the convicted child sex offender Jeffrey Epstein, which was public knowledge at the time of his appointment.

But it is rare for applicants to be denied developed vetting by UK Security Vetting (UKSV), the division of the Cabinet Office that oversees the background checks.

Almost all officials in the Foreign Office, including junior civil servants, require developed vetting (DV) and almost all of them get approval from UKSV. **Mandelson was no junior official.** According to publicly available government documents, the DV process includes a questionnaire and interviews requiring disclosure of private information, including questions about personal finances, business connections and sexual history. The security services also provide input.

The UKSV had three options: approve Mandelson's security clearance, approve his security clearance with risk mitigations or deny him clearance. By 28 January last year, it had made its decision. As the Guardian revealed last Thursday, security officials denied the clearance.

For whatever reason, senior officials at the Foreign Office decided to give Mandelson security clearance anyway. Downing Street said last week the decision was taken inside the department, with the prime minister's own team left unaware.

Starmer told reporters last Friday: "That I wasn't told that he'd failed security vetting when I was telling parliament that due process had been followed is unforgivable. Not only was I not told, no minister was told and I'm absolutely furious about it."

'It seems incredible that he didn't know. But the problem is it's quite possible as well'

If Starmer is right, senior officials in the Foreign Office decided to override their own security advice without telling any senior politician or any of the prime minister's advisers. If he is not telling the truth, Starmer will stand accused of deliberately misleading MPs and the public. He has told parliament repeatedly in recent months that "full due process" was followed when appointing Mandelson.

While some of Starmer's parliamentary colleagues do not believe his version of events, many believe he is telling the truth, and are still unimpressed. They say the prime minister's time in office has been defined by a lack of political nous and a noticeable **incuriosity in the face of difficult or sensitive decisions.**

"It does seem incredible that he didn't know," said one. "But the problem is that it's quite possible as well."

As for the prime minister, aides say he was first notified of Mandelson's failed security check early last week when officials in the Cabinet Office saw documents relating to the vetting process. The Cabinet Office is the closest thing the prime minister has to his own department. No 10 told Starmer there was a problem straight away. The prime minister, who had just finished preparing for the following day's prime minister's questions, the set-piece event of the parliamentary week, called an urgent meeting at about 8pm on Tuesday 14 April.

Those in the room included Antonia Romeo, the most senior civil servant in the government, Catherine Little, the official in charge of the Cabinet Office, and the prime minister's chief of staff, Vidhya Alakeson.

Officials told the prime minister there was an issue with Mandelson's vetting, but they did not have the full facts. Those close to Starmer say he was furious and tasked them with finding out exactly what had gone wrong so he could then tell parliament.

But he did not do so immediately. At PMQs the next day, which was dominated by questions about defence spending, there was no mention of the Mandelson vetting process.

Jones said last Friday that the prime minister had not raised the issue because he still had not ascertained all the facts. "If he went before he'd had those facts and inadvertently made a mistake, parliament would rightly



▲ Peter Mandelson drives away from his house in central London on 14 February

JUSTIN TALLIS/
AFP/GETTY

A chequered past Peter Mandelson's controversy-laden career includes stints in the Cabinet Office as business secretary and secretary of state for trade and industry. He had also held a sensitive brief, secretary of state for Northern Ireland, and the role of European commissioner. Despite his chequered reputation, and the questions about his suitability for the job in Washington, the Foreign Office, and Keir Starmer, may nonetheless have thought the UKSV process would be straightforward. It turned out to be anything but.

criticise the prime minister for doing that," he told the BBC.

The prime minister's allies say he is angry that officials had not told him at various points when it would have been obvious to do so, such as when the US Department of Justice published the latest Epstein files.

Soon after the Downing Street meeting, Starmer phoned Olly Robbins, the most senior civil servant in the Foreign Office, to tell him he was fired. Robbins was due to testify in front of MPs on the foreign affairs select committee this week. Robbins was understood to be taking legal advice after being sacked, angry at what he believes to be his unfair treatment over the scandal.

On Monday it emerged that the then cabinet secretary, Simon Case, appeared to have advised Starmer to complete security vetting for Mandelson before announcing his appointment. Documents released last month by the Cabinet Office as part of the disclosures over the appointment also show Mandelson was offered a highly classified briefing from the Foreign Office as US ambassador before he had finished the formal vetting process.

The leaders of all major opposition parties have called for the prime minister to be investigated or to resign. On Monday Kemi Badenoch, the Conservative leader, appeared to back away from an earlier claim that Starmer had lied about Mandelson's vetting. But in an open letter to the prime minister, she renewed calls for him to resign, saying he had been "at best recklessly negligent and at worse dishonest".

More problematic for the prime minister is that MPs in his own Labour party are in a febrile mood, angry over repeated scandals and the likelihood of heavy defeats at the upcoming local elections. Until last week, many believed the prime minister would survive the May elections, helped by the fact there is no obvious successor behind whom the party can unite.

The danger for Starmer now is that events overtake him. If MPs feel they can no longer defend the prime minister publicly, he will find it difficult to remain in post. As Boris Johnson said after he was unseated as prime minister, having lost the confidence of his parliamentary party: "When the herd moves, it moves."

KIRAN STACEY IS THE GUARDIAN'S POLICY EDITOR; PAUL LEWIS IS HEAD OF INVESTIGATIONS; PIPPA CRERAR IS POLITICAL EDITOR



SOUTH AFRICA

The families still fighting for justice after 30 years

Hearings into the atrocities of apartheid began with hope in 1985. But the long road to justice symbolises the limitations of the commission

By Rachel Savage
GQEBERHA

Darkness had fallen on 27 June 1985 when Fort Calata, Matthew Goniwe, Sicelo Mhlauli and Sparrow Mkonto set off on the 240km drive back from a meeting of anti-apartheid activists in Port Elizabeth, now known as Gqeberha. They never made it home.

About an hour into their journey towards their home town of Cradock

(now called Nxuba), the four men were pulled over by three white security police officers. They were handcuffed and driven back towards Gqeberha.

Mkonto was shot after a struggle with one of the officers. The other three were hit over the head from behind. Their bodies were stabbed several times by three black officers who had joined their colleagues, to make it look like a vigilante attack. Finally, the corpses were set alight.

The men became known as the Cradock Four, their murders a symbol of the callous violence of apartheid.

The advent of democracy in 1994 brought the families neither the justice they sought nor answers about whether the murders were sanctioned at the highest levels of government.

More than 30 years later the families are still fighting, and their struggle has come to symbolise the deficiencies of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), whose hearings began 30 years ago, on 15 April 1996.

The TRC, led by the late Desmond Tutu, was designed to uncover human rights violations committed by the

apartheid regime and the groups that fought it. It offered or denied amnesty to perpetrators who confessed.

Successive governments, led by the African National Congress (ANC) liberation movement, failed to pursue hundreds of cases referred to state prosecutors by the TRC. Victims' families have accused the former presidents Thabo Mbeki and Jacob Zuma of striking a deal with apartheid generals to bury the cases in exchange for atrocities committed by ANC members not being pursued in court.

Mbeki, who was president from 1999 to 2008, has denied stopping the TRC cases. He and Zuma, who was president from 2009 to 2018, have tried to halt a judicial inquiry into whether there was political interference with prosecutions.

In the case of the Cradock Four, a 1987 inquest concluded they were killed by "unknown persons". A 1993 inquest said "members of the security forces" were responsible but did not name any specific perpetrators.

It was only at the TRC that the three white police officers admitted



📍 Demonstrators take to the streets of the Lingelihle township in Cradock, 1985

GIDEON MENDEL/AFP/GETTY



to the murders, in an attempt to evade prosecution, and another three admitted to planning or ordering them. All were denied amnesty by the TRC and all have since died. The three black police officers were killed by security forces in a car bombing in 1989 amid fears that they would reveal the truth.

A third inquest into the Cradock Four killings opened in June last year, after sustained pressure from the families. Their question remained: why, when they had been denied amnesty by the TRC, were the killers not prosecuted decades earlier?

The TRC's first hearings were in East London (now KuGompo City), 290km up the coast from Gqeberha. For many victims and their relatives, this was their first chance to speak publicly about their suffering. On the second day of hearings, Nomonde Calata, the widow of Fort Calata, broke down.

After her husband's death, Calata stopped crying. "[I thought] the enemy will laugh at me when they see my sadness," she said in an interview on 22 March, before a week of hearings in the third inquest. "So when I went to the TRC, I just couldn't hold the cry in me and the pain."

The National party came to power in 1948, enforcing racial discrimination and segregation and pushing white Afrikaner nationalism. But the TRC covered only 1960 to 1994. Nonetheless, it took the testimonies of about 21,000 victims, of whom 2,000 testified publicly. In dozens of hearings that lasted until June 1997, they spoke of torture, abduction and killings.

Some apartheid security police admitted to violations in an attempt to escape prosecution. They included Eugene de Kock, who led the Vlakplaas assassination squad and was known as "Prime Evil".

In October 1996, De Kock was convicted of six murders and sentenced to 212 years in prison. A year later, he testified at the TRC, expressing bitterness that apartheid generals and politicians had not also taken responsibility.

▲ Mourners attend the funeral of the Cradock Four who were murdered by police officers in 1985

GIDEON MENDEL/
AFP/GETTY

▼ Desmond Tutu hands the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to Thabo Mbeki

JUDA NGWENYA/
REUTERS

The amnesty hearings lasted until 2000. There were more than 7,000 applications for amnesty and 849 were granted.

Max du Preez presented the SABC's weekly Sunday evening TRC Special Report. An Afrikaner himself, he had exposed many of apartheid's horrors during its dying years as the editor of the progressive newspaper *Vrye Weekblad*.

"We fully expected an apartheid denial after 1994. But we never had it. And I think watching the amnesty applicants confessing to all these crimes played a big role in that," he said. "If you were any kind of reasonable person, you could not deny afterwards that apartheid was a violent, evil system. I think that was important."

However, Yasmin Sooka, a TRC commissioner and human rights lawyer, said the commission did not properly expose the systemic nature of apartheid. "The politicians, from the outset when they appeared, made it clear, particularly Mr De Klerk [FW de Klerk, the last apartheid president], that he was not going to take responsibility for their actions," she said.

The TRC provided powerful moments of catharsis and accountability. But, as disappointment with the ANC has grown in the 32 years it has led South Africa amid persistent inequality, poverty and corruption, so too have criticisms of the TRC's scope.

'Watching the amnesty applicants confessing to all, you could not deny that apartheid was a violent, evil system'



In January 2025, Calata's son, Lukhanyo Calata, led 25 families and survivors in suing the government for failing to prosecute TRC cases. In response, that May, the president, Cyril Ramaphosa, announced a judicial inquiry into potential political interference, led by a retired constitutional court judge, Sisi Khampepe.

Mbeki, Zuma and their justice ministers have refused to cooperate. On 30 March this year, the high court rejected their attempt to get Khampepe removed. They have appealed to the constitutional court, claiming Khampepe is biased as she was a TRC commissioner.

Meanwhile, the inquiry's hearings have continued, with former prosecutors testifying that their work on TRC cases was obstructed. The final report to Ramaphosa is due on 31 July.

On 7 June 1985, Christoffel "Joffel" van der Westhuizen, a former military commander of the then Eastern province, authorised the sending of a signal to the regime's state security council. It proposed that Fort Calata, Matthew Goniwe and Goniwe's nephew Mbulelo be "removed permanently from society as a matter of urgency".

In 1993, the second inquest into the murders concluded that Van der Westhuizen intended the signal as a recommendation to kill. However, Van der Westhuizen said that he never wrote or saw the signal's contents, nor was he involved in any killings.

On 23 March this year, Eugene de Kock, the head of the Vlakplaas "death squad" who was sentenced to 212 years in prison in 1996, arrived at Gqeberha's high court for the inquest. He told the inquest that "removed permanently from society" meant murder.

Afterwards, Lukhanyo Calata shook De Kock's hand. "He's perhaps coming here and helping us, as the families of the Cradock Four. But he's also the same person that had caused tremendous amounts of hurt and loss ... So he's not a hero," he told journalists.

Nombuyiselo Mhlauli, the widow of Sicelo Mhlauli, said she hoped the inquest judge Thami Beshe would consider their decades of suffering.

"I don't even have a house in Cradock," she said. "If my husband was here, we would be having our house, reading newspapers, sharing spectacles. I hope that the judge will keep that in mind."

RACHEL SAVAGE IS THE GUARDIAN'S SOUTHERN AFRICA CORRESPONDENT



JAPAN



Older users answer call to make the most of smartphones

By Justin McCurry TOKYO

It's not only young people whose gaze is fixed on tiny screens. But for these users in Tokyo, clicking and scrolling is anything but second nature. "I can't deal with all of the apps that jump out at me," said one. "How do I know if I've definitely ended a call?" asked another.

They are common concerns among the four women and one man attending a beginner's smartphone class at a public facility for older residents in Nerima in the Japanese capital's north-west suburbs.

In Yasushi Nishioka, they have a patient guide to navigating the myriad functions and settings that can make the smartphone a portal into a new world of hyper-connectivity, but also a vortex for digital dystopia.

"Don't feel like you need to remember everything," said Nishioka, a retired programmer for an IT company.

"It's just a question of holding it in your hand and getting used to it."

The participants, most of whom are in their 70s, say they are intimidated by their devices - three iPhones and two Android handsets. But they are determined not to spend their later years in analogue isolation after the closure of Japan's 3G network.

The country's telecom companies have gradually plunged older networks into darkness. The 2G service had completely shut down by 2012 and by 2022, au, a popular carrier, no longer offered 3G, with rival SoftBank following suit in 2024. At the end of March, NTT Docomo became the last to pull the 3G plug, citing the need to retire inefficient base stations to reduce electricity consumption.

While some flip phones are still compatible with 4G, the move affected an estimated half a million people and more than 400 phone models, as well as early car navigation systems, vending machines that rely on 3G for cashless payment systems and unstaffed car parks that use the network for remote management, according to the Mainichi Shimbun news site.

Docomo and other carriers are helping subscribers - a mixture of stubborn flip phone users and the smartphone

◀ Older people are being forced to get to grips with smartphones

▶ The learners were very interested in using health trackers and weather forecasts

TOMOHIRO OHSUMI/
BLOOMBERG/GETTY/
JUSTIN MCCURRY

'When I bought my new phone, the icons were so confusing I had no idea what to do'



anxious - by offering classes that include sessions on taking photos and video and shopping safely online.

Unless they embrace the smartphone, which works only on 4G and 5G networks, flip phone loyalists will lose their voice-call and email functions and have their contracts cancelled along with their phone numbers.

Today, over the course of two hours, Nishioka guides his students through the basics: how to turn their phones on and off and control the volume, along with tips on scrolling and pinching in and out. He then turns to cashless payments and QR codes and - two subjects of common interest among the participants - health trackers and weather forecasts.

"If you use your phone only for admin it will quickly get boring," he said, promising that next week's session will delve into entertainment, social media and photo and video content.

All of the participants raise concerns about security - a growing problem in Japan, whose large population of over-65s are often the target of online scams. "If you have any doubts at all, just ignore the message or call," Nishioka suggested, before sharing an app that filters out suspicious contacts.

"When I bought my smartphone I turned it on and the number of icons was so confusing I had no idea what to do," said Hiroko Kanda, a class participant. "It's taking me a while to get used to it."

Another, who preferred not to give her name, reluctantly bought her first smartphone three months ago. "I didn't have the confidence to make the switch," she said, her flip phone resting next to her iPhone. "I still use my [old phone] on 4G... but I really like the weather and travel planner apps on my new phone."

Their reasons for taking the plunge aren't wildly different to those that keep younger people umbilically attached to their devices: reserving tickets for musicals, joining WhatsApp groups, learning a foreign language and making travel plans.

"Of all the things that annoy people about smartphones and often makes them quit, one really stands out," said Nishioka, before revealing a grievance that unites users, novice and experienced, across the generations: "Managing their passwords."

JUSTIN MCCURRY IS THE GUARDIAN'S TOKYO CORRESPONDENT

SPAIN

Bay watch Shipwrecks give up centuries of sunken tales

By Sam Jones MADRID

Spanish archaeologists exploring the bay between the southern port of Algeciras and the Rock of Gibraltar have documented the wrecks of more than 30 ships that came to grief near the Pillars of Hercules between the fifth century BC and the second world war.

A three-year project led by the University of Cádiz has now identified 151 archaeological sites in the bay, among them 134 shipwrecks. To date, the researchers and their colleagues from the University of Granada have worked to document 34 of those wrecks.

The oldest is that of a Punic era ship dating to the fifth century BC, while other finds include 23 Roman ships, two late Roman ships, four medieval ships and 24 vessels from the early modern period.

Between them, the sunken items - which include an agile and fearsome 18th-century Spanish gunboat and the engine and propeller of a plane from the 1930s - tell the story of war, trade, exploration and settlement in and around one of the most strategically important waterways in the world.

Felipe Cerezo Andreo, a professor of archaeology at the University of Cádiz who led the investigation, which is called Project Herakles, said that area has long been a watery crossroads.

"It's one of those bottlenecks through which ships have always had to pass, whether on commercial shipping routes, voyages of discovery, or due to armed conflicts," he said.

"There are really few places in the Mediterranean that have this kind of concentration and such a significant variety of archaeological remains,

especially in terms of different cultures or different nations. We have Dutch, Venetian, Spanish, and, of course, English ships - ships of practically every nationality - because they all passed through the strait, whether heading out to the Atlantic for trade, or entering the Mediterranean from northern Europe or other regions."

Although the team has come across large ships from the 16th and 17th centuries, one of the most exciting finds has been the wreck of the Puente Mayorga IV, a small, late 18th-century gunboat of a type used for rapid, stealthy attacks on British ships of the line around Gibraltar. Despite being frequently mentioned in contemporary reports, such boats have been little studied by archaeologists.

Cerezo was delighted to come across one of the Puente Mayorga IV's less obvious treasures during an excavation. What he initially took to be a miraculously preserved book turned out to be a book-shaped wooden box with a hollow space inside.

"At first, we thought it could be used to hide documents, and we thought it might have something to do with espionage," said the archeologist. "Was the officer who carried it mapping the position of an enemy vessel?" Sadly not. The box turned out to contain a pair of wooden combs, suggesting the officer may have been more preoccupied with grooming than spying.

Cerezo and his colleagues hope the Andalusian regional government and Spain's culture ministry will act to preserve and protect the sites in the Bay of

Algeciras - known to English-speakers as the Bay of Gibraltar - which are at risk from port development, dredging and dock construction. The climate emergency is already proving a threat, bringing rising sea levels that are altering sediment layers and exposing archaeological sites, and an invasive algae that grows over rocks and wrecks.

In order to share their finds and raise awareness of the importance of preserving them, the researchers have made virtual models and 360-degree videos of the sites, which they share with the public online and in local museums and town halls.

The waters of the bay offer an unparalleled microcosm of thousands of years of maritime and cultural development, said Cerezo.

"What we have here is a very small space that allows us to analyse the evolution of maritime history throughout practically the whole of the Iberian peninsula and north Africa.

"It tells us a story that we sometimes forget, which is that maritime societies, or peoples who have lived in coastal areas, have had a very intense relationship with the sea and have lived on the sea. And being able to study these kinds of archaeological remains - to document them, to learn about them in situ and not just through the objects that sometimes end up in a museum, but to understand them in their context - allows us to carry out that process of reconstruction and to tell the story of these people."

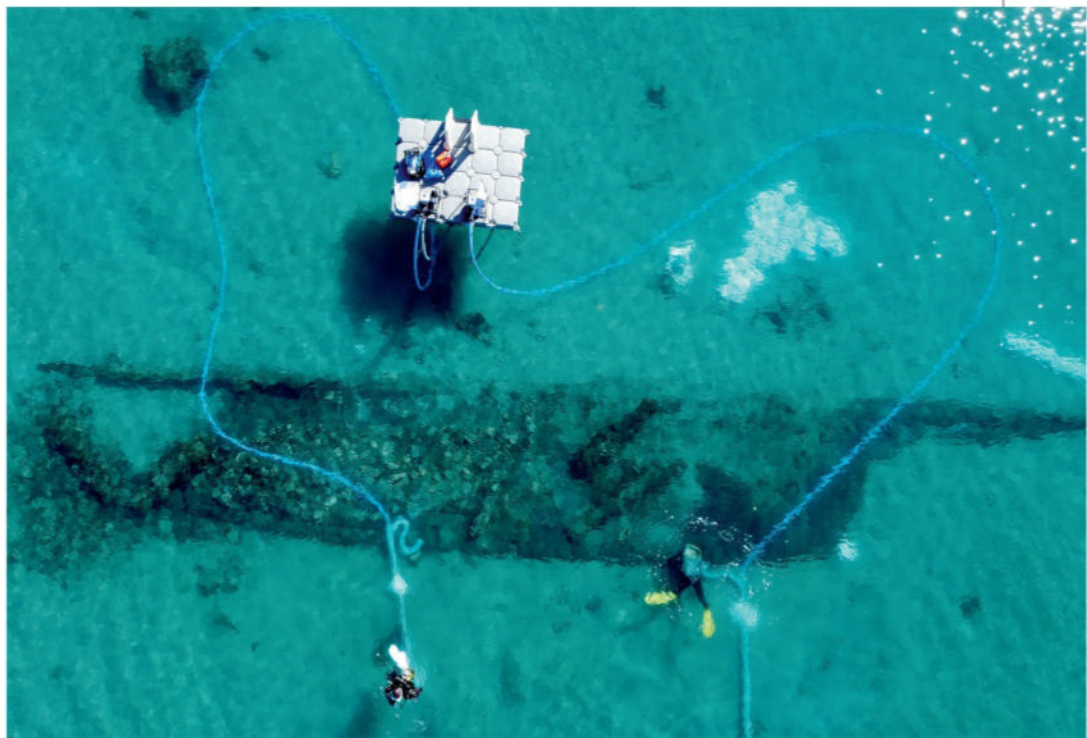
SAM JONES IS MADRID CORRESPONDENT FOR THE GUARDIAN

▼ Divers explore the wreck of the Puente Mayorga IV, a preserved 18th-century Spanish gunboat

ALEJANDRO MAÑAS

'Being able to study these objects in situ lets us tell the story of these people'

Felipe Cerezo Andreo
University of Cádiz



BIOLOGY

Ground force

By Whitney
Bauck

'Without them there is no life on Earth'
Fungi play a key role in ecosystems and storing carbon, so African scientists are championing the preservation of 'funga' as much as flora and fauna

A long-net stinkhorn on a forest floor. New research suggests that 90% of plants on Earth rely on fungi to supply them with crucial nutrients

Madagascar has long been celebrated for its remarkable wildlife, with the vast majority of its species found nowhere else on the planet. But when discussing the island nation's endemic treasures, fungi are often left out of the conversation. Yet "fungi are some of the most important things in the world", said Anna Ralaiveloarisoa, a Malagasy scientist. "They feed 90% of terrestrial plants. Without them, there is no life on the Earth."

As the first homegrown mycologist in Madagascar, Ralaiveloarisoa wants people to better understand the importance of this kingdom of life, adding that less than 1% of the estimated 100,000 species of fungi on the island have been scientifically described.

Ralaiveloarisoa is working on classifying the 200 new species she has identified so far, though she faces plenty of challenges: trying to preserve mushrooms without proper infrastructure; journeying to remote spots in the jungle without reliable roads or electricity; and having no other experts to collaborate with in the country.

These are familiar obstacles to mycologists in nearby nations, but Ralaiveloarisoa is part of an emerging cohort of scientists across Africa who are pioneering the study and conservation of fungi in their home countries.

Last November, many met for the first time at the International Congress on Fungal Conservation, held in Cotonou, Benin. The conference drew mycologists from 27 countries across Africa, Europe, the Americas and Asia, with several hailing from African countries where they are the only - or one of very few in the nation. Their congress reflected the growing global momentum behind fungal conservation, and the role that African scientists see for themselves within it.

Nourou Yorou, a mycologist who was recently named general director of the Benin Agency for Science and Innovation, told delegates at the opening ceremony: "What an exciting time: from almost nothing 20 years ago, fungal conservation has evolved from a little-known field into a dynamic global movement. The challenge is now to plan a future where fungi are firmly placed in the conservation mainstream."

Protecting fungi has lagged behind the conservation of plants and



animals. While the first organisations dedicated to protecting birds were established in the 19th century, fungi had to wait until the 21st century, when mycologists from more than 40 countries established the International Society for Fungal Conservation (ISFC) in 2010, and the first conservation nonprofit organisation, the Fungi Foundation, was only created in 2012.

Since those groups were established, a global movement has emerged. The first conservation legislation to include fungi was passed in Chile in 2013. The Fungi Foundation, which helped get the law passed, began to champion the phrase “fauna, flora, funga” to encourage more inclusive conservation frameworks.

Other organisations began to form: in 2017, North America’s first fungal conservation nonprofit group, Fundis, was created; in 2021, the research organisation SPUN (Society for the Protection of Underground Networks) was cofounded by the evolutionary biologist Toby Kiers, who went on to win the Tyler prize for environmental achievement and a MacArthur “genius grant” for her work in fungal research and conservation.

Later this year, the “fungal conservation pledge” first proposed at the UN biodiversity meeting of Cop16 in Colombia in 2024 will be discussed again at the forthcoming biodiversity Cop in Armenia.

This interest in conserving fungi has been spurred in part by evidence that they play a larger role in how ecosystems function than was previously understood: 90% of plants on Earth rely on fungi to supply them with crucial nutrients, and evidence is increasingly pointing to the key role that fungi play in helping maintain a stable climate. A recent study found that as much as 36% of annual CO₂ emissions from fossil fuels are stored in the underground mycelium of mycorrhizal fungi.

David Minter, president of the ISFC, compares fungi to waste collectors - overlooked but performing crucial services. He said: “But if [waste collectors] go on strike, we sure know that they’re needed. It’s exactly the same with fungi.”

Fungi need protection, Minter added, because they perform crucial functions in all ecosystems, and are just as susceptible to the climate crisis, habitat destruction and pollution as other living things.



From top left: a drawing from Cathy Sharp’s school surveys; Malagasy mycologist Anna Ralaiveloarisoa; a star stinkhorn fungus in Madagascar

36%

The portion of annual CO₂ emissions from fossil fuels that are stored in the underground mycelium of mycorrhizal fungi

It cannot be assumed that fungi automatically benefit from conservation efforts aimed at animals and plants. A 2025 study published in *Nature* found that less than 10% of predicted hotspots of mycorrhizal fungal richness - the kind that form symbioses with plants - are protected.

“In 2010, it was absolutely normal not to mention fungi at all in conservation,” Minter said. “At some point in the future it will look strange if fungi don’t get a mention. And the very exciting thing is that, right now, we are at that tipping point.”

At the Benin congress, African mycologists made it clear that they have the expertise and commitment to back this movement in their own countries and globally. In a workshop designed to help local mycologists evaluate the risk of extinction, Sydney Ndolo Ebika, the Republic of the Congo’s first mycologist, offered insights about *Termitomyces*, a genus of fungi that is “farmed” by termites. Prized as edible fungi throughout much of Africa, some species grow to be as large as an umbrella.

Ndolo Ebika’s expertise has been hard won: when he first decided he wanted to study fungi, there was no one in Congo-Brazzaville to teach him, so he began emailing mycologists abroad to ask if he could join their laboratories. When he eventually began a graduate programme in Germany, about the same time that the ISFC was formed, he sometimes photocopied entire books on fungi,

‘We have to talk with one voice as African mycologists so policy-makers know the importance of fungi’

because he knew no one in the Congo had access to these resources. He has now established the country’s first fungarium.

Cathy Sharp has taken a different approach in Zimbabwe, where she has been researching the depth of children’s knowledge of fungi, such as going to schools and asking pupils to draw the first thing that came to mind when they heard “mushroom” in their local languages. Most pictures they drew were detailed enough for her to identify them by the genus; some could be narrowed down to species.

Conserving fungi requires people to know and care about them, Sharp argued, so she is implementing educational initiatives in museums and schools to preserve this knowledge.

“We were the only country in the world at one point to have fungi in our junior curriculum ... which we were so proud of,” Sharp said during her presentation at the Benin congress. “And then during Covid the policy was changed. So when I’m finished [with] what I’m doing now, I’m going to fight to have it put back in.”

For Joyce Jefwa, a Kenyan mycologist, it is clear that “Africa is still finding its way in fungal conservation”. But she is hopeful about opportunities to meet other mycologists to share resources and learn from what has worked in other countries.

“We have to talk with one voice as African mycologists, so that the policy-makers and those who are in different sectors, such as forestry, conservation and environment, can get to know the importance of fungi,” she said.

A few months after the congress in Benin, participants released the Cotonou declaration, a document intended to address “the persistent underrepresentation of fungi” in conservation locally, nationally and globally. Cowritten by participants from four continents, it codifies global priorities for mycological conservation, while its name is a reminder that Africa must continue to play a key role in the growing fungi conservation movement.

For Yorou, the congress was “a milestone for the global mycological community and ... fungal conservation, both in Africa and across the world”, pointing the way to a future “where fungi stand as a recognised pillar of global biodiversity conservation”.

WHITNEY BAUCK IS A REPORTER FOCUSED ON CLIMATE AND THE ENVIRONMENT



COLOMBIA

'This is a racist state': first Black VP on four tough years

By *Tiago Rogero* BOGOTÁ

In the historic centre of Colombia's capital, Bogotá, a gallery of portraits at the vice-president's official residence displays the faces of all former vice-presidents since the country became a republic in 1886. All of them are white.

When the current president and vice-president leave office in August, the wall will include an Afro-Colombian face for the first time: Francia Márquez, 44, the first Black woman to become vice-president in a country where at least 10% of the population is Afro-descendant.

Elected in 2022 alongside the leftwing president Gustavo Petro, Márquez also became one of only three Black women to have served as second-in-command in the Americas, following Epsy Campbell Barr in Costa Rica in 2018 and Kamala Harris in the United States in 2021.

That is not the only similarity Márquez sees between them.

"The three of us were unable to take on leading roles within our governments. On the contrary, we were blocked," she said. "This has been a strategy of racism, and it doesn't matter whether the government is right or left; it has happened."

Márquez said Harris "was excluded" by former US president Joe Biden, and that this was one of the main reasons she lost the 2024 election to Donald Trump. "Biden didn't allow her to occupy a leading role that would have strengthened her leadership ... The three of us have gone through the same thing," she said.

In a rare interview at the vice-presidential residence, Márquez spoke openly about *the strain in her relationship with President Petro* - the two have barely spoken for more than a year - and the racism she said she had faced over the past four years, both "within and outside the government".

"The Colombian state is a racist state," she said.

Born in the Afro-descendant mining community of Yolombó, in Cauca, Márquez became an activist at the age of 13, when the construction of a dam threatened her village. In 2014, she led about 80 Black women on a 550km walk to the capital to demand the government end illegal mining. Four years later, she was awarded the Goldman environmental prize and ran unsuccessfully for congress.

Soon afterwards, she announced her intention to run for president. Despite her lack of political experience, she received 783,000 votes in a primary, finishing second only to

◀ Francia Márquez was elected vice-president of Colombia in 2022

FERNANDA PINEDA

Political fallout Central to Francia Márquez's dispute with the president, Gustavo Petro, is the ministry of equality, whose creation had been one of his campaign promises. In a cabinet meeting last year, Márquez criticised a lack of resources and the appointment of a minister accused of corruption. Days later Petro removed her from the ministry and since then she has held only the vice-presidential role.

the former guerrilla and then senator Petro, who invited her to join his ticket. They won, Petro became Colombia's first leftwing president, and many analysts believe Márquez played a significant role in the result.

"It felt like a monumental event," said the political scientist Ana María Ospina Pedraza. "It was a historic milestone for the representation of Afro-descendant communities in Colombia, which have historically been marginalised.

"Afterwards, over the years, perhaps her leadership was not what we had imagined."

The vice-president said it had been a "very challenging four years" for her, "as a woman and as a Black woman, in a country that is quite conservative and racist".

Márquez said she had faced racism from the local press, with caricatures depicting her as King Kong and what she describes as "unprecedented scrutiny" over vice-presidential travel expenses. She was criticised for using a helicopter to travel to a private residence in Cali, which she said was for safety reasons, as well as for trips she made to African countries to boost Colombian exports, with local media outlets calling it a "safari" and a rightwing senator asking whether "Swahili academies have already been set up [in Colombia]" as a result of the spending.

Márquez said the racism also came from inside government. One of her first actions was to change the face of the vice-presidential staff. "There were officials who told Afro women and men that they were only here because I was here. In other words, they were saying: 'You don't deserve to be here,' and this is painful."

The constitutional bar on the president seeking re-election does not apply to the vice-president, but she will not seek the highest office. She said she had not delivered as much as she would have liked but did not blame herself.

Petro did not respond to requests for an interview. Márquez said they had "a relationship of cordial respect". She added: "In a few months, in this corridor, there will be a photo of a face that is not the one usually seen in these institutions ... so it was worth it. My invitation is for other women to dare to occupy these spaces."

TIAGO ROGERO IS THE GUARDIAN'S SOUTH AMERICA CORRESPONDENT

CANADA

Out of office A rebirth or a rebrand for Justin Trudeau?

By Leyland Cecco TORONTO

The downfall of Hungary's Viktor Orbán prompted reactions from progressive leaders around the world celebrating the end to an authoritarian regime. However, one statement stood out - not for its sentiment but the setting in which it was issued.

"Hungarians voted for change and a renewed commitment to democratic institutions after years of erosion under Viktor Orbán," wrote Justin Trudeau, Canada's former prime minister - posting from the Coachella music festival, where he and his girlfriend, the American pop star Katy Perry, were watching Justin Bieber.

While the message resembled the boilerplate language issued near-daily by former world leaders, the context was less than typical. Earlier that day, Perry had posted a picture of Trudeau eating noodles in a backwards baseball cap and jeans, looking more like a care-free celebrity than a recently departed head of government.

The tonal contrast hinted at the challenge facing Trudeau, who stood down in March 2025 after nearly a decade in office: how to shape a political legacy and decide the extent to which he wants to remain a public spectacle. The responses to his social media post also raised broader questions of what Canadians expect from their former political leaders.

"The contradiction we're seeing with Justin Trudeau is one that he dealt with before he came into office: is he a celebrity, or is he a man of depth?" said Susan Delacourt, a political columnist with the Toronto Star. "For those who have remained Trudeau loyalists,

here's a healthy debate about how much he's doing to burnish his legacy and reminding people of his record in office - and also enjoying himself."

Trudeau's first social media post after leaving office was a selfie at department store Canadian Tire. The image, captioned in French and English, suggested he was easing into a quiet life outside the public gaze. Soon, however, he was photographed alongside Perry (on a yacht, in a restaurant, on a ski-slope) and other celebrities, including Prince Harry and the Olympic gold medallist Eileen Gu.

Other prime ministers have taken more staid routes after leaving office: jobs at law firms, business ventures and a retreat to a lifestyle they led before entering the political arena.

But Trudeau, 54, is the first prime minister to leave office with an extensive social media following. And his complicated relationship to fame predates Perry and her 200 million Instagram followers. He has said publicly he is an introvert, and those close to him say he can be a very private person. But he is also the son of Pierre Trudeau, Canada's first true "rock-star" politician, and he entered public life carrying both the mythology and expectations of that inheritance.

"I was struck by how much inherited charisma played such an important role in his political career. He presented himself early on as someone that Canadians already knew - and his career can be seen in a way as the kind of restoration of the vision

He appears freer to drift into a role he always half occupied: a celebrity statesman and global brand

for the country that his father first created," said Stephen Maher, author of *The Prince: The Turbulent Reign of Justin Trudeau*.

Early in office, Trudeau showed an instinct for viral moments. Later, the asset became a liability. His decision to surf on a day set aside to honour Indigenous peoples revived claims that he was more style over substance.

Trudeau's post-office image is also being shaped in contrast to his successor. As Mark Carney cultivates the aura of a pragmatic technocrat, Trudeau appears freer to drift into the role he has always half occupied: a celebrity statesman and global brand. Both were in attendance at Davos, where Carney gave his famous speech eulogising the international rules-based order. Trudeau also spoke, discussing the need for soft power in geopolitics. Perry sat in the front row.

A year into Trudeau's political after-life, the shape of his legacy remains a subject of debate. But the quality that first propelled him to power - celebrity - seems likely to endure.

"Trudeau's team very astutely built a global brand for him. But part of managing a global brand is having a good sense of how things that you do will land in order not to damage that brand, and they misjudged that at times," said Maher. "But in the end, it worked. He was - and still is - famous around the world. People around the world know his name, and that's going to last."

LEYLAND CECCO COVERS CANADA FOR THE GUARDIAN

🕒 Clockwise from main: Justin Trudeau and Katy Perry at Coachella; his first selfie after leaving office; with Perry at the World Economic Forum in Davos

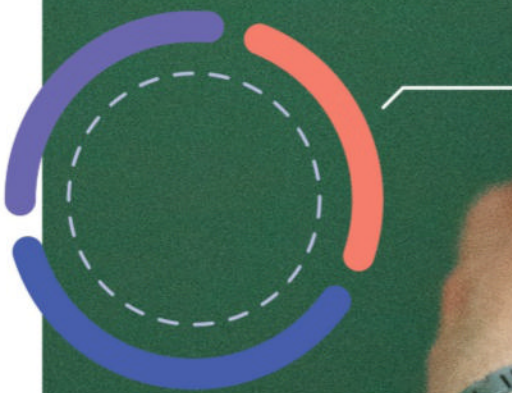
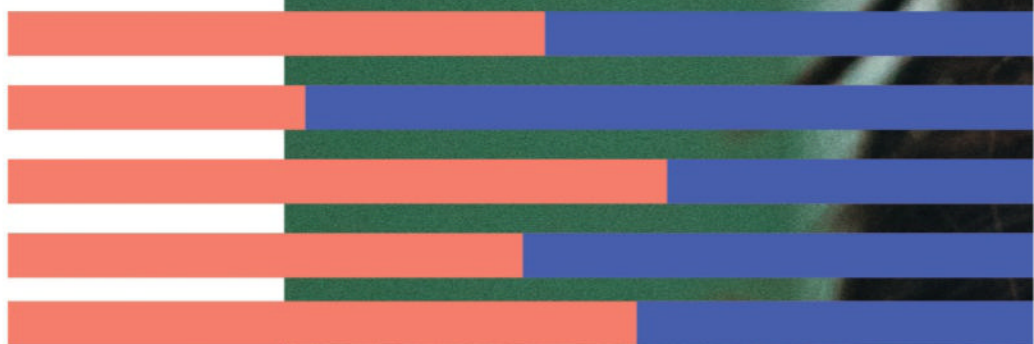
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From art to education and singing to sex, many things seem to be sold to us for the material benefits they can bring. What if instead we just appreciate things for their own intrinsic merits and live in the moment? *By Julian Baggini*



The lost joy of doing things





FOR DECADES, FILMS OUT OF THE METRO-GOLD-WYN-MAYER STUDIOS have opened with Leo the roaring lion, garlanded with the motto *ars gratia artis*: art for art's sake. Given that MGM is a money-making behemoth, we might doubt the sincerity. Still, it certainly expresses one of the few legitimate reasons why people *should* make movies. Art for the sake of anything else – profit, self-promotion, propaganda – isn't really art at all, or at least not in its purest sense.

It therefore came as a bit of a shock to see an advert for the National Art Pass, which gives holders free or discounted entry to galleries and museums around the UK. The tagline “See more. Live more” sounded right: art does indeed enrich our lives. But it turned out that the “more” here was purely quantitative. “Grow some years on to your life with art,” proclaimed the main slogan, followed by: “Spending time in galleries and museums could help you live longer.” Art not for art's sake, but for your heart's sake, the fleshy not the spiritual one at that. This messaging around the arts has become ubiquitous, with Arts Council England promoting the idea that “engaging in creative and cultural activities has proven health benefits”.

For a long time, I have been lamenting the instrumentalisation of everything: how nothing seems to be of value in itself any more but is only seen as useful in the service of some utilitarian function. I first got wind of this trend in 2010, when I had the misfortune to review Gretchen Rubin's book *The Happiness Project*, an account of a year in pursuit of the happy life. In one passage, a day with her

husband gets off to a sticky start but, after an apology, Rubin writes: “We hugged – for at least six seconds, which, I happened to know from my research, is the minimum time necessary to promote the flow of oxytocin and serotonin, mood-boosting chemicals that promote bonding. The moment of tension passed.”

I was left with the chilling image of a woman holding her husband not only out of love or affection but in order to release hormones and reduce her stress. Those sentences highlighted how her project had led her to do everything with the improvement of her mood in mind. She reflected at the end of her year-long experiment: “Maybe I was seeing what I wanted to see,” she wondered, only to add: “Maybe, but who cares?” Whatever makes you feel better, true or not.

In the years between witnessing hugging for happiness and creativity for longevity, I have seen countless other examples of all the things that are good in life being promoted not for their own sake but for the material benefits they bring. This instrumentalisation has become normalised so insidiously that we don't even notice that it is odd, let alone wrong.

Before offering a diagnosis for what has gone wrong and how to cure it, I need to defend the seemingly hyperbolic claim that *everything* is becoming instrumentalised. It may seem a rhetorical exaggeration, but I genuinely find it difficult to think of anything worthwhile that hasn't been celebrated by someone for its utilitarian benefits ahead of its intrinsic merits. Take churchgoing. Most believers hold that worship is a devotional duty rather than a pragmatic means of getting into heaven. Today, however, it is not uncommon to hear even Christians,



such as Deborah Jenkins in Premier Christianity magazine, pointing to research that: “Being part of a church community can lengthen life, reduce depression and promote positive mental health.”

A book I flicked through advocated prayer for physical health, pointing to a study that “found significant medical benefits on the cardiovascular system, blood, as well as muscle and bone resulting from the *solat* daily prayer”. Of course, if challenged, none would say these are the *best* reasons to practise religion. But it doesn’t stop them offering these reasons as very good ones. Furthermore, they are more credible and certainly more scientific than claims that a god really thinks it’s important how you spend your Sunday mornings.

More profanely, we are even given instrumental reasons to orgasm. A headline from the Telegraph in 2015 – “An orgasm a day could keep prostate cancer away, scientists claim” – summed up a now widely shared belief that one of the best reasons for a man to have sex or masturbate is not pleasure or intimacy but to protect his health.

If you were to search for things people value in their own right, in the hope of finding one that hasn’t been praised for its benefits for health, wealth or wellbeing, you’d be looking for a long time. The Opera North website lists 10 benefits of singing, and only one – it lets you express yourself – has anything to do with art and creativity. The others include “makes you feel better”, “enhances lung function”, “helps you beat stress and relax”, “helps improve memory”, “can help when life gets tough” and “boosts your confidence”.

Many people who advocate for reconnecting with nature do so with reasons that are designed to appeal to the very same utilitarian,

self-centred hedonism that is to blame for humanity losing touch with the Earth in the first place. The National Trust talks of how “walking in nature can help wellbeing” while the growing popularity of forest bathing encourages us to use woodland as though it were a kind of literal walk-in clinic.

Even philosophy has fallen prey to the curse of instrumentalisation. It is no longer enough for universities to say that their programmes allow you to explore the most fundamental questions of existence. Now the questions are: how will philosophy help you buy a house or build your pension pot? Philosophy is sold as a trainer of “transferable thinking skills”, and it’s clear where these most transfer to: the world of work. The Faculty of Philosophy at the University of Cambridge has a webpage devoted to five résumé-friendly skills it teaches: intellectual, communication, organisational, interpersonal and research.

Instrumentalisation is most pernicious when it applies to things we do with and for others. Immanuel Kant saw it as a “categorical imperative” – an absolute demand of morality – to “treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means”. The words we use to describe the instrumentalisation of others echo how corrupting we think it is: dehumanisation, objectification, exploitation. That is why the instrumentalisation of social connection is immoral as well as self-defeating. If we start to foreground what social relationships do for us, we treat the other people as mere tools for self-advancement.

I haven’t even begun to exhaust the list of activities that have become routinely instrumentalised. Among those we could add are gardening, playing sport, camping, swimming, volunteer work, baking bread, crafts, keeping a diary, laughing, saying “thank you”. We increasingly ask not what is good about them but what good they can do for us. And by “good” we mean health, wealth and worldly success.



Philosophy is sold as a trainer of transferable thinking skills

THOSE WHO LOVE NATURE, ART, LEARNING, friendship and so on for their own sake may find it distasteful to spotlight their instrumental benefits, but what is the harm in doing so? After all, someone living an instrumentalised life and someone who is not might be doing exactly the same things. This objection misses the fact that a good life does not only depend on *what* we do, but *how* we do it. Two people may go to the same exhibitions, watch the same films and listen to the same music, but if their motivations are fundamentally different then so are the worlds they inhabit.

To understand why, we have to go back to the basic question of why anything has value. Aristotle was one of the first but certainly not the last to observe that we do some things as means to ends and other things as ends in themselves. Only the latter have intrinsic value, while means to ends have mere extrinsic value. If we ask where the ultimate value in life lies, it is clearly in things with intrinsic value.

This piece of wisdom merits repeating across the ages and across all our life stages because it is so easy to be sucked away from what has real value by instrumental goods. Money is the clearest example. Money is important only for what it can buy and can be used to obtain many of the things we most value. Yet it seems all too human to try to accumulate more and more of it, never believing one has enough, diverting us from time with loved ones and cherished activities.

Pursuing extrinsic rather than intrinsic goods is a common enough mistake. But the instrumentalisation of everything takes it one step further. It doesn’t just distract us from all the things that are good in themselves; it strips these very things of their intrinsic value and turns them into mere means to ends. Worse, these ends are not even of value in themselves.

Think about what instrumentalisation serves: health, wealth and psychological wellbeing. These are all so obviously desirable that it’s easy to miss the fact that none have



intrinsic value. That is clearly true of wealth, but it is equally true of mental and physical health.

We often talk about bodily health as if it were the most important thing of all. That's why Augusten Burroughs's quote "When you have your health, you have everything" has a healthy life as an internet meme. But we don't prize health for its own sake. We value it for two reasons. One is that the alternative usually involves pain and suffering. The other is that, with health, we are more able to do the things that bring meaning to our lives. But a healthy life devoid of love, meaningful activity or experiences would be empty. Indeed, many people with chronic illness surprise themselves and others when they discover that, actually, their health is not the most important thing after all.

Even mental health is not important in itself. Mental illness is intrinsically bad, since it is suffering without gain. But being in good mental health is just an enabler of what is more fundamentally valuable. Even some mental distress is not intrinsically bad. It is a good thing that we grieve, as it shows that our emotions are functioning correctly when bad things happen to the people who matter to us.

Not even happiness, perhaps the most commonly claimed benefit of instrumentalisation, is an intrinsic good. It is not good if someone feels happy to see the suffering of people they prejudicially hate. It is not good to live happily in the illusion of a strong relationship when your partner is cheating on you. Blissful ignorance may sometimes be better than painful knowledge, but that does not make it good.

So what is good in itself, if not health, wealth and mental wellbeing? Philosophers have repeatedly made the mistake of trying to identify one thing as the *summum bonum*, the "ultimate good" for humankind. For Aristotle, it was intellectual contemplation; for the Buddhists, elimination of suffering; for Kant, a good will; for utilitarians, happiness. But there seems no reason to try to narrow down what is intrinsically valuable to one state or activity. Aristotle was more on point when he identified flourishing as the highest good for humanity, erring only when he became too prescriptive about what flourishing demands. We flourish when our lives are ones of engagement with things that are valuable for their own sakes and not for any other.

Intrinsic human goods include all the things that make life worth living without need of any further justification. To ask of them: "What's the point?" would be to miss the point. They are the point. We cannot give arguments for why they are valuable; we can only describe what makes them valuable and hope others recognise their worth. For example, we can say that a day spent in the forest should be appreciated because it makes us recognise the wonder of the natural world. To play or watch a sport is to participate in or witness the struggle and delight of attempting to bring mind and body together more seamlessly than in the rest of life. Learning a foreign language is a gateway into another culture that allows you to communicate with members of it and access its literature and media. All these things enrich our lives and broaden our experience, which is valuable even if it doesn't add a second to your lifespan. Life isn't a training for the future. It's a game that's already started, and time is running out.

THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN INTRINSIC AND EXTRINSIC goods may be conceptually sharp, but in the real world it quickly becomes less clearcut. Instrumentalisation does not create extrinsic value, it merely elevates it above what is intrinsically valuable. Human beings have practical needs, and it can be more important to earn money or chop wood than to read a novel or play with your grandchildren. Many things have to be done for instrumental purposes, and to occupy yourself only with what is intrinsically worthwhile would be an exceptional privilege, an indulgence, or both.

The debate over "art for art's sake" versus "art as a didactic tool" can be somewhat misguided. Some art, especially instrumental music and

abstract painting, can be appreciated only for its own sake. But much literature, film and drama can give us insight into ethics, politics and the human heart. All such understanding helps us to live better and attend more to what truly matters, in our lives and those of others. Such art can be seen as a means to the end of moral education, but in good art, means and ends are so closely tied that the distinction seems artificial. For instance, any account of why Anton Chekhov was such a great playwright could not separate his stagecraft and the humanity of what it represents. The problem with much didactic art is not that it contains lessons but that they are conveyed so crudely. Such works are not just bad art but poor pedagogical tools.

The relationship between intrinsic and extrinsic value is complex, and one of the problems of instrumentalisation is that it seeks to flatten and simplify it. It encourages us to identify what is most useful, and then separate it from, and prioritise it above, what is of ultimate value. In doing so, it often diminishes or destroys the very benefits it promises to maximise.

Take social connection. A study says that doing anything - even reading - is better for us when we do it with others. People know that conviviality is important for their mental and physical health. But one of the most valuable features of friendship and community is how they take us out of concern for ourselves and make us more aware of the needs of others. To get the most out of socialising we need to do it in the right spirit, choosing to be with other people because we care for them and they for us, because we find them stimulating, because we enjoy being part of a collective experience or endeavour. So if we choose to mingle only for reasons of our personal wellbeing, we are probably not going to get the benefits that socialising usually brings.

Instrumentalisation offers the illusion of efficiency because it promotes the direct pursuit of practical things that we all want. But often this turns out to be counterproductive. More often than not, you will fail to get the claimed benefits of an activity if getting them becomes your primary motivation. What look like shortcuts turn out to be short circuits, undermining what they seek to achieve.

If instrumentalisation is such a profound mistake, why have we made it? After all, we do not deliberately set out to strip meaning from our most valued activities.

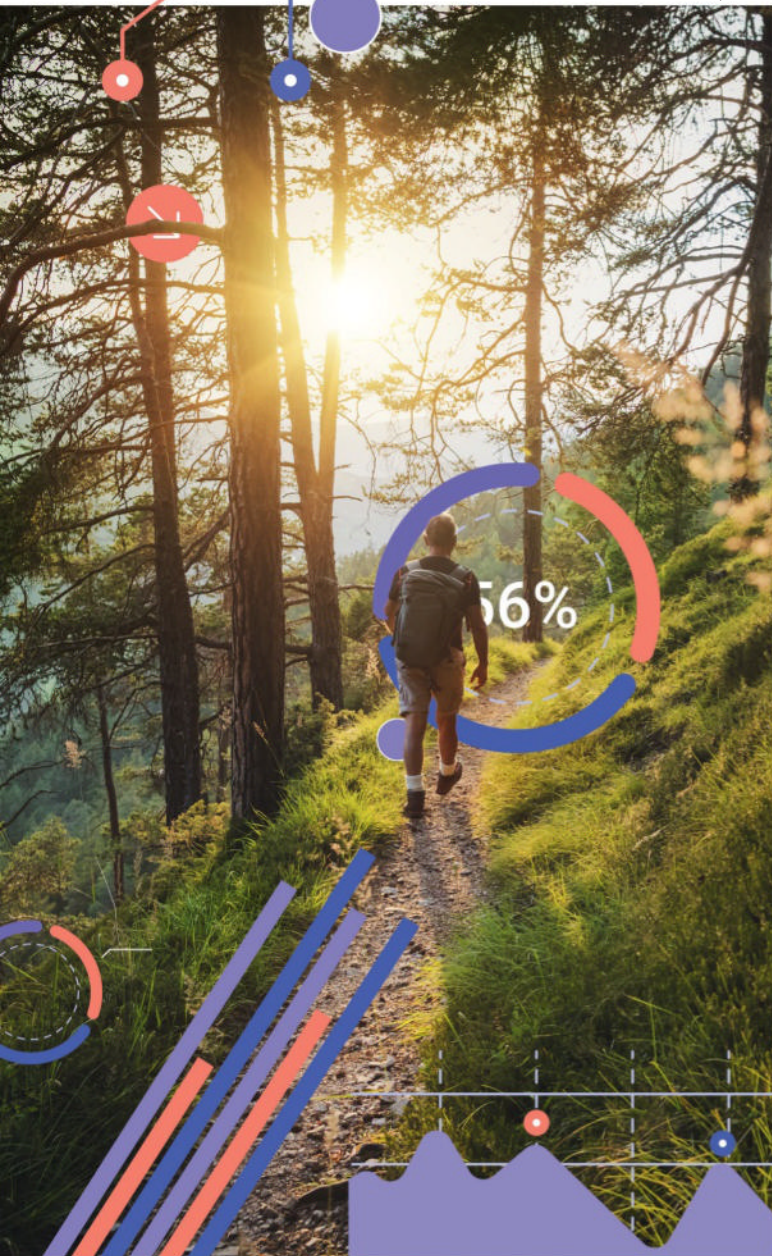
Instrumentalisation has its roots in several connected features of western modernity. The Enlightenment brought to fruition an idea of the primacy of the sovereign, autonomous individual, one that had deep roots in classical and Christian thought. Over the centuries, this idea has become a kind of common sense. Each person is supposed to be the master of their own destiny, the author of their own life story. Self-expression and self-determination are seen as essential for being an authentic self.

Enlightenment thinkers were correct to promote greater individual freedom in an age when power was wielded by the few over a subjugated majority. But human beings are also social animals and can never be entirely autonomous. Modernity's mistake is to lose sight of this, placing all the emphasis on personal liberty and not enough on our interdependence. This has led to an exaggeration of the importance of autonomy that has pushed the prizing of individuality too far. The result is atomisation: a world in which our separateness from others has become excessive.

This atomised world has features which encourage instrumentalisation. First, it promotes an illusion of control. Encouraged to feel autonomous, we lose sight of the fact that there is much over which we have no power. The world unfolds, opening up opportunities and throwing spanners in the works in equally random measure. We are not even in full control of ourselves. We had no say in our fundamental constitutions: our dispositions, personalities, gifts and limitations.

But primed to think of ourselves as free and autonomous, we imagine that we can manipulate the world to achieve whatever we want. Happiness, health and success are all ours for the taking, just as

A consumer mindset has affected how we relate to everything, not just what we buy



long as we make the right choices. And so the world becomes a series of levers to be pulled and buttons to be pushed, all to yield to our wills.

Our autonomous agency has increasingly been expressed through our status as consumers. Freedom is above all the choice of how to spend our money, with the promise that everything we need can be obtained in exchange for cash. The consumer mindset has affected how we relate to everything, not just the things we buy. The result is that the world has become essentially transactional, meaning that everything is an instrument for getting something else. It is no coincidence that dating apps give the impression that we are shopping for partners because we approach even relationships with the consumer framing. Higher education is no longer primarily an opportunity to expand the mind but an investment on future earnings, with courses that do not promise a good financial return considered poor value.

ANOTHER DEEP CULTURAL SOURCE of instrumentalisation is the reductionism that has seeped into our culture from natural science. Reductionism is the idea that the way to understand how things work is to break them down into their constitutive parts. It's an idea that served natural science well for centuries. But a clue as to its limitations comes in its relative failure in the social sciences. Economies, societies and psychologies cannot be explained by simple mechanistic processes. Even in the natural sciences, you can explain only so much by taking things apart, and that it is equally important to see how systems work as a whole.

Behind much instrumentalisation is a crude reductionism that ignores systems and focuses on elements within it. The richness of an experience, such as being in the outdoors, is reduced to a means to stimulate blood flow or release hormones. Art, which stirs a large variety of often conflicting emotions, is prized purely for its capacity to evoke certain good ones. Social bonds, which cause pain and heartache as well as joy, are reduced to sources of emotional support.

Combine an inflated belief in personal autonomy, a transactional consumer mentality and a reductionist attitude to how things work, and it is inevitable that we treat the world as a collection of resources we can plunder to promote our own wellbeing. The tragedy is that when we do so, we neglect rather than serve our deepest needs.

What if we were to reverse the instrumentalisation of everything? We would still do many things as means to ends. We would also be happy to agree that many of the good things in life bring us instrumental benefits too. But we would see these as welcome side-effects, not their purposes. A deinstrumentalised world would be one in which we would attend more to what is of value right here, right now.

Take friendship. The personal benefits we get from others are real, but they should not be the reason for being with them. Relationships are valuable because we value the people, not because spending time with them releases endorphins in our brains. David Hume corrected this error more than two centuries ago when he wrote: "I feel a pleasure in doing good to my friend, because I love him; but do not love him for the sake of that pleasure."

To appreciate things for their own value instead of what they might bring us is liberating. It frees us from the internal pressure always to make sure that what we are doing serves some further purpose. Living life to the full means fully appreciating what life brings, not trying to extract bankable benefits from it. It leaves us able to recognise that the good life is something we can live every day, in small ways as well as big. Most importantly, it tells us that the things and people we love are enough in and of themselves and don't need to serve any further function to justify devoting time and care to them. To be in this world realising that life is its own end is the key to attaining its fullness ●

JULIAN BAGGINI IS A WRITER AND PHILOSOPHER

A version of this piece originally appeared in Aeon

It starts with a 'back in my day' Facebook post or the sharing of a nostalgic meme - then suddenly Grandma is repeating conspiracy theories and praising Tommy Robinson. Family members open up about how they are coping with older relatives who have drifted towards extremism *By Simon Usborne*

Far rights and wrongs

Illustrations by CARL GODFREY

GRAHAM DOESN'T REMEMBER HIS MOTHER EVER SHARING HER POLITICAL VIEWS. He's not certain she even voted until she met his father, who was a big Labour supporter. She went along with that, only once voting Tory as an act of spite towards the end of their relationship. She later married a farmer who was more conservative, and leaned towards leave in the Brexit referendum. "But, honestly, beyond that, she would never even speak of politics. She just wasn't interested."

Graham, who works in the transport industry in England's Midlands region, noticed a big change in his mother during the Covid pandemic. "I remember walking home from work one day and I got this phone call and all of a sudden she was listing off these conspiracy theories at me." He now realises how much time she was spending online, on her phone and iPad, cut off from friends, family and the church life that had always been so important to her.

Five years later, Graham's mother, who is retired and in her 60s, supports the hard-right agitator and convicted criminal Tommy

Robinson with what her son describes as a religious fervour. She has told him Keir Starmer is a communist trying to "replace us all with Muslims" and Covid was a hoax. He says she spends hours on social media and uses her TV only to stream YouTube videos.

"I went to see her a few nights ago and everything started off as normal and then the conversation just switched," Graham says. "All of a sudden it was about Muslims in prisons forcing others to convert at knife-point, then somehow Starmer became part of it, and I just had to leave. I've been trying to help her, but I don't really understand politics and I end up making it worse. We've always been close but I feel like I'm losing her."

Graham has never had a clear idea of what, exactly, his mother is consuming on her screens, or how she has become radicalised. But he is far from alone in grappling with the sometimes extreme rightward political drift of an older relative. While so much research and concern has focused on radicalisation in young people - particularly young men - less is understood about the effects of a fragmenting political and media landscape on increasingly online boomers, the generation now aged from about 60 to 80.





Polls have long indicated that, on average, we get more conservative as we age. And the generation gap shows signs of growing. YouGov polling in the 2024 general election showed the traditional fall-off in the Labour share of the vote with rising age was steeper than in previous elections, dropping from 45% for those aged in their late 20s to 20% in those 70 or older. Meanwhile, recent analysis of US and UK survey and polling data by the Financial Times shows that, whereas the cohorts now aged over 46 are on traditional, rightward political trajectories, millennials - those now aged 29-45 - appear to be resisting it after two decades of economic turmoil.

I spoke to dozens of people about the painful faultlines in their families, where these rightward shifts are becoming more marked. They painted a picture of alienation driven by misinformation.

NADINE'S PARENTS SEPARATED WHEN SHE WAS IN HER TEENS. Like Graham's mother, hers hadn't previously expressed political views. But in the past few years, she and her new partner have become fixated on race and immigration, frequently "launching into tirades" about small boats. "Mum is on her iPad on the sofa, while her partner is usually at his desktop computer, shut away in another room," says Nadine, who is in her early 40s and lives in northern England. "I've no idea what forums or YouTube channels and other platforms he's on, but I know they're both on Facebook a lot."

Sara Wilford, an associate professor and specialist in computer ethics at De Montfort University in Leicester, has been trying to chart the online waters in which her own demographic now swims (she's 61). The founder of Smidge (Social Media Narratives: Addressing Extremism in Middle Age), an EU-funded research project, she says older people are spending an increasing amount of their free time online. In 2025, the industry regulator Ofcom found that Britons aged over 65 now spend a record three hours and 20 minutes a day online.

At the same time, the moderation of networks such as X and Facebook has become more relaxed, potentially bringing traditionally fringe messaging into ageing hands. Ofcom's survey found for 75% of social media users over 65, Facebook is their "main" social media app; for a third it's the only platform they use.

Wilford identifies "nostalgia porn" as a common first step on a radicalisation pathway. "Back in my day" content is now getting the AI treatment. Social media accounts with names such as Purest Nostalgia pump out soft-focus clips of fresh-faced (almost always white) youngsters unsullied by the bleak realities of the 21st century. "I had one the other day that was a boy walking around the streets in the 80s saying how much better everything was," Wilford says.

The 1980s or 90s setting of much of this generative content reveals its origins in the hands of gen Z creators. They are feeding demand for nostalgia among fellow young digital natives who fetishise a pre-smartphone era of mix tapes and Blockbuster stores. But their videos are hitting a nerve among older cohorts becoming accustomed to a diet of "boomerslop" - clips that range from weird AI twists on traditional cat content to the kinds of unhinged videos being shared by rightwing influencers including boomer-in-chief Donald Trump.

Wilford keeps an X account as a window into what can happen next. When she started it, she followed a few right-leaning but fairly mainstream accounts, and says, "I now get a very interesting 'for you' feed." She started getting content from rightwing accounts, including

the MP Rupert Lowe, who lost the Reform whip last March and has pursued a hard line on immigration. "I also get a lot of Maga people, then random posts that are smothered in misinformation. But they're also clever. In three well-written lines, they'll say something about immigrants and rape gangs or benefit cheats, and if you don't have the inclination to do some checking, you'd swallow it whole."

Wilford is concerned older users don't always recognise how vulnerable they can be. "These are people who haven't grown up as digital natives," she says. "But I've had so many conversations where people say, 'Oh no, I'm not being influenced by anyone' and they're blithely pottering along, not factchecking anything. Or they say they're not online, or don't do social media, but then you ask and they're on neighbourhood apps and local forums. They go there to check when the bins go out, but these apps can be full of rightwing content."

A spiral of misinformation and distrust of government and the mainstream media can lead people who might not have joined a hard-right organisation into dark places. Data analysis by the Guardian last year identified a network of far-right Facebook groups from the profiles of some of the people charged with online offences in connection with the riots after the murder of three young girls in Southport in summer 2024. The 51,000 posts analysed as part of the project revealed patterns of anti-immigrant rhetoric and conspiracy theories.

Wilford says the mainstreaming of racism on Facebook and X is emboldening people who might previously have kept a lid on offensive views. She believes participation in these communities can offer a powerful sense of recognition at a stage of life when people can feel socially redundant, or even invisible.

Last year, Smidge produced *A Family Tea*, a six-minute film made to reflect the potential impact of this within families. A mother looks at anti-immigrant propaganda on her laptop while her husband reads a newspaper and their grownup son looks at his phone. The mother, a nurse, gets angry about losing out on a promotion to a foreign colleague. Tensions flare and soon she's repeating lies about the white-nationalist "great replacement" theory. Her son, whose partner is an immigrant, walks out. "If you go on like this, you might not see your grandchildren grow up," the father says.

Sarah, who's in her 60s, almost became that mother. She recalls voting for the Liberal party, aged 22, in the 1979 general election, when Margaret Thatcher swept to power. "Their policies seemed more gentle to me, they seemed to be considering more people," she says of the Liberals. "But when my brother found out, he said, 'What are you doing? Dad votes Conservative, I vote Conservative, you must vote Conservative.'"

"I wasn't really that into politics. I thought, well, if they think that, I'll follow them, which is a bit pathetic but I was very young. There weren't the sources of news you get now, so I changed to voting Conservative."

Sarah, who lives in rural East Anglia, thinks buying a home aged 24 also helped shift her politics. She came to admire Thatcher, and tolerated John Major. It wasn't long after Tony Blair's victory in 1997 ("Terrible!") that Sarah says concern about Europe inspired her to vote for Ukip. "I liked what they stood for and I thought they were more patriotic," she says.

As she grew up, Sarah's daughter, now in her mid-30s, developed very different views: "I can't think of anyone on either side of her family who would ever have voted Labour, but perhaps it was the influence of her teachers and schoolfriends. By her teens she was

'I've been trying to help, but I make it worse. We've always been close but I feel like I'm losing her'



saying, ‘Mum, I don’t understand why you’re supporting these people. You’re a really nice person. It doesn’t make sense.’”

The gap widened as Sarah began campaigning for Ukip. Then came Brexit. “My daughter valued her freedom of movement and believed the hype that people who didn’t want to lose their sovereignty were bigots and racists. We had extremely heated arguments, which we’d never had before. Our relationship was at breaking point.”

Sarah now votes for Reform. She admires Nigel Farage and Donald Trump, and says “the Muslim way of life worries me on a daily basis”, a view she recognises as racist. Yet she also resents the idea that people over 60 are clueless about the internet or desperately seeking purpose online. She says she gets most of her news from GB News and the Telegraph. She only uses Facebook to stay in touch with friends, says X isn’t really for her, and that she knows how to factcheck.

ANDY, AN ACADEMIC IN HIS EARLY 50S, says his parents, who are in their 80s and live in the home counties, have needed no exposure to extremist X accounts or conspiracy-filled Facebook groups to drift to the right in a way that has created a family rift. “I think the worldview they get from the newspapers they’ve always read is far more dangerous,” he says via Zoom. “We can still argue about the way-out conspiratorial stuff on the basis that it’s just crazy, but the things they’re reading are just seen as normal ... It’s basically the same worldview expressed in a more polite manner.”

Andy, who now lives abroad, says his mother was once a Lib Dem voter, while his father was always an “old-fashioned Tory”. They respected his environmental activism as a student in the 90s. His mother even once voted Green in sympathy. But in the past 25 years – most noticeably after 9/11 – “the discourse on immigration has

radicalised them”. When Andy married an immigrant in 2005, “It was always, ‘Well, we don’t mean her.’”

Their views have grown more extreme since Brexit and the rise of Reform, which they now support. “When leaving the EU came up, it was impossible to have any kind of conversation about it. Brexit broke everything.” During one row about Europe, fuelled in part by alcohol, Andy says his father threatened to punch him.

His parents live comfortable lives, Andy says, largely unaffected directly by the issues they get most agitated about, including immigration. “But it’s like they’ve lost the ability to think critically, so they’re in this sort of self-reinforcing cycle of ignorance. But they also can’t imagine they’re ignorant because they’re educated people who know about the world. They fundamentally believe people of different races don’t mix and foreigners shouldn’t be living in Britain.

They’re very Islamophobic, but these aren’t seen as extreme views any more by a lot of people. Zack Polanski and the Green party have been talking about making hope normal again. I think we also need to make prejudice strange again.”

Andy blames centrist politics for failing to offer people a more positive worldview. “Nobody has defended civility and multiculturalism, or a liberal vision of Britain as a humanist power that supports human rights and the rule of law,” he says. “That’s the natural place where my parents should be, but when parties like Ukip started to rise up, there was just this collective panic about losing voters to them.”

Alison, whose brother has shifted hard to the right, thinks social media has taken such a hold that it is radicalising people who may never have had an X or Facebook account. “I don’t even know if my family are on social media, but the fact that it surrounds us, and that people are getting this polarising information on the front pages of their newspapers or on the radio, means it almost doesn’t matter any more,” she says.



'They're on local forums to check when the bins go out, and these can be full of rightwing content'

She grew up in a working-class family in London. Her brother, who is in his 60s, runs a pub. When he mentioned at a recent family wedding that he was now a Reform voter, she was surprised and asked him why. "He said, 'We're losing our identity.' I asked what he meant by 'identity' and he just exploded and told me to fuck off, that I'm naive and ridiculous and don't understand what it's like. Then he stormed off. Everyone stood there shocked, because he'd never said anything like that, so full of anger and hate. It was really upsetting."

Now a corporate coach, Alison says an education gap in her family has made it harder for her and her brother to see eye to eye. She has found reasoning with him and other relatives who have drifted to the right only seems to make them angrier. But she wonders if the rage is misdirected. "It felt to me that because I had asked a question he couldn't answer, the anger was actually not at me, it was at himself. And then I felt sorry for him."

Alison's brother apologised and they have managed to continue their relationship, even if it is now damaged. But dozens of other people I heard from talked of family ties that have snapped. "My family are now pretty much estranged from my aunt due to her far-right views on Facebook," a woman in her 40s from Hampshire says. An American says only duty to care for a sick relative has halted her estrangement from her family since her parents "shifted so far to the right as to be almost unrecognisable ... It's hard to see glimpses of the loving parents I remember, only for them to disappear into cult-like nonsense the moment social media spins them up."

AMONG HUNDREDS OF RESPONSES TO A GUARDIAN CALLOUT about older relatives shifting to the right politically, there was a noticeable subset: those bucking the trend and becoming more leftwing as they age. One woman says she and her friends have become more liberal: "Living longer gives us a chance to see things aren't as simple and dichotomous as we once thought." A retired publisher in his 70s also describes a leftward drift: "It's partly to do with guilt at our comfortable postwar lifestyle, and feeling we owe a debt to society."

Tracey Laszloffy, who has worked in the US as a marriage and family therapist for more than 35 years, says opposing values have always been a feature of her work. "But politics itself has exploded in the past few years. And here, it's really where they line up on Trump and Maga. I've never seen anything this divisive."

The strength of feeling can make it hard for Laszloffy to unearth root causes, often tied up in old resentments. "I only use politics as an opening, because conversations about Trump are not going to go anywhere," she says. She saw one older couple whose marriage was threatened by differing views of Trump (he was a fan). As it turned out, the man, who had a manual job that paid much less than his wife's, had since become angry because Trump's promised economic resurgence had not materialised. "He was struggling with issues around masculinity and identity, and acknowledging that vulnerability created the ground they needed to re-engage in a meaningful way."

Janet Reibstein, a psychologist at the University of Exeter, says she's reminded of her own background in the US, from where she emigrated to the UK decades ago. "My whole family was against the Vietnam war, but I had one cousin in the army who used to come and deliberately provoke us," says Reibstein, the author of *Good Relations: Cracking the Code of How to Get on Better*. The solution was

the one she still prescribes: give up on the idea that you're going to change anyone's mind. Instead, draw boundaries around the minefield, and retreat to common ground. "I told him he couldn't visit if he talked about the war, and he respected it. The problem is, when the dominant discourse is one of divisiveness, it's harder to have those conversations."

Family estrangements, promoted on social media and Reddit accounts as "going no contact", have apparently mushroomed. Data here is scant but a YouGov poll in the US last year suggested more than a third of adults were estranged from a parent, child, sibling, grandparent or grandchild. Separate research just after the 2024 election by the Harris Poll suggested half of all US adults were estranged from a close relative, with 18% citing political differences as the reason.

Even if older people are moving faster and harder to the right, Joshua Coleman, a psychologist specialising in family estrangement who created the survey with the Harris Poll, argues that their children are also becoming less tolerant of difference. "Perhaps in the past, people thought, 'Oh, Mum or Dad is getting more conservative, that's really annoying' but now it becomes this huge value signifier," says Coleman, the author of *Rules of Estrangement: Why Adult Children Cut Ties and How to Heal the Conflict*.

While Coleman, 71, acknowledges cutting contact is the only way forward in extreme family breakdowns, he thinks younger people are more likely to see politics as a reason to justify, and even boast about, drastic action. "It's seen as a virtuous act of protecting your identity and mental health," he adds. "All of that's pretty new."

He sees the same instinct in millennial parents to shelter children from their grandparents' views. Nadine, the reader whose mother and her partner have become fixated on small boats, now thinks twice about taking her child to her mother's house. "I still invite her to family occasions, but I do feel nervous she might say something offensive. I know her views don't reflect my own, but I worry others might think they do."

Largely, though, Nadine says she has been able to swerve politics and maintain relations with her parents. As for Sarah, the Reform voter with the despairing daughter, "We agreed we weren't going to change, so we had to stop talking about anything political. I have to be so careful because we don't agree on anything, but it works and the main thing is she knows I love her."

Graham has also made the decision to stop engaging with his mother when she shares her views or the latest conspiracy theories she has consumed online. He recognises something in Wilford's view that many older online radicals are motivated by a sense of redundancy and isolation. "Provided I keep my mouth shut, I think the relationship will survive," he says. "But I feel I need to help her somehow. When she's saying this stuff, she sounds almost panicky, like she's trying to convince me. But I also think she's now worried, because of what I have said, that some of the things she's read aren't true."

He has suggested therapy, but she shuts down the idea. At first it was the political views that troubled him, challenging his own values as well as his understanding of who his mother was. But now he just wants her to be OK. "I don't know what her political beliefs would be if she could be healed from this," he adds, before admitting that his tolerance could only go so far. He thinks for a moment. "I suppose it wouldn't bother me any more if she wanted to be a member of Reform or support Tommy Robinson, just so long as it wasn't because she was believing lies." ●

SIMON USBORNE IS A FEATURES WRITER



BRIGID DELANEY

The hatred of
Meghan says
much about us

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Opinion



ARTIFICIAL
INTELLIGENCE

*AI is destroying jobs - and our
governments are far from ready*

Larry Elliott



ILLUSTRATION: MOOR STUDIO/GETTY

The transition to a world of artificial intelligence has given a whole new meaning to the concept that capitalism can only renew itself through creative destruction. This is the idea that clapped-out technologies have to be replaced by new ways of doing things, even though the process can be brutal.

That has been the way of things for every new wave of inventions since the dawn of the industrial age in the mid-18th century, but with machines now displaying cognitive skills, able to both think and learn, the potential for economic disruption is all the greater.

In an ideal world, policymakers would have time to adjust and so make the transition smoother and less painful. There are always teething troubles with new technology, which means businesses tend to change their working practices relatively slowly. That gives governments the space to invest in skills and craft industrial strategies. Only by doing so can the full potential of technological progress be realised.

It also helps if economies are growing and jobs are plentiful, as was the case in the 1950s and 1960s. Full employment then made it easier for workers displaced by automation to find another job. That, though, is not the world in which we currently live. Even before the US and Israel launched their attack on Iran, growth was weak and jobs hard to come by.

That said, the war in the Middle East has further complicated matters. The closure of the strait of Hormuz has led to higher energy prices and shortages of raw materials for use in industry and agriculture. A sharp rise in business costs coupled with the ready availability of new labour-saving technology is a toxic mix that has the potential to destroy jobs rapidly and on a grand scale.

The incentive to choose machines over humans will increase because the outlook is a lot worse than it was only a few weeks ago. The International Monetary Fund last week cut its growth forecasts and highlighted the risks of a global recession, and if the warnings prove correct, unemployment will rise sharply. Businesses are going to be even more eager to cut costs, especially labour costs, and will be reluctant to start hiring again, even when business conditions improve.

AI optimists acknowledge there will be short-term problems but say that in the longer term there is nothing really to worry about. In the past, every wave of new technology has been accompanied by



Policymakers have less time than they might think to ready their societies for the challenge posed by AI

predictions of machines supplanting humans, but the doomsday scenarios have never materialised. Some sectors suffered and even disappeared altogether but, ultimately, more jobs were created than were destroyed. That's because humans have used new technology to find more efficient ways to do things, thus raising productivity and boosting growth. An expanding economy provides job opportunities, even if it is impossible to say at the moment exactly where those job opportunities will be.

There are two potential problems with this analysis. The first is there is no guarantee that history will repeat itself. AI's impact may prove to be more transformative and much more disruptive than, say, the internal combustion engine. It may be different this time.

The second potential problem is that the jobs destroyed by AI may prove to be better paid than those created. In the past, this has not been the case, with labour-saving machines freeing up humans to do more creative tasks. The opposite could happen this time, with machines doing the clever stuff and humans left with more menial tasks.

In the end, it will depend on whether AI allows men and women to do their jobs better or whether it makes them redundant. In the first case, the AI optimists will be proved right. In the second, they will be proved spectacularly wrong.

Before the Iran war started, the research company Citrini came up with a possible scenario in which there was an AI-driven economic and financial crisis in 2028.

Automation wipes out well paid white-collar jobs, which reduces consumer spending power. Machines can work 24/7. They don't take holidays and they don't call in sick. But, on the other hand, machines don't spend money on a new car or a round of drinks in the pub.

So, while it makes sense for each individual company to accelerate its use of AI, the drop in demand for goods and services across the economy as a whole hits corporate revenues, which in turn leads to pressure for further cost-cutting, and leads to more automation and a fresh wave of redundancies. The doom loop created by the adoption of AI eventually leads to a stock market crash.

Until now, the worry on Wall Street has been of a crash caused by AI failing to live up to the hype. The Citrini report shows what could happen if the claims for smart machines prove to be right. In which case, the countries that have been quickest to embrace AI - such as the US - will be the most vulnerable.

The war is a wake-up call. Policymakers have less time than they might think to ready their economies and their societies for the challenge posed by AI. They need to concentrate on the three Rs: reskilling, reindustrialisation and redistribution. What's more, they need to act fast. Otherwise any benefits from AI will be captured by a tiny minority, while the majority battles with the consequences of mass unemployment ●

* **Larry Elliott**
is a *Guardian*
columnist

MONARCHY

The scapegoating of Meghan reveals hidden anxieties of the public

Brigid Delaney



Whatever unhinged parasocial relationship the adoring public had with Diana, Princess of Wales, their relationship with the Duchess of Sussex is its shadowy reflection.

For decades, Diana was the subject of public adoration that was locked in a permanently hysterical register.

Yet in terms of public opinion, Meghan is stuck in its opposite register - a perceived darkness to Diana's light. In a single year in 2019 - still in the honeymoon stage - Meghan appeared in negative news stories 21,100 times across 29,000 tabloid and broadsheet publications, according to data analytics company Brandwatch. The data revealed that in 2019, Meghan received roughly five times more negative newspaper stories than Catherine, Princess of Wales, with the analysis showing 4,300 negative stories for Kate.

I can understand the hatred and disgust at a figure such as the former prince Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor - given his associations with Jeffrey Epstein. But I cannot imagine why anyone at a remove would have anything other than a mild or neutral view of Harry and Meghan. What choices they make have so little to do with any of us. If we don't approve of the products they are peddling, we can simply not buy them. Yet eight years after their wedding, on a private visit to Australia last week, the negative press continued.

The latter that the pair inspire makes me wonder if the hate directed at them has some deeper meaning that sits below the level of consciousness - just as the inconsolable public reaction to Diana's death also revealed hidden aspects of British character. Meghan has been cast in a sacrificial role - an inverse to Diana, a sort of photonegative of adoration, consigned to the role of scapegoat.

We need scapegoats in our society, according to René Girard, a French-American philosopher and literary critic who died in 2015. He wrote that human societies are held together not primarily by shared love but by shared violence; specifically, by the periodic sacrifice of a victim who absorbs the tensions that would otherwise tear the community apart.

The victim, or the scapegoat, is someone who everyone agrees, implicitly or explicitly, is to blame for the community's disorder. The victim is expelled, and this causes massive relief to the community, who feel a return of peace and unity. Meghan is a classic scapegoat figure, fitting the characteristics outlined by Girard. Firstly, a victim must be inside and outside the community simultaneously (which she is, as an outsider who married into the British establishment).

The scapegoat must then transgress a boundary or break a rule - and we see this through narratives that Meghan somehow corrupted Harry and turned him against his family. And the sacrifice must feel unanimous, the whole community against this one person. In Meghan's case, this is reflected in the disproportionate negative press and low public opinion she faces.

The hostility toward Meghan and Harry coincides with a period of extraordinary anxiety in British (and to some extent Australian) public life, including Brexit, the pandemic, cost of living crisis, the decline of institutional trust, immigration fears and the shadow of Andrew cast over the monarchy.

Particular to Meghan are accusations of "wokeness" - framing her scapegoating within a culture war. In the media, Meghan became the explanation for the monarchy's problems, for Harry's split from his family, for the sense that something has been lost or corrupted and the royal family having to change in uncomfortable ways (witness the discomfort of the British public with aspects of her wedding, such as the American preacher and the gospel choir).

The way to identify a scapegoat, Girard argues, is through the disproportionate response, when the punishment wildly exceeds any plausible crime (often the scapegoat is not actually guilty of what they have been accused of), and the hostility is maintained long after any rational grievance would have dissipated. Much of the modern scapegoating industrial complex is driven by the media, which profit from and maintain audiences through rage-baiting. Meghan has been good fodder for them.

This is what being a princess *really* entails. It is not an enviable job. There is nothing inherently social about parasocial relationships. They say more about us than them ●

ILLUSTRATION:
GUARDIAN DESIGN;
JONATHAN BRADY/PA



ENERGY

In a war of unintended consequences, green technology is a winner

George Monbiot

Donald Trump has done more to accelerate the energy transition than anyone else alive. Fossil fuel companies bankrolled his presidential campaign to stop the transition in its tracks. But when you back a volatile narcissist, you shouldn't expect to control the outcome.

It's not that the fossils are suffering yet. As prices have soared since Trump and Benjamin Netanyahu attacked Iran, oil executives have been selling shares at gobsmacking prices: the CEO of Chevron, for example, has cashed \$104m so far this year. Vladimir

Putin has also received a massive boost to his Ukraine invasion budget. As promised, Trump has gutted clean energy rules and programmes, green alternatives and environmental science.

But Trump's illegal war, waged at terrible cost, is also focusing minds in governments around the world. It's a demonstration not just that the orange emperor cannot be trusted, but also that fossil fuels cannot be trusted. Concentrated in certain regions, in the hands of either unreliable allies, potential opponents or outright enemies, dependent on long supply lines that can easily be disrupted, subject to price volatility that can trigger regime change in almost any country that relies on them, they now look less like a lifeline than a liability.

Again, it is true that the short-term response of some governments has been to favour fossil energy, through cutting fuel taxes or raising subsidies to help ease the cost of living crisis. But at the same time, many are now seeking to reduce or break their dependency. The logic of switching to renewables looks ineluctable.

This is certainly how their voters see it. The war has triggered a global surge in demand for electric vehicles (EVs), solar panels, heat pumps and other fossil-free technologies. Inquiries about buying EVs have risen 23% in the UK since the attack on Iran began, by 50% in Germany and by 160% in France. There's similar

ILLUSTRATION:
GUARDIAN DESIGN;
GETTY

interest in India, south-east Asia and South Korea. Even in the US, where Trump has done everything possible to stymie the technology, there's 20% more interest than before the war. The same goes for domestic solar panels and heat pumps.

Rising enthusiasm for green tech coincides with some remarkable breakthroughs. Battery technology, as the climate advocate Bill McKibben points out, is advancing at astonishing rates, defying even recent predictions. Through grid-scale batteries, we could quickly eliminate the need for fossil fuel plants as the power source of last resort. This would greatly reduce the price of electricity. Solid-state batteries could, before long, enable the super-fast charging of everything, everywhere, with far longer storage times and (in cars) much greater range. Quantum batteries, now beginning to look like a realistic possibility, could transform the system all over again.

We are on the cusp of vast, cascading shifts in energy supply and storage. Any country that fails to respond will remain trapped in the fossil age, facing high bills and insecurity, while others transform their economies. Petrol and diesel automakers developing new models might as well be investing in typewriters and rotary telephones. Governments should seek the electrification of everything that can be electrified, and the retirement of much that cannot. Half-measures offer nothing but delay and wasted costs.

This is also a great time to invest in energy conservation and energy efficiency. One of the remarkable legacies of Anne Hidalgo, former mayor of Paris, has been to enable, through the 15-minute city programme, people to meet their needs more cheaply, more conveniently and with greatly reduced emissions and air pollution. It is one of many examples of how we could do more with less. Instead of seeking to extend the long fossil century, we can, by switching to 21st-century technologies and solutions, not only protect ourselves from price shocks and dictators, but also improve our lives, create jobs and help prevent climate breakdown. But today we scarcely need to point it out, as Trump is making the argument on our behalf.

I believe his attack on every possible green measure is motivated as much by billionaire nihilism as by the demands of his sponsors. As a recent post of his suggests, he might actually believe he is divine. How can he prove it to himself? By terminating the lives and living conditions of mortals, either with a stroke of the pen, or with a thunderbolt from a B-1 Lancer bomber plane. Destruction is not just the means to an end. It is also the end.

Greens who were long dismissed as "idealistic" and "unrealistic" now look like hard-headed pragmatists and true patriots. They are years ahead of their rivals in demanding a transition that makes sense on every level: environmental, economic and political.

The attack on Iran is not the way any of us wanted this to happen. But the unintended consequences of Trump's pointless war could help sink Trumpism everywhere - and the corrupt and filthy industry that props it up ●

Japan's cherry blossom data is a record of longevity and of changing times

A picture posted on social media last April by Prof Yasuyuki Aono of a spreadsheet, with its blank row for 2026, carries a quiet poignancy. Prof Aono died before he got to fill in this year's entry for when the cherry blossom fully bloomed in Kyoto. The academic had spent decades reconstructing dates of flowering that go back to the ninth century. His work illuminated how a botanical event long associated with the Japanese idea of *mono no aware* - a sadness at the passing of things - is shifting because of the climate crisis.

The "peak bloom" now occurs around two weeks earlier than in previous centuries. In the 1820s full bloom arrived in mid-April. In 2023 the full-flowering date was 25 March. An earlier blooming indicates warmer springs - and Prof Aono's data provides a warning that Japan's "sakura front" comes sooner each year.

But this change is more than just a biological response to rising temperatures. In Japan, it threatens to disrupt what the seasons mean. Springtime arrives with *hanami* - weeks of picnics and petals - as the blossom sweeps north in a blaze of pink and white.

The timing matters beyond the aesthetic. Japan's tourism industry relies on the \$9bn a year generated by cherry blossom season. Such is the craze that a town near Mount Fuji cancelled this year's festivities because it was being overrun by visitors in search of "Instagrammable" spots.

Prof Aono's work suggested that March temperatures in Kyoto have risen by several

degrees since the early 19th century. The pattern is not unique to Japan. Since 1921, the US has recorded peak bloom dates for the cherry trees Japan had given as a gift to Washington a century ago - they have advanced by a week.

Another researcher will now update the records. Prof Aono learned classical Japanese script to read historical documents and reconstructed centuries of bloom dates. A millennium of book-keeping sounds permanent. But it depends on decades of effort by individuals whose lives are finite.

The information ultimately rests on a 1939 effort to compile a chronology: the seamless 1,200-year dataset began as a painstaking act of archival recovery. By 1956 a Japanese meteorologist, Hidetoshi Arakawa, had made an intellectual leap. Writing about Kyoto's cherry blossoms, he argued that the dates of their flowering were more than cultural markers of spring: they were climate records.

To the Japanese, the flowering cherry has always been more than a plant. In the 10th-century masterpiece *The Tale of Genji*, arguably the world's first novel, there's a whole chapter on the cherry-blossom festival staged in the imperial palace. Nine centuries later the Meiji era of rapid industrialisation promoted it as a symbol of both modernity and loyalty to the emperor. Disputes over the blossom's origin periodically burst open in east Asia. The stakes could not be higher. Earlier blooms due to global heating risk breaking the natural rhythms that give meaning to *sakura's* fleeting beauty ●

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Renewable power plants are a price worth paying

I was concerned to read Tom Wall's piece on how Reform UK is weaponising the concept of net zero in its opposition to Lincolnshire's expanding solar power installations (Fight the power, Feature, 27 March).

I can understand rural communities not finding renewable infrastructure aesthetically pleasing, but when the alternative is environmental collapse, this is surely a price worth paying to enable a better future for generations to come.

Where I live in Germany, my train route to work takes me past both solar and wind farms, which - though perhaps not as "beautiful" to me as to the engineer quoted in the article - do offer me a small daily comfort that humanity is (slowly) making progress towards getting ourselves out of the mess we are in.

Meanwhile, it is all very well for the Reform council leader Sean Matthews to insist he "doesn't want to be described as a climate change denier", but labelling human-caused climate impacts as "nonsense" and "made-up

stuff" begs the question: if that is not climate change denial, then what is?

*Luke Davis
Lübben, Brandenburg,
Germany*

Did irony of CEO's tribute get lost in translation?

There is an irony about the hullabaloo created by the Air Canada CEO having used his native Canadian English (rather than both official languages, French and English) to deliver a tribute to the pilots who succumbed at LaGuardia airport (Global report, 3 April).

The language laws of Quebec require that the official language to be used in that province for public administration, commerce and work should be French only.

Quebec spends tax dollars on a "language police", the Office québécois de la langue française, to the tune of C\$49m (\$35m) a year. Its agents spy on work places and shops to enforce such communication usage, fining those that do not comply. Shop signs must feature French in larger lettering than English.

Can you imagine Quebec's neighbour Greenland having the requirement that tourist

shoppers be solely addressed in Greenlandic or Danish?

*Anthony Walter
Coldstream, British
Columbia, Canada*

Calling me auntie honours my years of experience

In my role as a healthcare assistant, I was often referred to as auntie (Calling a woman "auntie" depends where you're coming from, Opinion, 10 March). I loved it and regarded it as an acknowledgment of my skills and knowledge built up over a lifetime of experiences, education and training.

*Jacquie Platt
Greatworth, England, UK*

Artemis II images reignite a moon mission memory

There has been much excitement about the crew of Artemis II seeing the far side of the moon (Artemis II crew return as Nasa faces deep cuts, Eyewitness, 17 April). Let us remember that on 7 October 1959 the Soviet spacecraft Luna 3 photographed the back of the moon for the first time. A picture was sent down to Earth and printed in Pravda newspaper using standard wire-photo equipment.

Meanwhile, the Daily Express obtained the photograph via the Jodrell Bank radio telescope but got the proportions wrong, printing it too wide or too narrow (I'm not sure which).

I was a schoolboy obsessed with space, so I wrote to Pravda in Moscow asking for a copy of the newspaper with the (correct) moon photograph, and they kindly obliged.

*Dr Nigel Fairweather
Brixham, England, UK*

● So these astronauts on the Artemis II mission went to the moon? In the same way that if I drove round the M25, I'd have gone to London?

*Simon Ratcliffe
Leighton Buzzard,
England, UK*

JD Vance is welcome to sway our next election

Having seen the result of the Hungarian election, perhaps we could invite JD Vance to interfere in our next general election by speaking in support of Nigel Farage (On Budapest streets, joy and disbelief greet end of Orbán era, Spotlight, 17 April).

*Clifton Melvin
Chalfont St Giles,
England, UK*

BECKY BARNICOAT ON MILLENNIAL LIFE

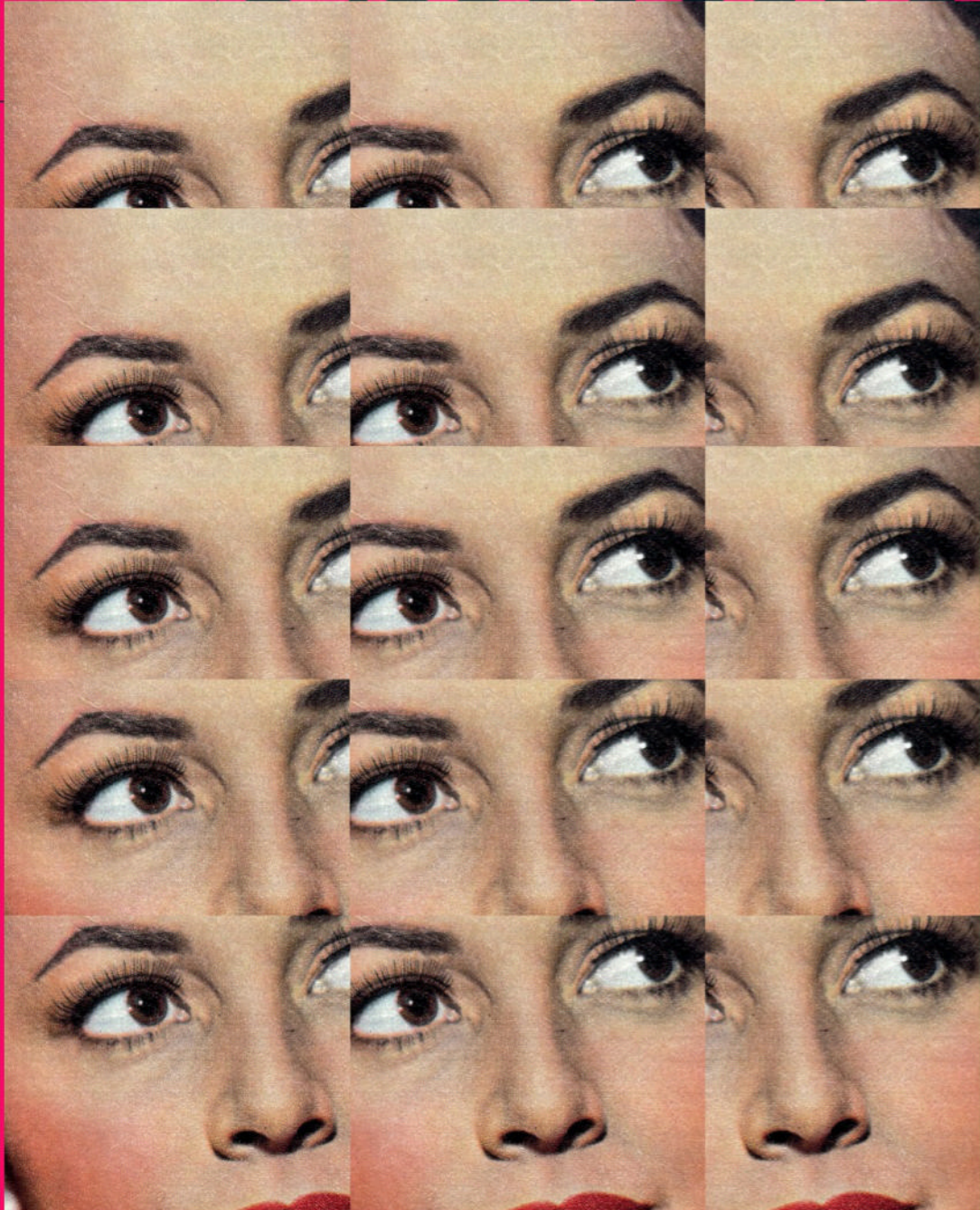




ARCHITECTURE
From ceramics
to codpieces:
inside V&A East

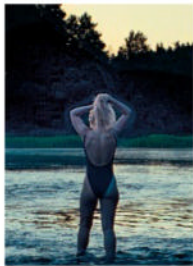
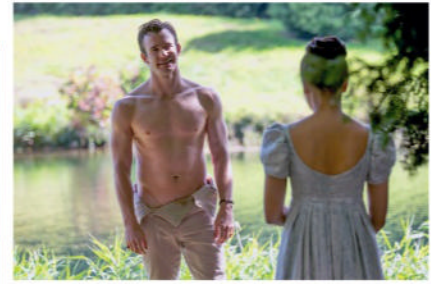
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Culture



The look of love

*How the female gaze is finally bringing the desires
and interior lives of women to film, TV and fiction*



By Deborah
Linton
COVER
ILLUSTRATION
Michelle
Thompson

DO YOU VORACIOUSLY READ THE PAGES OF STEAMY romantasy best-sellers by Sarah J Maas or Rebecca Yarros? Or flood your group chat with breathless recaps of the latest goings-on in TV series such as *Heated Rivalry* or *Bridgerton*? If so, you surely can't have failed to notice that in pop culture, the female gaze - storytelling that highlights the meandering, textured, sublimely messy inner worlds and wants of women - is enjoying an explosion.

On TV, you can see it in the interior lives and desires taken up by *Big Little Lies*, *Sirens* or *Little Fires Everywhere*. Romantasy harbours it in the shape of powerful maidens and sex in fae (fairy) realms, while Emerald Fennell's *Wuthering Heights* and *Promising Young Woman* are marketed with the promise of converting women's experiences into dark beauty on the big screen.

A shift, a moment or a commercial juggernaut? That depends how deeply you look. But the portrayal of internalised female perspectives - and, crucially, desires - has gone from guilty pleasure to middle of the zeitgeist. Today, the idea of centring the subjectivity, rather than objectivity,

of women's experiences, agency and emotion is as visible as it has ever been across the cultural canon.

This emergent body of pop culture takes on society's conditioning to experience women's lives through the lens of male storytellers - or the male gaze. Coined in 1973 by film theorist Laura Mulvey, the theory is used to explain how women on screen, in art and literature have long been reduced to objects of desire as viewed by heterosexual men. Subversion of this male gaze, rejecting voyeurism to portray women's bodies as lived-in, is not new - at least in arthouse cinema. Jane Campion's 1993 *The Piano* is a defining example that gained mainstream crossover, winning Oscars and the Palme d'Or; so too, Andrea Arnold's *Fish Tank*, an Essex housing estate coming-of-age tale that won the Prix du Jury at Cannes in 2009; and Céline Sciamma's 2019 *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, a slow-burn romance between a French aristocrat and the woman commissioned to paint her.

But in the mainstream the female gaze has taken decades to cut through in any measure. Today though, finally, it is making bank. See Fennell's box office-topping adaptation of *Wuthering Heights*, which retains the puristically male trope of Emily Brontë's heroine seeking male affection, but filters it through Margot Robbie's female-centric

psychological and erotic lens. Meanwhile, romantasy has buoyed publishers to the tune of \$610m in annual sales in 2024, while generating billions of TikTok views on captivated BookTok, where romance, story-building and sex - or "spice" - draw in emotionally invested users.

One of the best examples of the burgeoning female gaze on screen is last year's nine-time Emmy-nominated *Dying for Sex*. It centres on Molly Kochan (Michelle Williams), who is dying of metastatic breast cancer and enjoying an end-of-life sexual awakening, trying bondage, dominance and role-play. Iris Brey, author of *The Female Gaze: A Revolution on Screen*, heralds the show as "super important", explaining: "It teaches things that are extremely taboo - women being sick and wanting to experience pleasure. We feel seen."

The show was directed and executive produced by Shannon Murphy, who also worked on such female-focused dramas as *Killing Eve*, *The Power* and *Dope Girls*. "I'm drawn to projects that are less A+B=C. I like something more meandering, holistic, which I do think goes with the feminine brain," says Murphy. She also notes a grey "and in some ways less judgmental" area in female storytelling compared with more "obvious" male depiction.

Murphy's own cultural upbringing was against a backdrop of 90s female-fronted stories such as *Ally McBeal*. "On screen, when I think about shows that really grabbed me, that was a huge one," she says. "I'd never seen this powerhouse lawyer with this wild feminist imagination." Operating in the same era was *Sex and the City*'s Samantha Jones, whose sexual confidence was critiqued as scandalous before ultimately being considered empowered - "I will not be judged by you or society. I will wear whatever and blow whomever I want as long as I can breathe ... and kneel," goes one of the character's most famous lines.

Its successors went further: "The first time I saw *Lena Dunham's Girls*, something in me just blew apart and was so elated that I'd seen my sensibilities of what female creativity could be," Murphy remembers. "Girls was, for me, the first time that the wildness, messiness, real bodies and brains and comedy was put on screen."

Like *Girls*, Michaela Coel's *I May Destroy You* illustrated the kind of yearned-for female agency on TV that set group chats alight, alongside Phoebe Waller-Bridge's *Fleabag* and *Killing Eve*. Meanwhile, the success of female-focused stories in Shonda Rhimes's *Grey's Anatomy* and then *Bridgerton* - among Netflix's most-watched shows ever - have made the case for greater commercial buy-in. It's a baton intriguingly taken up by *Heated Rivalry*, this year's raunchy, gay ice-hockey drama, which framed slow-burn intimacy in a way that garnered a massive female fan following. Straight women found themselves enjoying the sex and Adonis-like naked bodies while celebrating the show's emotional depth.

These mainstream successes serve the point that "women can bring money to the industry; they're telling studios we can have bigger budgets and ambition", Brey says. "I want to see the money going to female characters where men are not looking at them."

Brey tracks the prevalence of the female gaze in pop culture alongside other societal movements: "What has happened is the same as feminism - we're going through waves. I think after #MeToo a lot of people in power positions were like: 'Let's give this another try.' The industry goes where they think they can generate money."

Still, those waves render investment fragile and inconsistent and Brey warns of a "receding moment" on the

horizon. She points to this year's *The Chronology of Water*, a turbulent, Kristen Stewart-directed arthouse coming-of-age drama based on Lidia Yuknavitch's 2011 memoir of the same name. The film takes on rape, incest and the reclamation of desire, both affronting and invigorating in its aim to return women's confessionals to the canon. As such, Stewart has described the "tough sell" to get it funded; it spent eight years in development before being shot outside the US, in Latvia and Malta.

LESS SUBVERSIVE IN BREY'S ESTIMATION, BUT WILDLY SUCCESSFUL, IS ROMANTASY. It is female desire that has part-driven the genre's phenomenal appeal, delivering readers fantastical worlds, female protagonists and explicit sex, while delivering publishers seductive profits. Bloomsbury added £70m (\$95m) to its market value

when it announced two new books for Sarah J Maas's top-selling *A Court of Thorns and Roses* series last month. Rachel Reid's *Game Changers*, the book series adapted for TV as *Heated Rivalry*, hit 650,000 sales for HarperCollins after the show aired, with a seventh instalment due next June - and a second season for TV instantly commissioned, too.

Reminiscent of the hushed way EL James's *Fifty Shades of Grey* was talked about 15 years ago, romantasy novels are often downplayed - and reclaimed - as "fairy porn" or "smut". "I hate the word smut," says Jennifer L Armentrout, author of the internationally bestselling romantasy series *From Blood and Ash*. "You label things smutty for the general readership, they're automatically thinking: 'This is something wrong.' Any time something is dominated by women, in the sense of being written or consumed by them, it's always seen as less than."

Armentrout credits BookTok with "removing the guilty pleasure", leaving readers free to enjoy textured worlds with complex heroines. "You will see main characters with mental illnesses, disabilities, not stereotypically super-thin," she says. "These books address some serious, real-life issues from handling depression to assault. They become so easily relatable. Even though you're dealing with dragons or vampires in a world that doesn't look like ours, they're going through the same things that many readers are."

Romantic set-ups vary (female-male, female-female, male-male) yet, says Armentrout, "they're almost always, by the end of the series, on equal footing so you don't see one person's growth overshadowing the other's". It goes some way to reframing the male conquest trope. "Women don't want to see the significant other being steamrollered over."

The progress has been dramatic, but Brey says that there are still many stories to be told for this female gaze explosion to become a sustainable shift. "I think we are deprived of representation and narratives that could really change the way we view relationships and love."

Murphy has found herself on panels where "male directors get to talk about the work and creative process and here we are talking about being women". Progress would be reaching a point where the female gaze simply is.

"I'm never making work for women more than men," says Murphy. "But, of course, as a woman, I'm very proud that the work is accessing feelings and thoughts for women that they haven't seen as much of. I do think that's something that just has to keep happening."

DEBORAH LINTON IS A FEATURES WRITER

◀ The eyes have it

Clockwise from main image: *Wuthering Heights*; *Bridgerton*; *Heated Rivalry*; *Dying for Sex*; *Big Little Lies*; *The Chronology of Water*

FLIXPIX/ALAMY; NETFLIX SABRINA LANTOS/ SPHERE ABACUS; SARAH SHATZ/FX; HBO; BFI

“ Women can bring money to the industry; they're telling studios we can have bigger budgets and ambition

Hold fire

The shooter game where chat reigns

In Arc Raiders' cut-throat world, players are opting to team up and open up - a phenomenon that's intriguing game developers and psychologists alike

By Oliver Holmes

▼ Couch co-op

Players team up against murderous machines

EMBARCK STUDIOS

The video game Arc Raiders is set in an apocalyptic future. Survivors have been forced to live deep underground in colonies while mysterious, murderous AI machines patrol the surface. Only the desolate ruins of former cities survive, and reckless human "raiders" take trips topside to conduct dangerous scavenging missions.

The armed robots, called Arcs, are not the biggest threat in this hugely popular game, which was released late last year and has sold more than 14m copies. Raiders operate with the constant anxiety that another person will shoot them on sight and steal their loot. Mercilessness is rewarded in this high-stakes world.

So it has come as a jolt to the game's developers at Embark Studios in Sweden that many players are not shooting at each other at all. "It caught us a little bit by surprise," says executive producer Aleksander Grøndal, who has found that many people play "a more peaceful version of the game than we anticipated". He is quick to add: "Pleasantly surprised, just to be clear."

Unintentionally, the game has become a sort of social and psychological experiment, raising questions about game design - and the human condition - that have intrigued social scientists, psychologists and criminologists. Roughly one in five players have never knocked out another raider, and half have knocked out fewer than 10.

In most shooter games, killing other players is the point - and Arc Raiders is part of a growing subgenre that is notoriously cutthroat: the extraction shooter, where players compete not just with each other but with the world itself. Sessions are intense, with high risk v reward gameplay in which death often comes right at the end of a hard effort gathering loot. So why aren't players behaving as mercilessly as the environment calls for?

Grøndal says the team knew there was room for some cooperation: "But it was a little bit surprising to see how many people latched on to that aspect of the game."

Many players team up to take down the robot monsters. Others try to sneak quietly to scavenge rare resources. Grøndal says players also hold spontaneous rave parties, where people play music through their microphones.

But often, players are just talking. A YouTube video called The Humans of Arc Raiders features conversations with randomly encountered players. They talk about family struggles, work lives, depression, autism and, in one case, a lung collapse. In one conversation, a heavily armed player in green armour named Poopy candidly asks another raider: "What's it like having kids, dude?"

Sean Hensley, a graphic artist from Tennessee who makes YouTube videos about mental health and video games, has taken an interest in the game and believes players value "connection over competition". "What players are getting from these friendly interactions is more rewarding than any game loot system or victory screen," he said in a recent video.

The strongest catalyst for cooperation, however, might be a common threat. When Embark introduced a massive walking mechanical enemy called the Matriarch, Grøndal expected rival squads to be sneaky, waiting for others to expend their ammunition before attacking them to steal the loot. Instead, players teamed up.

This type of unexpected player behaviour can be problematic for developers, but whether players want human connection - or are making a cold, calculated decision that it is more profitable for all to cooperate - is a question for scientists, not video game developers, says Grøndal. He was recently contacted by a criminologist who he says was "really intrigued by how players are interacting with each other".

Embark CEO Patrick Söderlund has previously said he was tapped on the shoulder by a neurology professor friend interested in the lessons they could learn from Arc Raiders about human behaviour. But he has his own theories, rooted in the modern epidemic of isolation and loneliness. "I think that people are seeking connections with other players and maybe this is not so easy to do out in the real world any more because people are stuck on their phone," he says. "Maybe we have kind of accidentally created a place for people to connect."

Arc Raiders is certainly not what it first seems to be. While it looks like a bleak future where humanity is struggling, there is hope here. "Yes, the Arcs have captured the surface and they're the dominant. But if you look around you, nature has come back from an ecological collapse," Grøndal says. "The animals are back and the world is thriving. We want to instil hope in the player."

OLIVER HOLMES IS A GUARDIAN JOURNALIST





HUFTON+CROW

The new circus of curiosities

The V&A's latest museum created by architects O'Donnell + Tuomey in London's Olympic Park is a honey-hued triumph of human ingenuity

By Catherine Slessor

▲ **Giant origami**

V&A East on the East Bank, London, opened last Saturday

It's hard to tear your eyes away from Leigh Bowery's pink sequined codpiece, just one of the many sumptuous objects in the cabinet of curiosities that is V&A East, the new museum in London's Olympic Park. But the idea of radical tailoring underpins this whole building, which exudes an explicit haute couture vibe. For Dublin-based architects O'Donnell + Tuomey, it all started with a sleeve in a Vermeer painting that hangs in the National Gallery of Ireland. "I was trying to work with the folds," says John Tuomey, "which became the first iteration of the building. I started thinking about the fabric that clothes you, the body that's sheltered, but also the space in between."

Tuomey compares the V&A East's design to a protective jacket, a kind of futuristic outerwear. "We hollowed out spaces, so when the public

sees the shape on the outside, they can sense the shape on the inside, before they enter."

What the public sees is a pavilion in the round, immaculately folded and faceted like a giant piece of origami or an angular circus tent. It is tailored from chunky precast concrete panels, the colour of honey. "We wanted it to feel like it was formed out of stuff of the earth," says Tuomey. Each precast section was calibrated to exacting tolerances, then craned in and slotted together, like a 3D jigsaw, supported by a steel structure.

In expanding eastwards, the V&A joins outposts of the BBC, London College of Fashion and Sadler's Wells (also designed by O'Donnell + Tuomey), ranged along a waterfront site, each a statement building unto itself. Farther afield are a new campus for University College London, and the V&A's East Storehouse, a walk-in *wunderkammer* the size of an aircraft hangar containing half a million objects, which opened last year to awe and acclaim. Now collectively known as the East Bank - after the South Bank, with its pioneering postwar venues for art, theatre and music - this constellation of culture and education brings a new kind of industry to east London.

"As soon as you're inside, you should feel as though you have the whole building at your disposal," says Tuomey. The five-storey creation is an armature for activity and encounter, its gallery spaces flexing and fluxing with a dazzle of changing displays, its main staircase cranked like a German expressionist film set, where people can sit and hang out, its rooftop terrace a window on the world offering new views.

"I like to imagine people looking down at the square," says Tuomey. "They might have in their mind a kind of double-image of themselves, being on the terrace and down in the square, as if they have mentally mapped their journey up."

Amplifying the institutional quest to demystify and democratise its historic collections, the V&A East delves into the art, culture and politics of making, teleporting Henry Cole's Museum of Manufactures into the 21st century. Two permanent galleries headlined *Why We Make* will offer topical and subversive perspectives on the museum's vast collections.

"It's an approach that enables us to draw from geographies, chronologies and media," says V&A East project director Jen McLachlan. "Each section is populated with multiple objects that haven't been brought together before to spark new dialogues around a particular theme."

So Leigh Bowery's pink sequined codpiece forms part of a glittering "his and hers" ensemble designed by Bowery and corset-maker Mr Pearl, for a 1987 ballet *Because We Must*, choreographed by Michael Clark. The kaleidoscopic costumes are paired with an impromptu video of the ballet, contextualising the objects but also giving a sense of how gorgeously outrageous and countercultural the 1980s really were, in a pre-digital age when everything was performed by hand. →

It's a world away from dusty cabinets. In fact, the cabinets and display systems are compelling objects in themselves, designed by Jayden Ali of JA Projects, with artist Larry Achiampong and graphic designers A Practice for Everyday Life.

Showcases with illuminated fascias echo shopfronts, cabinetry is crafted from salvaged London plane trees and assemblages of fashion, textiles and ceramics echo how goods are arrayed in local markets and shops. The V&A East Youth Collective devised bespoke typography and illuminated signage, channelling the city's electric nightscape to guide visitors through the building.



▲ **Well-dressed**
The permanent gallery, designed by JA Projects

▼ **Folded facade**
Looking out from level one

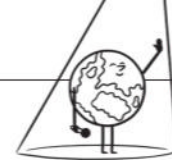
HUFTON+CROW

Although the permanent galleries will regularly rotate their displays, the museum will also host a programme of temporary exhibitions, with an inaugural show examining the history and impact of Black British music. And beyond the formal confines of the galleries, a series of commissions and live events will platform the people and ideas shaping culture.

The scene is set by a specially commissioned sculpture on the waterfront promenade. A Place Beyond, by Thomas J Price, shows a fictionalised young everywoman, mobile phone in hand, scanning the horizon. Five metres tall, but somehow in perfect synchronicity with O'Donnell + Tuomey's building, it's Price's tallest sculpture to date, constructed in bronze.

"I want this sculpture to become an extension of the people who inhabit the museum," Price says, "and the spaces around it." In some ways, it's emblematic of the convulsive change wrought across this part of east London. When Price was discovering the old V&A, the site of this new V&A would have been tangled industrial acres as far as the eye could see, with culture the last thing on anyone's mind. And now look at it.

CATHERINE SLESSOR IS AN ARCHITECTURE WRITER AND CRITIC



TELEVISION

**A Gorilla Story: Told
By David Attenborough**

Netflix

★★★★★

The most famous sequence in all of wildlife film-making happened 48 years ago. During the filming of *Life on Earth*, David Attenborough crept through the forests of Rwanda, and found himself being playfully set upon by a family of gorillas.

Almost half a century on, the sequence still has the power to give you goose bumps. This is possibly why it has formed the backbone of a new documentary.

The Pablo Group, as the family is known - named after the young gorilla most drawn to Attenborough - finds itself in a state of flux. All the animals Attenborough met have died, and their descendants rule. Gicurasi, the dominant silverback, is growing older. A new challenger, Ubwuzu, has noticed this, and now he is throwing his weight about in every possible direction.

So it's little wonder that Imfura sneaks back into the family when Ubwuzu is off with his mistress, and kills his baby. Violence, power, grief; this is the stuff of drama.

All of this is crammed into just over an hour. It is beautifully captured, but you can't help but wish it was given the series-length treatment it deserves.

What also works against the film is that all this gorilla footage is in direct competition with what is probably the main draw: David Attenborough.

Attenborough turns 100 in a few weeks, which means that every appearance here automatically feels elegiac. When he reads about the Rwanda encounter from his diaries - for the love of god, someone publish these diaries! - you find yourself overcome by admiration for the man. *Stuart Heritage*



MUSIC

Tori Amos

City Hall, Sheffield

★★★★☆

Ahead of her 18th studio album, *In Times of Dragons*, and on her first tour in three years, Tori Amos is navigating the brutal state of the world by channelling Celtic gods and turning into a half-dragon, half-woman character. The allegorical tales that make up her forthcoming record - "a metaphorical story about the fight for democracy over tyranny" - are evident on the live debut of *Shush*. A dark track that slowly unfurls like a southern gothic tale, albeit one about battling an evil billionaire lizard demon husband.

However, this is not a run through of her unreleased album. Instead, Amos dives into her back catalogue.

The love in the room for Amos is palpable. Her voice and masterful piano playing bring out a devotional following. On top of a drummer and bass player, Amos has three backing singers. Occasionally, their presence gets in the way of the raw intimacy one expects from her live shows.

It's not a hit-stuffed set, but *Crucify* is a beautiful closer; the encore of early career favourite *Cornflake Girl* has the whole venue on its feet. *Daniel Dylan Wray*
Touring Europe and the US
until July 12

Podcast of the week *History's Greatest Fails*

How to Fail's Elizabeth Day teams up with historian Dan Jones for this entertaining new series about screw-ups from times gone by. They first challenge Shakespeare's vision of a villainous Richard III, while another episode considers the "Ross and Rachel of early modern history", Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn. *Hannah J Davies*

ILLUSTRATION BY ELIA BARBERI



THE BIG IDEA

Free your brain from a doom loop
If we can learn to tolerate uncertainty, a whole world of possibilities opens

By Hannah Critchlow

FURTHER READING
Three books for a deeper dive

- **The Experience Machine: How Our Minds Predict and Shape Reality**
By Andy Clark
- **Being You: A New Science of Consciousness**
By Anil Seth
- **The Art of Uncertainty: How to Navigate Chance, Ignorance, Risk and Luck**
By David Spiegelhalter

It can feel as though the world is tilting towards chaos: political shocks, technological upheaval and a constant stream of bad news. Faced with so much uncertainty, many of us default to a sense of impending doom. But is that reaction hardwired - or can we train ourselves to keep a more open mind?

A useful starting point is humility. Every generation, it seems, believes it inhabits uniquely turbulent times, as literary epics down the ages testify. Uncertainty has always been part of the human condition, and none of us can really know what tomorrow holds.

Yet recognising this does not make it easy to bear. In fact, our brains are exquisitely sensitive to uncertainty. From a neuroscientific perspective, unpredictability is costly. The brain is an energy-hungry organ that relies on following patterns and habits in order to conserve effort. When faced with ambiguity, it must work harder - analysing, predicting, recalibrating. This extra effort is not just tiring; it can feel actively unpleasant.

Research suggests uncertainty can be more distressing than negative certainty. In one study, people were calmer when they knew they would receive an electric shock than when there was only a 50% chance of one. The ambiguity, not the pain, proved harder to tolerate. Similarly, long-term evidence suggests that the threat of losing a job can be more harmful to health than unemployment itself.

This tells us something important: the brain is wired not just to avoid harm, but to avoid not knowing. From an evolutionary standpoint, that makes sense. Our ancestors survived by making rapid judgments with limited information. If a rustle in the bushes might be a predator, it was always safer to assume the worst. This negativity bias keeps us alive - but in modern life it can lead us to overestimate threat and underestimate opportunity.

The result is a cognitive trap. Faced with uncertainty, we tend to narrow our thinking, rush to conclusions and cling to simple explanations. In extreme cases, this can manifest as anxiety, rigid beliefs or even susceptibility to conspiracy theories - frameworks that impose order on a confusing world.

But there is another way. The poet John Keats described "negative capability": the ability to remain "in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason". Modern neuroscience increasingly supports this strategy. The capacity to tolerate ambiguity - to sit with not knowing - appears central to flexible, creative and resilient thinking.

So how might we shift from a mindset of doom to something more open? The first step is curiosity. When we're unsure about what might happen next, our instinct may be to withdraw or rush to judgment. A more adaptive response is to ask: what do I not yet know? Thriving in uncertainty means resisting the pull of easy answers. In an era of misinformation, the brain's urge to resolve questions quickly can lead us to flawed conclusions unless we engage our critical thinking.

Emotional regulation is equally important. Uncertainty triggers stress responses that impair judgment and narrow attention. Techniques such as controlled breathing, mindfulness and physical exercise can help stabilise these responses.

Importantly, this is not about blind optimism. Our brains are prone to negativity bias and optimism bias - the tendency to be sensitive to threat while also overestimating positive outcomes. Navigating uncertainty well means balancing these tendencies, avoiding catastrophising at one end, and wishful thinking at the other.

Social context plays a role as well. Emotions are contagious in person and online. Spending time with people who are open-minded can shape how we respond to uncertainty, just as environments dominated by fear can amplify it.

None of this makes uncertainty easy. It remains uncomfortable. Nor should we suppress negative emotions; they carry useful information. The challenge is to respond to them intelligently, using them as signals rather than allowing them to dictate our behaviour.

The question is not whether we can eliminate uncertainty, but how we relate to it. We can treat it as a threat, clinging to false certainties and narrowing our perspective. Or we can treat it as an inevitable - and potentially generative - feature of life, one that invites exploration, learning and change. The difference lies not in what life throws at us, but in the habits of mind we cultivate.

In a rapidly changing world, the ability to tolerate uncertainty may be one of our most important cognitive skills. It protects against both paralysis and delusion, avoids kneejerk reactions, and underpins sound decision-making. Perhaps most importantly of all, it opens the door to possibility.

HANNAH CRITCHLOW IS A NEUROSCIENTIST AND AUTHOR

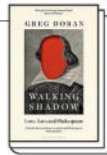
NON-FICTION

Love's labours

A global quest for the surviving First Folios offers consolation in the midst of grief

By Michael Billington

Book of the week
Walking Shadow
By Greg Doran



This is really two books in one. The first part consists of the diaries written by Antony Sher in the six months before his death from liver cancer in December 2021. The second, longer part is a record by his husband and partner of 35 years, Greg Doran, of an obsessive quest to see as many of the more than 200 extant copies of Shakespeare's First Folio as possible. Taken together, the two parts amount to a very moving record of one person's confrontation with death and of his partner's attempt to cope with survival.

Sher, in his multiple roles as actor, artist and writer, was always a shrewd observer, and what he called The Dying Diaries show a characteristic mix of candour, resilience and wit. When he discovers that the two lesions in his liver are the size of a satsuma and a walnut, he thinks that might make a good title for his diaries. Reflecting on the fact that the last play he did, *Kunene and the King* by John Kani, was about an old South African Shakespearean actor dying of liver cancer, he adds: "Who says that actors don't take their roles home with them?" What comes across is his and Doran's shared delight in many things, from wildlife to tapes of the US comedian Jackie Mason, and their love for each other.

The bulk of the book, however, is about Doran's need to find a new motive for living. After Sher's death he stepped down as artistic director of the Royal Shakespeare Company, left their Stratford home and was hit by a bold, and in his words, slightly "crazy" idea. Since 2023 marked the quatercentenary of the publication of the First Folio - without which we would

have lost half of Shakespeare's plays - he decided to track down as many of the existing copies as possible. His journey takes him to North America, Japan, South Africa and the antipodes. When Doran's twin sister asks him why he would want to see endless copies of the same book, he says it is an attempt to understand Shakespeare's complex legacy. In truth, he knows his quest is really "a massive piece of displacement activity".

Every copy of the Folio tells a story, and Doran starts with a good one. In 1964, which marked 400 years since Shakespeare's birth, the Catholic church decided to participate in the celebrations, and a trio of RSC actors went to Rome to do a recital before Pope Paul VI. Along with them went the company's own copy of the extremely valuable First Folio, which travelled separately by train in case of a plane crash. At the end of the recital one of the actors, Dorothy Tutin, impulsively held up the First Folio to be blessed by the pope who, misunderstanding the gesture, treated it as a gift and handed it to a cardinal to add to the Vatican vaults. It took swift intervention by the Archbishop of Westminster to retrieve the book and prevent Stratford losing its sole copy of the Shakespearean bible.

In Doran's account of what he terms The Folio Roadshow, for all its scholarship and zest for detail, Sher is never far from his thoughts.

Even Doran admits to occasional Folio fatigue and there is a danger we may share this as he zealously works his way through 201 of the copies. But boredom is kept at bay through Doran's delight in discovering new information and in his response to the variations each copy provides. At Skipiton in Yorkshire, where the Folio has none of the comedies, he speculates whether the Brontë sisters read that edition and whether Charlotte was responsible for ripping out the plays she loathed.

Doran has a sharp eye for the eccentric band of forgers and fakers who have capitalised on the Bard. He reminds us of the young William Henry Ireland, who in 1795 claimed to have discovered a lost Shakespeare play, *Vortigern and Rowena*, which fooled many until, during its single performance at Drury Lane, it was laughed off the stage. Another fraudster, John Payne Collier, in the mid-19th century, produced copious



Audiobook of the week
The Possibility of Tenderness
By Jason Allen-Paisant

An award-winning poet living in Leeds, Jason Allen-Paisant spent his early childhood in rural Jamaica.

The Possibility of Tenderness is an account of his relationship with the land where he grew up and in his adopted home.

Read with warmth by the author, the book contains meditations on nature,

history, race and belonging. Allen-Paisant explains how the impulse to surround himself with nature allows him to feel hopeful and "find ways of living through - if not beyond - the constraints of racism".

Fiona Sturges

emendations to a later Folio only to be exposed as a "great literary slug". In the same century, James Orchard Halliwell-Phillipps set up the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, but proved to be a vandal who removed the Droeshout engraving of Shakespeare from Stratford's own copy of the First Folio.

Doran's travels provide encounters with the emperor of Japan and King Charles: the latter took pains to phone the dying Sher, and soon after his coronation invited Doran to inspect the Windsor First Folio housed in the Royal Library. Doran's journey inevitably leads him to the Folger Library in Washington which, incredibly, has no fewer than 82 of the surviving Folios.

By the end of the book Doran's Folio mania has become infectious. You have also learned a lot about how these precious volumes were printed, disseminated, passionately collected and sometimes crudely defaced. But while his book is a valuable addition to Shakespeare scholarship, it is something more: a human story about how grief over loss of a loved one can be turned into a seemingly impossible quest and a search for consoling hope.

MICHAEL BILLINGTON IS A FORMER GUARDIAN CHIEF THEATRE CRITIC

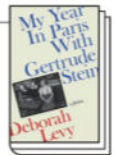
FICTION

Portraits of Paris

Biography mingles with fiction in an exuberant study of Gertrude Stein

By Lucy Hughes-Hallett

My Year in Paris With Gertrude Stein
By Deborah Levy



The narrator of Deborah Levy's witty scherzo of a "fiction" - "novel" isn't the word for this uncategorisable book - thinks that Gertrude Stein would have liked Sigmund Freud. She imagines them enjoying a cigar together while their wives make small talk. The two never met, but that barely matters. This book is full of things

that don't actually happen, imagined encounters and shifting relationships.

It all starts with a lost cat. The cat is called "it": lower-case "i" and "t", which causes all sorts of linguistic confusion. The book doesn't exactly have a plot, but there is a situation. Three female friends are in Paris. The narrator (English, single) is writing, or failing to write, an essay about Gertrude Stein. Eva (Spanish-Danish, married to a man in Seattle whom she sees once a week, if that, on FaceTime) is a graphic novelist. Fanny (French, polyamorous with three female lovers) is a financier.

Fanny is impatient, annoyingly often on her phone, but she is also secretly vulnerable, wounded by her father's homophobic rejection and more invested in the three-way friendship than either of the others. When the narrator is knocked off her bicycle, it is Fanny who comes to help.

Eva looks angelic, and the fuss about her lost cat makes her seem childish, but she is commercially astute and emotionally cool. She appoints herself the narrator's assistant, says she will illustrate the Stein essay, and finally announces, without any consultation, that she will take over the project and write it herself.

Most of the time, though, her mind is in Stein's lifetime, and she carries us there with her. Levy is not competing with Stein's many biographers. She is writing a meditation, not a chronicle or an explanation. The narrator thinks that, for all her insistence on confining herself to simple words, Stein didn't "believe in" being understood. "When I look at photographs," she writes, "I cannot get into her eyes."

Levy can, though, carry us into the Paris of Stein's era and introduce us around. She chooses her quotes astutely. A put-down from Virginia Woolf nicely punctures Walt Whitman's self-righteousness. She has a knack for summing up a character with one detail. Of the artist Chaim Soutine: "A doctor had to remove a nest of bedbugs from his ear." Of Stein: "She was so forward-looking that she never learned to reverse her Ford Model T."

We are not to assume the narrator is Levy - this is "a fiction", after all - but of one thing we can be certain. Eva announces that the essay on Stein will never get written, but here it is - odd, inventive and wonderfully entertaining - triumphantly proving her wrong.

LUCY HUGHES-HALLETT IS AN AUTHOR AND BIOGRAPHER

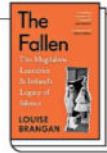
HISTORY

Ireland's shame A searing account of the Magdalene laundries and a regime of cruelty

By John Banville

The Fallen

By Louise Brangan



Many readers, and surely most Irish readers, will finish this book in a state of white-knuckled rage, mingled with sorrow and at least a pang of guilt. It is a detailed, thoroughgoing and appalling account of the Magdalene laundries, the most infamous among Ireland's extended and varied landscape of penal or correctional institutions, which operated for most of the 20th century - the last of the laundries was closed in 1996.

As the academic Louise Brangan points out, the Magdalene laundries were unique. Brangan writes: "In a regime distinguished by its excessive inhumanity, the Magdalene laundries were its deep end. In 1951, when the laundries were at their height, for every 100,000 males, 27 were in prison ... [while] for every 100,000 females,

70 were in a laundry. These were not peripheral: they were Ireland's main carceral institution."

The laundries were set up by the state, but run by nuns. The inmates, from girls as young as nine to women in their 80s, worked for no pay, six days a week, laundering. Discipline was rigorous, and the smallest transgressions were severely punished. And who were they, these laundrer-slaves? "Irretrievable women and girls, the fallen, who were believed to have engaged in sexual misconduct so egregious that they had strayed dangerously, irrevocably, beyond the lines of what was acceptable."

How did they become enmeshed in this ghastly spider's web? Some were simply lifted off the streets. In her prologue, Brangan tells of 15-year-old Eileen, "who disappeared on a quiet Sunday evening in February 1954". Eileen had run away from an abusive family and was working as a maid in Dublin. She was approached by two women who she learned later were members of the Legion of Mary.

The two women drove Eileen to a large, gated house. Here, Eileen was received by a nun, who gave her an institutional smock, cut off her hair, and changed her name. From now on she would not be "Eileen", but "60".

To date, more than €33m (\$39m) in redress payments have been made to survivors of the laundries; the money was provided by the Irish government, while the religious orders have for the most part declined to contribute.

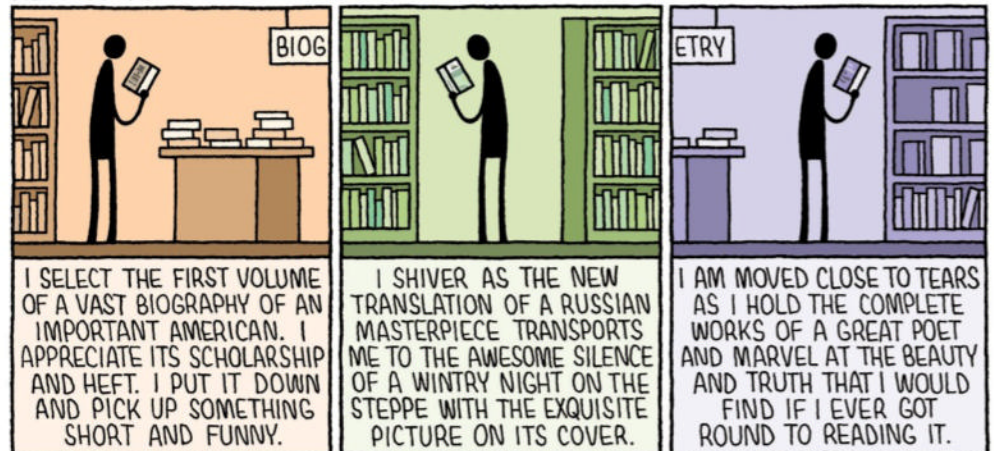
JOHN BANVILLE IS A NOVELIST AND SHORT STORY WRITER



**From Peepo!
to Middlemarch**
25 books
to read before
you turn 25

TOM GAULD

ALMOST READING THE GREATS



KITCHEN AIDE

By Anna Berrill



I gave pork the chop. How can I get a similar taste and texture?

I'm struggling to compensate for the umami of pork when cooking, say, carbonara or chorizo dishes. What would be a good substitute?

James, by email

For Joe Woodhouse, author of *Weeknight Vegetarian*, there's something about white beans: "Whether cooked from dried, then dropping chopped onion, garlic, sage and thyme into the broth, or just dumping a jar or tin into a pan with fried garlic and sage, the smell is like that of sausagemeat," he says. "It tastes a bit like it, too."

While chef Mike Davies' first port of call would be Chinese mushroom seasoning powder: "It's super-effective in replacing the richness and fattiness that comes from cooking with any meat, and especially pork," says the chef-director of the Camberwell Arms, south London.

Things get a bit trickier when it comes to achieving a similar porky texture, mind, especially if, like Woodhouse and Davies, you're not big on meat substitutes: "I do love tofu, though," Davies says - and Woodhouse couldn't agree more, often using meat rubs with firm tofu that has been crumbled and fried hard until crisp. "Throw in a tablespoon or two of tomato puree, cook that out, then add a drop of water," Woodhouse says. The tomato puree ticks the umami box, while the tofu brings the texture.

That said, if James were to go down the textured vegetable protein path, he needs to go heavy on the spices. Chorizo's flavour comes from pimentón, so stock up on dried smoked peppers, as well as on chilli, Woodhouse says: "Add two or three different types, so layering the flavour to bring that sausage vibe."

A good carbonara hinges on the mingling of pasta, egg, guanciale (or pancetta) and cheese, so we're going to need Felicity Cloake. In her perfect meat-free spaghetti carbonara, the Guardian's resident perfectionist favours king oyster mushrooms, and adds soy sauce, garlic and a pinch of smoked paprika to "help maintain the illusion". Her other tip? Don't skimp on the oil: "Guanciale is fatty stuff, and mushrooms aren't, so you want them to soak up that olive goodness."

Woodhouse, meanwhile, turns to Rachel Roddy's linguine with courgettes, egg and parmesan in *The A-Z of Pasta*: "You've still got the egg and cheese, and you cut courgettes into batons and fold them in with the pasta," he says. James could then add those white beans with sage and garlic that Woodhouse spoke of earlier, and finish with fried breadcrumbs for texture. As always, it's better to find what you're looking for through flavour, rather than subbing in ultra-processed stuff.

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



THE WEEKLY RECIPE

By Santiago Lastra

No 362

Beetroot tostadas



Prep 10 min

Cook 2 hr

Serves 10

Tostadas are traditionally made with crisp corn tortillas. I've used poppadoms to achieve a similar texture and starchiness.

Method

Heat the oven to 210C (190C fan)/400F/gas 6½. Toast the garlic in a dry pan, moving it constantly, for eight to 10 minutes, until the skins are charred and the insides creamy. Put the sesame seeds on a baking sheet, toast in the oven for five minutes, then set aside 20g.

Pour enough oil into a frying pan to coat the bottom, and put it on a medium heat. Add the chilli flakes, toast for about a minute, then pour into a food processor. Add the remaining 100g toasted sesame seeds and all the other macha ingredients and blend smooth. Finish with the reserved sesame seeds.

For the mole, toast the pine nuts on a baking tray in the oven for eight minutes, then set aside. Turn up the oven to 220C (200C fan)/gas 7. Wrap the 60g beetroot in foil then put the three other beetroot on a sheet of foil, drizzle with oil, and roast them all for 90 minutes until soft. Once cool, peel.

Toast the unpeeled garlic in a dry pan over a medium heat for about 10 minutes, until golden, then squeeze out the flesh. Put the beetroot for the mole, pine nuts and garlic in a food processor with the remaining mole ingredients. Add 50ml water and blend smooth.

Put the three beetroot in a mortar and roughly mash. Season with salt.

Half-fill a saucepan with oil and heat to 180C. Deep-fry the poppadoms for three minutes or until puffed up, then remove with a slotted spoon and drain on paper towels.

Put the burrata on a plate and dress with the herbs. Sprinkle over a pinch of salt and drizzle with oil. Put the mole and sesame macha into bowls, then build your tostadas.

Ingredients

For the sesame macha (750ml)
2 garlic cloves
120g sesame seeds
500ml vegetable oil
4 tbsp chilli flakes
2 tsp smoked paprika
2½ tsp honey
2 tsp flaky sea salt

For the pink mole

(makes 250g)
45g pine nuts
60g beetroot, unpeeled
3 garlic cloves
1½ tsp smoked paprika
2 dried bird's eye chillies (or to taste)
½ tsp flaky sea salt

For the tostadas

3 mixed colour beetroots, unpeeled
Vegetable oil, for drizzling and deep-frying
1 tsp flaky sea salt
10 uncooked poppadoms, or use ready-cooked ones
1 ball burrata
1 bunch soft herbs, such as oregano, parsley, mint, basil
½ quantity of pink mole (see above)
½ quantity of sesame macha (see above)





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

QUIZ

Thomas Eaton

- 1 Which world-famous ancient site was the capital of the Nabataean people?
- 2 What is a shark's skeleton made of?
- 3 Which England footballer presented Deal or No Deal Nigeria?
- 4 Ju-ae is the daughter and possible heir of which leader?
- 5 United Downs in Cornwall is the UK's first of what type of power plant?
- 6 Which US magazine was founded in 1925 by Harold Ross and Jane Grant?
- 7 Who was the first British entrant to win Eurovision?



▲ What links a 1982 song by Prince (above) with a 1949 George Orwell novel and Taylor Swift's 2014 album?

FRANK MICELLOTTA/GETTY

What links:

- 8 Dead Man Walking; Monster's Ball; The Green Mile; True Crime?
- 9 Early English; decorated; perpendicular?
- 10 Flute-playing rapper; tears in Turin; Paranoid singer?
- 11 Gretna, Scotland, and Marshall Meadows Bay, Northumberland (4,350km)?
- 12 Solon; Hammurabi; Moses; Justinian; Napoleon?
- 13 Christie's rostrum; Comic Relief nose; Coronation emblem; Linn turntable?
- 14 1949 Orwell novel (35); 1982 Prince song (17); 2014 Taylor Swift album (25)?

PUZZLES

Chris Maslanka

1 Jay Larto the ice cream vendor told me: the number of choc-ices £48 would buy was the same as the number of pounds 3 of them would cost. How much does one cost me?

2 **E pluribus**
Rearrange *SUPER DECOR* to make a single word.

3 Wordpool

Find the correct definition:

MUSCOLOGY

- a) study of flies
- b) study of muscles
- c) study of weasels
- d) study of mosses

4 Cryptic

Where Spielberg does what he does in 1982? (4, 3)
A walkover for a groom - but not a bride (short-held?) (9)
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Answers Quiz: 1 Petra, Jordan. 2 Carriage. 3 John Fashanu. 4 Kim Jong-un. 5 Geothermal. 6 The New Yorker. 7 Sandie Shaw (1967). 8 Films featuring capital punishment. 9 Phases of medieval gothic architecture in England. 10 Names featuring ZZ: Lizzo; Gazza (World Cup 1990); Ozzy Osbourne. 11 King Charles III coast path. 12 Historical lawgivers: Athens; Babylon; Israelites; Byzantium; France. 13 Jony Ive designs (other than for Apple). 14 Difference between year of release and year in the title: 1984; 1999; 1989. Maslanka: 1 If the price of a choc-ice is P, then 3P is the cost of 3 pounds would buy is 48/P. These are the same, so 3P = 48/P and P = 16 and a choc-ice costs £4. 2 PROCEDURES. 3 (D). 4 FILM SET (FILMS ET). THRESHOLD (anag SHORT-HELD)

CHESS

Leonard Barden

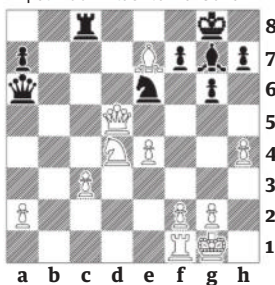
Javokhir Sindarov finished with a record total in the world championship Candidates in Pegeia, Cyprus, as the 20-year-old from Uzbekistan won with a record 10/14 total, 1.5 points clear of his nearest rival, Anish Giri. The women's Candidates was won by India's 24-year-old Vaishali Rameshbabu, half a point ahead of Kazakhstan's Bibisara Assaubayeva.

Sindarov's pre-game preparation was exceptional, accurately predicting what would appear on the board right

into the endgame. On the rare occasions when he was under pressure, as in his second game against the world No 3 and US champion, Fabiano Caruana, his defensive technique was precise and assured.

Now comes the world championship

4020 Xu Jun v Pentala Harikrishna, Tripoli 2004. Black to move and win.



match against Gukesh Dommaraju, to be played over the best of 14 games, later this year.

The Women's Candidates featured an extraordinary performance by Rameshbabu. She was the lowest-ranked player in the competition and was on a minus score after five rounds. After 11 rounds she led, a point ahead of the field, and despite a 12th-round defeat by China's top seed, Zhu Jiner, she continued at the front, winning a tense final-round game against Kateryna Lagno.

42021...Bxd4! 2 cxd4 Nf4! 3 Qb3 Qxf1+! 4 Kxf1 Rc1+ 5 Qd1 Rxd1 mate.

COUNTRY DIARY

BRIGG

Lincolnshire, England, UK

Spring has sprung here, and with warming soils we start planting our more delicate crops such as peas. With the chatter of skylarks in the background, we slowly drill our way across this 15-hectare field using a 3-metre precision drill that carefully places the seed. Six weeks ago, this would have cost £7.50 (\$10) per hectare on fuel, now it's £15 - a severe shock to the farm's finances.

It's not often that an arable farmer's mind is so focused on global events, but our fuel use tops 50,000 litres a year and the Middle East conflict is having profound consequences. Thankfully, we're partly protected. Over the last seven or eight years, we have transitioned to a low-disturbance approach to establishing crops, disturbing the top few centimetres only. This means less tractor use and healthier soil - a big priority here.

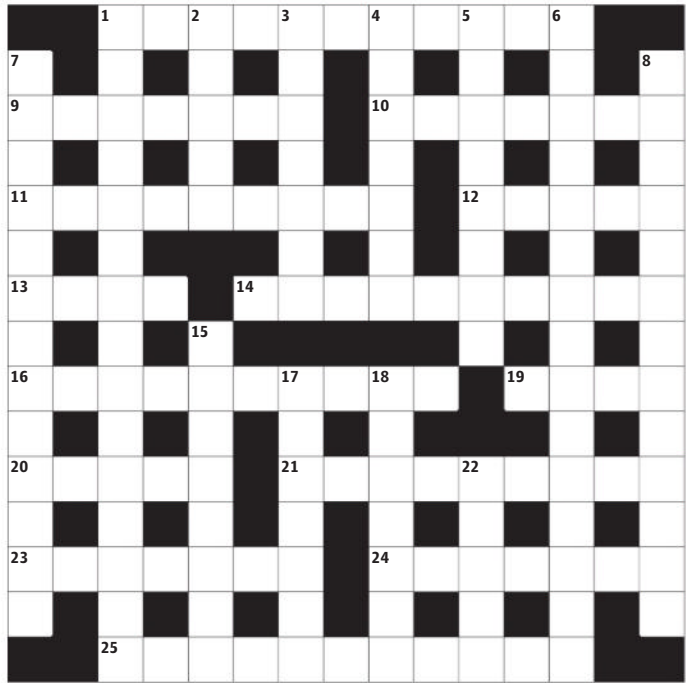
This is a 485-hectare carbon-neutral arable farm, using no insecticide and with more than a quarter of land in environmental measures. For us, the chemical can be the last thing we reach for, rather than the first. We produce mainly human-quality combinable crops such as milling wheat, milling oats, marrowfat peas, seed wheat, forage barley, spring barley, feed beans, forage maize and miscanthus.

We've created a mosaic of habitats that are interconnected, so wildlife can escape human activity. Fish have returned to our ditches, otters are back in the River Ancholme.

Of course, we are totally at the behest of mother nature, and rain is another worry going into cropping season. Since 1 October, we've had 550mm of rainfall, out of an annual average of 650mm-670mm. Sod's law, the tap will be turned off soon - until about August, just when we don't need it. *Colin Chappell*



ILLUSTRATION: CLIFFORD HARPER



* All solutions published next week

The Weekly cryptic

No 29,980



By Maskerade

Across

- 1 First of the chickens moulting as programmes finishing once (7,4)
- 9 Poor actor's part as expressed on picnic menu (3,4)
- 10 Bottle party? (2,3,2)
- 11 Martin's followers reform most of unearthly beliefs ultimately (9)
- 12 They're not here, but are in Sussex and Hampshire (5)
- 13 College official - idle, vain, absent now and again (4)
- 14 Welsh girl about to be cuddled by cute pedigree pet (7,3)
- 16 Rude hallo I might produce? (4-6)
- 19 Regularly - often - tea is cheese (4)
- 20 Beauty captured by the lens (5)
- 21 Trousers, lost at the start, eventually turned up (9)
- 23 Tastier dancing from this performer? (7)
- 24 Duck. On reflection, 20! (2,5)
- 25 NT character making drop-goals in error (8,3)

Down

- 1 Finish one's sentence and heed driving instructor (4,2,1,4,4)
- 2 Invigorating air in Gozo? Never! (5)
- 3 Sick notes lead to notoriety (3,4)
- 4 Band's origin (7)
- 5 Islander's love of pastoral life lacks initial attractiveness (8)
- 6 Windies won - Kent gets caught out, when the last man is batting (4,7,4)
- 7 Letter to boy questionable help getting Botham as US citizen (13)
- 8 It's deteriorated a lot, sadly wasn't over here (5,4,4)
- 15 F. Gump actor cuts toe, because of ...? (6,2)

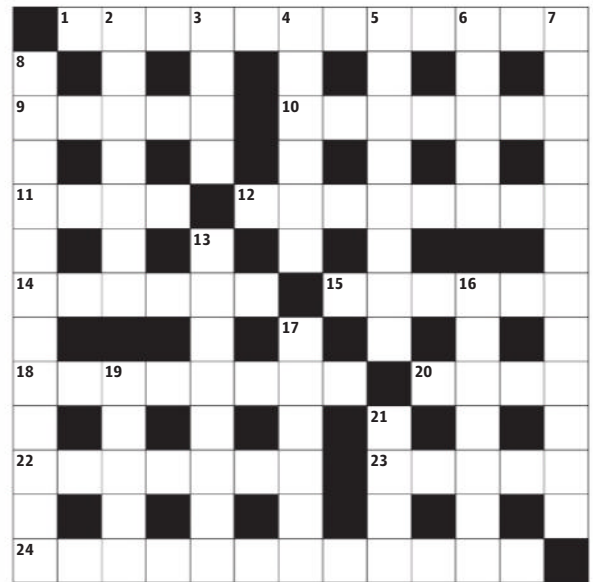
- 17 Sharon, say, is PM, losing head (7)
- 18 Land collapsing into sea (7)
- 22 Orchids, originally unaltered, an ikebana requirement? (5)

Solution No 29,974



Quick crossword

No 17,453



Across

- 1 One's surprisingly successful (12)
- 9 One's not at all successful (5)
- 10 Single pay-out (4,3)
- 11 Ball of thread (4)
- 12 Topped by breadcrumbs and cheese (2,6)
- 14 More elegant (6)
- 15 Fanatical individual (6)
- 18 Calls out (8)
- 20 The largest continent (4)
- 22 Leaped (over) (7)
- 23 Reasoning (5)
- 24 Speciality food shop (12)

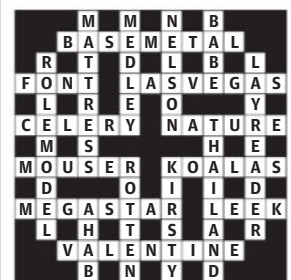
Down

- 2 I've cars (anag) - guts (7)
- 3 Uncommon (4)
- 4 Not black-and-white (6)
- 5 Deeply involved (8)
- 6 Flying, home or hospital? (5)
- 7 Macron enters (anag) - protest (12)

8 Poorly thought-out (3-9)

- 13 Relating to the meaning of words (8)
- 16 Sheets of pasta (7)
- 17 Surrounded by (literary) (6)
- 19 Mean-spirited individual (5)
- 21 Sad to say (4)

Solution No 17,447



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



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