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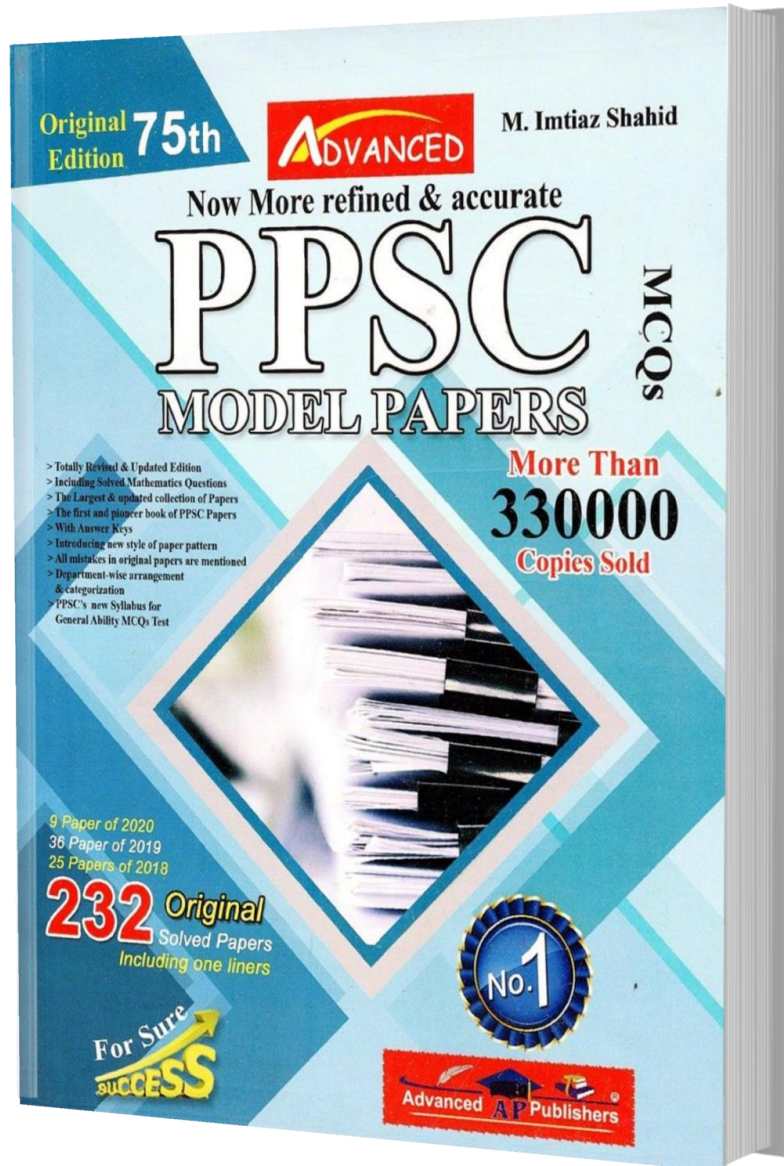
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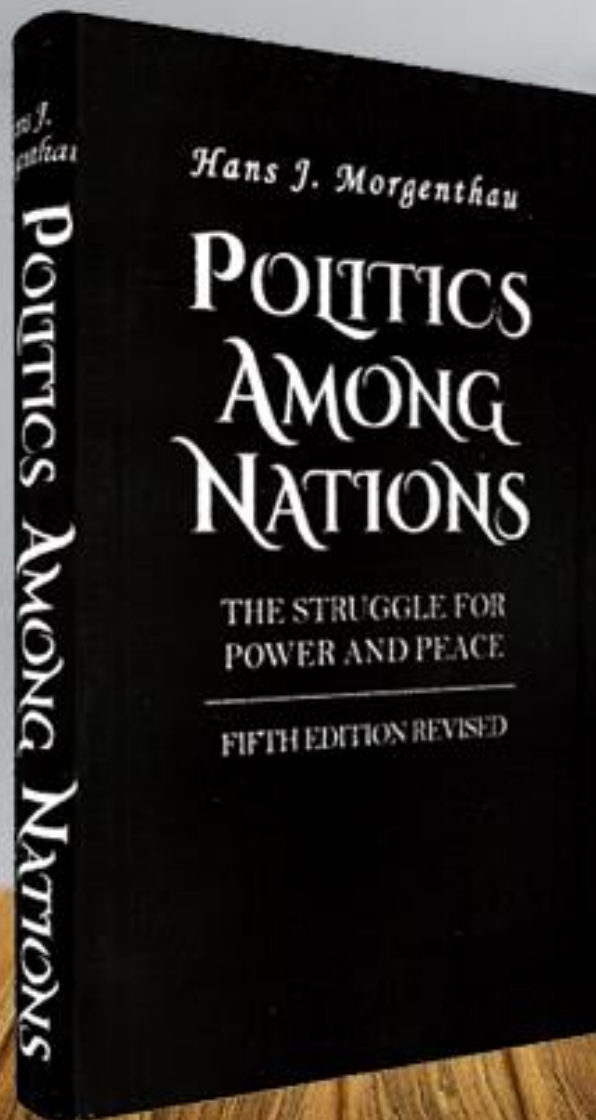
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Editorial



The fog of war

Tom Clark

When the question is the “culture wars,” as it so often is these days, the standard liberal homily mourns the passing of a shared public sphere and appeals to everybody to step outside the echo chamber. How often, however, do we really do it ourselves? That was nagging at me as we put to bed this issue about the “new American civil war.” Could it just be that the “war” framing is one that progressive Europeans apply precisely because we never engage with those from the cultural right, and the American right in particular? Is the whole notion, in other words, a creation of my own echo chamber?

With that in mind, I decided to take stock of the (so-called) “debate” in Ohio between Donald Trump and Joe Biden not with my usual go-to news sources, but instead with the help of American conservative podcasts. Within minutes of tuning in to Steve Deace’s post-match analysis, I had heard several phrases that seemed to belong not only to another tribe, but also an entirely different era—“the reds are taking off the masks.” One thing, however, was entirely familiar: analogies from military conflict flowed through the discussion. The shouting match had been, Deace suggested, much like it would have been “if Lincoln had debated Jefferson Davis,” leader of the old Confederate South. We heard, at different points, that a civil war would soon be coming—and also that one was already raging.

So if talk of the United States coming violently unstuck still strikes you as wild and over-heated, pause and consider the fact that such talk is now emanating from both sides of a great cultural divide. It is a divide whose potential to translate into street violence can only have been elevated by the President urging an obscure band of black shirted-wearing thugs to “stand by,” presumably for action after a contested election result. In a magisterial state of the Union survey, Sam Tanenhaus (p18) highlights the abject disdain with which Trump and his noisily patriotic tribe have come to regard vast tracts of their own country. A hard right sets itself up as defending a mythical American past even as it radically disrupts the American present.

The President’s self-serving destruction of America’s belief in the very possibility of a fair election, pursued in all the ways Dahlia Lithwick warned about in the last issue, is the single most salient example of that, amid the chaos and loathing of the current campaign. Potentially of more enduring significance, however, is the increasing fixation of partisan enmity on the US Supreme Court and the rules of the political game. Look at the lopsided operation of the Senate and the Electoral College (Speed Data, p27) and you can see why liberals as well as conservatives are now also focusing so much energy here. But there can be no hope of restoring anything like politics as it used

to be until the discourse of each side shifts back to the substance of what the other side has said. Instead, all discussion risks being consumed by disputes about what winning involves.

The reason it makes sense for a British magazine to give so much space to the US is not merely the grisly fascination of its current election, but also because, however much we might regret it, the idea of a culture war is becoming increasingly useful as a prism to make sense of our own public affairs. Whether we are talking about the new BBC Director-General’s in-tray (Jean Seaton, p34), the controversies that have to be navigated by museum directors (Tristram Hunt, p46) or, indeed, the technical policy choices and even—absurdly—the interpretation of the epidemiological data in the Covid-19 pandemic (Tim Harford, p11), arguments are coalescing around rival sets of wearily predictable conclusions.

A monthly magazine can hardly hope to turn that round by itself, but we can do our bit by making room for a fresh look at figures who have determinedly thought for themselves, and followed their minds to wherever they went—see Hadley Freeman on Germaine Greer half a century after *The Female Eunuch* (p54), and Jesse Norman (p56) on whether John Rawls’s grand liberal philosophy will survive the “safety-first” mood of the pandemic—or indeed the rest of the 21st century.

“Talk of the United States coming violently unstuck now emanates from both sides”

The challenges that will confront public policy in the wake of the virus, such as eye-watering debt (Barry Eichengreen, p28) and the lethal inadequacies of the English social care system (Nicholas Timmins, p40), are formidable. And while there may be no fruitful way to engage with the finger-jabbing certainties and libels of the angriest chauvinists, none of these problems are going to be easier to sort out amid the fog of war.

Tom Clark

🐦 @prospect_clark

A new standard for the charity sector

Rebuilding after Covid-19

UK charities do enormous good, both domestically and internationally. In raw economic terms, charities are massively important: an estimated 900,000 people work in the sector, generating £15 billion in GDP. But obviously that is only a tiny part of the function of charities. The social good created by charities is close to incalculable. Charities are embedded in our lives, not just the lives of service providers, service users and volunteers, but in the lives of communities across Britain.

The Covid-19 crisis has been tough for the charity sector. One study has forecasted that 10 per cent of the UK's 166,000 charities will be forced to declare bankruptcy by the end of 2020, with a funding shortfall of £10 billion opening up. This could have disastrous consequences not just for the sector, but for the millions in Britain and around the world who rely on it for support.

Nearly 6,000 charity workers have been made redundant; large swathes of staff, including fundraising teams, have been furloughed; charity shops closed, and on-street fundraising stalled. Meanwhile, everyday charitable giving has focused narrowly on institutions such as NHS charities which directly address the crisis.

As with almost everything else, Covid-19 will force some rethinking in charity funding, both by donors and recipients. Dealing with the crisis and its aftershock has been difficult and even traumatic for many charities, but as the crisis shows little sign of abating, the sector must turn to what it can do to create its own "new normal".

No one can afford to cut corners on fundraising, without which, after all, a charity will simply cease to function: everyone involved in the sector understands the false dichotomy between frontline services and "admin" – the background teams who are essential to maintaining frontline provision.

“Charity funding doesn’t need a revolution, but it urgently needs innovation”

But it is undoubtedly worth examining how we can improve and strengthen relationships between donors and funders. Working with researchers at the University of Bath before the Covid-19 crisis, we at Brevio discovered that more than £1 billion is spent on charity staff time filing funding applications every year. And most of this money is spent on unsuccessful applications. In 2010, The Directory of Social Change found that, of the one million grant applications made, two-thirds – or 667,000 – were either ineligible or rejected.

While the rate of ineligible or rejected grants has remained a constant 66% over the last nine years, the number of applications by registered charities has more than tripled to 3.6 million in 2019, with 2.4 million applications either ineligible or rejected.



In 2012, one report suggested that charities lose more than £100 million a year on unnecessary applications. Today this figure now exceeds £700 million in paid staff time alone.

Applying for more grants, as organisations inevitably will do, does nothing to address the problem, as the expense will rise while the success rate remains the same.

Statistics gathered by the university show where the problems lie: in the vast divergence of demands in grant applications. An application can contain as few as 21 questions or as many as 193. Filing an application can take anything from two to 175 hours, and that is just the time taken by the charities to write the application – the donor funds will also spend countless hours sifting applications.

The sector is vast – according to the NCVO, there are over 180,000 general charities in the United Kingdom – and its needs are complex: but that complexity should not be seen as a barrier to change. The hardworking sector does not require revolution, but it does need innovation – often a rare commodity in a world where so much is at stake.

Combining decades of expertise in philanthropy and charity fundraising and analysing the processes of a vast range of application processes, Brevio identified the need for a simplified grant portal. Our centralised matching platform takes much of the unnecessary duplication out of the fundraising process by creating a single digital space where charities and funders can confidentially and securely upload their details and be matched according to an array of criteria from financials and governance, through to the more unique elements of organisational person-

ality. Streamlining the essential elements of funding goes a long way to building an effective, expedient and satisfying experience for everyone concerned – ultimately allowing everyone to focus their resources effectively.

Our central digital grants platform will liberate the charity sector from the toil of endless applications – requiring charities to only fill out one application instead of one for each funder – and entice new donors with a simple process that will help them channel funds in the right direction with ease.

Vitality, the platform will create a more level playing field for the sector, where new and established charities can be assessed on the clarity of their vision and the quality of their work, rather than their capacity for form-filling.

Brevio believes the UK charity sector sets standards across the world: now we want to help set a new standard for the charity sector.

For more information visit brevio.org

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Brevio is hosting a free to view webinar discussing the impact on charitable funding post-covid. To register to watch, and contribute questions, please visit the *Prospect* Events page

www.prospect-magazine.co.uk/events

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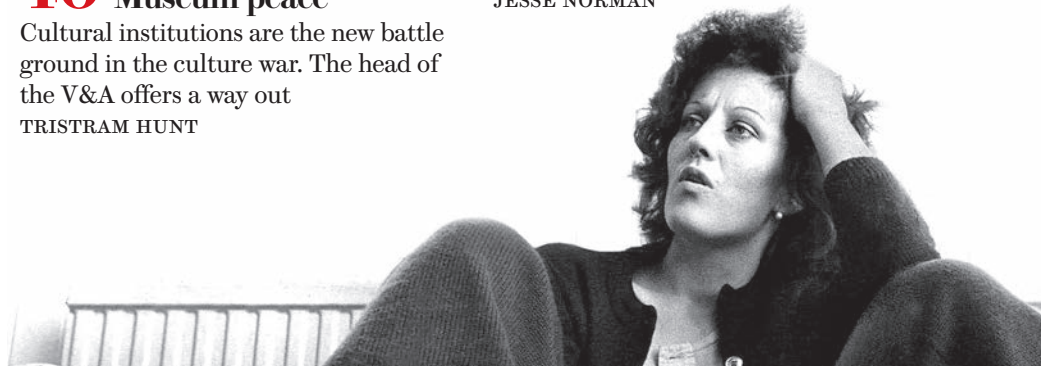
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Helena Kennedy and Sionaidh Douglas-Scott reflect on the life of Ruth Bader Ginsburg

Peter Kellner remembers working with the late editor Harry Evans

Philip Ball on whether closing pubs early will really curb the infection rate

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Philip Ball's latest book is "How to Grow a Human" (William Collins)
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Letters

Still hope for American democracy

In her splendid summary of the fissures that threaten the integrity of the American electoral system, Dahlia Lithwick invokes a Buddhist story about a “shattered bowl” that “was already broken in the first place” to describe our situation as we hurtle toward the 2020 presidential election.

We do not share Lithwick’s pessimism. Let’s begin with the broken bowl, a story told by Ajahn Chah, an influential 20th-century Buddhist monk and teacher. “Do you see this glass?” Chah asked. “I love this glass. It holds the water admirably. When the sun shines on it, it reflects the light beautifully... But when I understand that this glass is already broken, every minute with it is precious.” When we see our democracy for what it is, a delicate edifice already cracked and compromised, we can focus our attention on the glue that holds it together: trust. Trust in one another, in our institutions, and perhaps even in our elected officials.

As Lithwick observes, trust has been on the wane for decades, and not just in the US. Eroding trust is an issue facing democracies around the world. Whether this erosion results from persistent efforts by authoritarian interests or less sinister forces, there is little we can do at this late date to restore trust already lost. Like decarbonisation, it takes longer to reverse the problem than to create it.



The best we can do is to continue to act with integrity and transparency, guided by principles of decency and fair play. Even if we are convinced the other side is cheating (and they believe the same of us), we must play by the rules set forth in our Constitution.

Sowing distrust and persuading citizens that participation is futile are the very tactics employed by Trump and his antidemocratic brethren. If we were guided by Lithwick’s conclusion—that the trust essential to making democracy work is already gone—then the serious work of planning litigation, protecting vulnerable voters, and countering lies might as well be abandoned as pointless. In truth, we cannot say with certainty when the bonds of trust that hold the chalice of democracy together will finally give way. Our electoral system is so complex and dynamic, with so many inputs and chaotic interconnections, that the outcome is impossible to predict.

We can’t know whether we will succeed in overcoming prophecies of the American experiment’s demise. But to enact daily the hope that we will is not a matter of blind optimism, rather one of well planned, aspiration-driven, reality-based advocacy, organisation, and carefully timed execution. We have our work cut out for us. Let’s get to it.

Laurence H Tribe, Harvard, and Mark Tribe, New York School of Visual Arts

The judge in a democracy

My friend Helena Kennedy is right to praise Lord Bingham (“At law,” October) but I part company from her in the suggestion that the very notion of a review of the way judicial review works is “constitutional vandalism.” On the contrary, I believe that an examination of this kind is timely.

In his excellent book *The Rule of Law*, Bingham said that judicial review of the lawfulness of administrative action “is the judges’ stock in trade, the field in which they are professionally expert. But they are not independent decision makers and have no business to act as such... They are auditors of legality; no more, no less.” He adverted to the fact that the “unreasonableness” rubric in judicial review was “more difficult territory,” and it is this contested

area into which some decisions may be seen as straying.

However much we may welcome individual decisions, the broad concept that the judges have developed of the rule of law (seen for example in the Unison case on employment tribunal fees) enlarges their constitutional role so as to be more like that of the US Supreme Court.

There has been an explosion in the number of judicial review cases over recent decades, and the generous views of time limits for claimants are also ripe for review. I hope the committee can go about its work away from the vandal tendency within the government. Thankfully Edward Faulks, the chair, is hardly a card-carrying member of the “weirdos and misfits” brigade.

John Bowers, barrister

Tom Bingham is without a doubt my legal hero. He was the senior law lord from 2000, and when I joined the House of Lords in 2004, he led us with great distinction and a wonderfully light touch. He wasn’t bossy at all, but you didn’t want to do anything that he wouldn’t approve of, and that was because of his towering legal intellect but also his great personal qualities.

He led very much by example and it took a lot of courage to disagree with him. He wouldn’t be cross with someone for disagreeing—he would certainly be happy if one did that—but it took intellectual and moral courage because he was always right. He was always, always right!

Brenda Hale, former president of the Supreme Court, (as told to Prospect’s Alex Dean)

The uncertainty principle

Covid-19 is a new disease and there was necessarily great uncertainty in the early days, with rapidly evolving evidence. This means, as Philip Ball argues (“The dark arts, ‘the science’ and the human toll,” October), that attempts to present science as a monolith, justifying a single course of available action, were at best misleading and at worst damaging. Policy had to change in response to new evidence.

For instance, good evidence on face coverings became available over the spring and early summer. New policies mandating their use in certain situations was good policymaking, but risked being undermined by accusations of “U-turns” when the uncertainty in the science was not understood.

Even now, we still don’t fully understand the role of children in transmission, nor what proportion of people infected are asymptomatic (estimates range from 30 to 80 per cent!). We certainly do not know yet what the long-term health impacts are; there is growing evidence that the heart and lungs are damaged in many who suffer even from mild forms of the disease.

As we move into autumn, the government faces the difficult job of supporting the economy while suppressing the virus, in a situation with many aspects we do not understand. Independent Sage is committed to presenting these uncertainties and being transparent about the choices ahead.

Christina Pagel, Independent Sage

How the west won

Anatol Lieven’s rant against capitalism and freedom (“How the west lost,” October) reminds us that gloom sells. So does economic ignorance packaged as deep strategic thinking, and musty academic Marxism that has learned nothing at all from the 3,000 per cent increase since 1848 of real income per head for the formerly wretched of the earth.

After the fall in 1989 of the socialist plan of economic coercion, and contrary to Lieven’s rage

In fact

People in 14 advanced economies were asked if their country had done a good job dealing with coronavirus: Denmark came top, with 95 per cent agreeing it had. The UK (46 per cent) came last. *Pew Research Center, 27th August 2020*

An analysis of 300,000 tracks on driving-themed Spotify playlists shows that the song most listened to in the car is “Sweet Home Alabama” by Lynyrd Skynyrd. *Antimusik, 3rd August 2020*

The Isles of Scilly have the world’s smallest football league: its two teams, the Garrison Gunners and the Woolpack Wanderers, play each other 18 times a season. *Fifa.com, 25th June 2020*

Every combat veteran running for the US presidency since 1990 has lost, often to draft dodgers. *Economist, 17th August 2020*

The UK’s favourite pasta shape is fusilli, chosen by 19 per cent of Britons, followed by spaghetti (15 per cent) and penne (11 per cent). *YouGov, 25th August 2020*

The last time that every person was within the Earth’s atmosphere was 31st October 2000—two days later astronauts reached the International Space Station, which has been occupied ever since. *Air & Space, October 2020*

Following the death of US Supreme Court justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Democratic fundraising platform ActBlue took \$6.3m in one hour and \$70.6m the next day, beating previous records of \$4.3m and \$41.6m respectively. *Guardian, 21st September 2020*

The word “freelance” was coined by Walter Scott in his 1819 novel *Ivanhoe* to refer to a mercenary in the Middle Ages who was not sworn to any liege, and thus could be hired along with his weapon. *The Etymology Nerd, August 2020*



“And here we have a lovely three-office terraced house”

against sensible liberals like Fukuyama, prosperity exploded. A mythical “Chinese model” didn’t do it. China in fact liberalised, though the country is backsliding now. It was the “deeply flawed” western model, in Lieven’s phrase, that raised up the poor of China and then India, as had happened long before in Britain.

The cause of the startling enrichments after the upheavals of 1776 or 1848 or 1989 has been, as Marx wisely said, “constantly revolutionising the instruments of production.” Lieven is right that “minimal moral values” are the ticket to the good society—those values which liberate adults from subordination to aristocrat, husband or planner.

Deirdre McCloskey, economist

Frosty reception

Your profile of David Frost (Boris’s brick wall,” October) is too generous. It is now clear that any deal achieved with the EU will be a fig leaf, disguising a scale of rupture that the Leave camp strenuously denied would happen during the referendum.

The detailed work that our chief negotiator needed to undertake to achieve compromises on state aid, fishing, mutual recognition of qualifications and the protection of key industries has simply not taken place. A minimalist zero-tariff, zero-quota arrangement is now the best that can be hoped for, but even this “deal” will severely damage British economic interests, in particular high-value-added manufacturing and financial services. “Frosty” demonstrates no grasp of this reality.

What he does grasp is the courtier’s need to say what King Boris wants to hear. Frost calculates that playing up Britain’s readiness to rupture with Europe completely (instead of being a “quisling”—the unfair charge levelled at his predecessor) may frighten EU negotiators into making last-minute concessions. But the EU knows the vital work has not taken place, has no intention of sacrificing its hard-won achievements and is readying itself for no deal.

It is a dangerous game for an individual who purports to represent the British state. But Frost is not a civil servant dedicated to the public interest. He is a vainglorious partisan who has successfully advanced his own

career, to the disadvantage of our country.

Will Hutton, former editor of the Observer

The taxing reality

Reading the “duel” between Jonathan Portes and Bill Mitchell (“Are tax rises now inescapable?” October), I was struck by the complete lack of reference to politics.

There are many reasons to be highly sceptical of the mystical powers of modern monetary theory, but foremost among them is this notion, hinted at by Mitchell, of fine-tuning inflation through regular adjustments to taxes. Nobody pushing this idea can have spent much time actually trying to implement a tax rise—and a glance at the backlash over recent weeks in response to briefings that Rishi Sunak is merely thinking about raising taxes should serve as advanced warning of what a disaster it would be if we tried to use fiscal policy to control inflation.

As Portes rightly points out, over the long term taxes will need to rise to pay for an ageing society and rising healthcare costs. The choice over the timing and nature of those rises will, however, largely be driven by the politics. The result will be messy compromises, unlikely to satisfy many economists, and certainly unlikely to coincide with what is needed to keep inflation stable.

Tim Pitt, former Treasury adviser

Literary comrades

The doubtful assumption that ideological differences must get in the way of friendship, to which Miranda France draws attention in her excellent piece (“Call time on ‘cancel culture,’” Aug/Sept) is a commonplace of literary life. According to his widow, George Orwell’s greatest friend in the late 1940s was the novelist Anthony Powell, an arch-Conservative lieutenant-colonel’s son married to the daughter of an earl. None of Orwell’s attempts to convert Powell, for example by buying him a subscription to the left-wing weekly *Tribune*, met with the slightest success, yet the two remained on the most cordial terms.

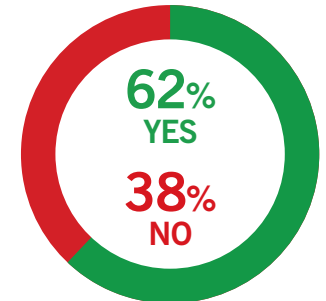
In the diaries written in his old age, Powell regularly complains of interviewers’ obtuseness on this point. He was particularly irked by Bernard Crick, Orwell’s first biographer, who “remarked when



The Duel

Last month *Jonathan Portes* and *Bill Mitchell* debated whether tax rises are now unavoidable.

Readers said:



This month read *Robin Hodgson* vs *Norma Cohen* on whether Britain is overpopulated

See p16

he lunched here that he could not imagine how Orwell and I had ever been friends.”

DJ Taylor, critic and novelist

Full Rosster

In addition to the three Ross County goalies mentioned in October’s “In fact”—Ross Laidlaw, Ross Munro and Ross Doohan (a late addition, on loan from Celtic)—the first team squad includes Ross Draper, a midfielder, and Ross Stewart, a striker.

The academy sides are clearly looking to maintain the Staggies’ tradition: Logan Ross, Under 18s goalie; Ross Hardie, Under 16s striker; Ross MacLeod, Under 15s midfielder; Fergus Ross, Under 13s midfielder; Fraser Ross, Under 12s midfielder; and Jack Ross, Under 11s striker.

Unsurprisingly, a search for eponymous players at Cowdenbeath and Stenhousemuir proved less fertile, although the former has two players with a first name of—you’ve guessed it—Ross!

Hugh Smith, Teddington

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Opinions



Covid confusion and the overpowering argument against “debate”

Tim Harford

Confused by the contradictory claims about the dangers posed by coronavirus? Cut through the fog with this one weird trick: stop trying to win an argument.

I realise that such advice does not sit easily with the way culture has been going in Britain in general of late, and the way things have been at Westminster for as long as anyone can remember. The Prime Minister, like too many top British politicians through history, is the former president of the world's most famous student debating society. The leader of the opposition, meanwhile, was a prominent barrister. Both men are well-used to beginning with a conclusion, and hunting for the facts to fit.

The mindset of the debater is not that of the calm seeker-of-truth. Opposing arguments are to be caricatured, statistics to be twisted, examples to be cherry-picked. The audience is to be entertained or even enraged as much as persuaded. Politics rewards anger and in-group loyalty.

When one is used to examining every scrap of evidence as possible ammunition, it becomes hard to use them to navigate towards a truly solid conclusion, or sometimes towards any conclusions at all: just think of Boris Johnson's notorious pair of opinion columns, one arguing for Brexit and the other, unpublished, arguing the opposite. Such rhetorical gymnastics are familiar to anyone who has spent time in a debate club. They create the illusion of giving the pros and cons a thorough testing. But now that Brexit is happening, the illusion has faded; we realise the referendum barely scratched the surface of the real issues.

In the early spring, coronavirus shouldered Brexit to one side. It presented us with a common enemy, impervious to spin and misinformation. Amid the anxiety and the sorrow, I found something refreshing about reporting on an issue where people actually wanted to understand, rather than use to defeat their political opponents.

But it did not take long for the polarisation to creep back in. Somehow we have now managed to start a culture war about a



**The Oxford Union school of governance—
Boris Johnson at Prime Minister's Questions**

pandemic. There is a vociferous chorus of lockdown “sceptics” and Covid alarmists.

The alarmists have natural allies in the media's love of tragic yet unrepresentative tales of young people slain by the mysterious illness, or worrying reports of “long Covid” symptoms presented without any sense of whether such symptoms are common.

The so-called sceptics, who lack any of the doubt about jumping to conclusions that defines the proper use of that word, are—if anything—even louder. They have moved steadily from one talking point to another: that the virus might be vastly more common—and thus less deadly—than it seemed; that a kind of herd immunity might be in easy reach; that people were “dying with” rather than “dying of” Covid-19; that the virus was mutating to become less dangerous; and most recently, that the number of cases was dramatically overstated because tests were producing so many false positives.

There is something in most of these claims, from both sides. But my point is not that if there is truth on both sides, the centre ground must be right. It is that this grand “clash of ideas” is not bringing us any closer to understanding the truth.

This is a disturbing conclusion. I grew up thinking that the truth was most likely to emerge from a process of intellectual disputation. It does not seem to be working out that way.

We all have a tendency to think with our hearts rather than our heads, and that tendency is sharpened, not dulled, by a vociferous argument. Wishful thinking, tribal loyalty, and tortured logic are ever-present pitfalls, but the pits yawn wider and deeper once a few alpha chimps are yelling at each other about “covidots” and “face-nappies.”

A disheartening autumn provides us with an interesting case in point. At the end of August, the virus seemed to be in retreat. The prevalence survey published by the Office for National Statistics on 4th September, covering late August, suggested that infections had fallen to 36 per million people per day in England. Even for the highly vulnerable, the risk of taking a day out was looking small. But then each new week showed a large increase, and by 25th September, the estimate of infections was up to 175 per million people per day—mostly in the under-35s, and mostly in London and the north of England.

Those are the facts. But the facts were not of much interest: cabinet ministers blamed the public, lockdown sceptics blamed false positives, and newspaper columnists mocked the government for reversing its stance from “get back to the office” to “actually, stay at home.”

Everyone got their zingers in, but an ordinary citizen, trying to weigh up the health risks she faces, her responsibility to keep others safe, and the threats to her livelihood, is none the wiser. The personal risk remains low for most people, but the fact that cases have risen so rapidly suggests that we have a real challenge on our hands.

The truth, it turns out, is complicated. But complicated is no way to win a shouting match. If we want to understand the virus—and, for that matter, anything else in a complex world—we must first give up on the illusion that what passes for public “debate” is about anything more than scoring cheap points, which inevitably come at the cost of the whole truth.

Tim Harford is a columnist for the Financial Times. His new book is “How to Make the World Add Up” (The Bridge Street Press)



Lame ducks, largesse and the Brexit age

Frances Cairncross

Last year, a couple of economists from the International Monetary Fund published a book called *The Return of the Policy That Shall Not Be Named*. What was this daring breach of economic taste?

Industrial policy. For economists of a certain age, the very words are an uncomfortable reminder of wasted taxpayers' millions. Some studies have indeed reviewed policies in countries like South Korea, Taiwan, and above all China, and suggested that some kinds of government intervention *could* boost growth, and these have caught the eye of later cohorts of think-tankers and politicians. But other analysis has continued to find that government subsidies to industry—state aid—do more harm than good.

Successive British governments have tried (and usually failed) to bribe and coerce companies to do better. In the 1950s and 60s, politicians attempted to use a combination of planning controls and public funds to drive particular industries to parts of the country that needed jobs—and might offer votes. The system of Industrial Development Certificates, devised soon after the Second World War, forced companies to get government permission before building or expanding a plant. The scheme aimed to divert jobs from the industrial southeast and the midlands to “development areas.”

This regime sent Rootes, manufacturer of the Hillman Imp, to build a factory at Linwood in Scotland, where the militant workforce had no experience of building cars and the main suppliers were many miles away. In spite of repeated government bailouts, the plant shut after less than 20 years.

Sceptics recall other disasters. British Aluminium was persuaded by the promise of cheap nuclear power to locate a smelter at Invergordon: the power plant never materialised and the smelter shut after only 10 years in operation. Indeed, Scotland was home to a disproportionate number of failures of state aid. In 1971, Upper Clyde Shipbuilders, sustained initially by a generous dollop of government money, collapsed when the government refused further subsidies. And British Leyland, the country's biggest car company, had to be rescued by the government in 1975, at the cost of more than £3bn. With the arrival of the Thatcher years, industrial policy of this crude sort was dead.



Rootes, maker of the Hillman Imp, couldn't be saved by state bribery

But now industrial policy is creeping back into academic fashion and state aid, often a key component, has become a Brexit battleground. Where the Conservative right used to stand firm against rescuing “lame ducks,” these days latter-day Thatcherites demand freedom from Brussels to bail out firms as they please.

So does state aid actually give economies a competitive advantage? And do European rules actually blunt it? You might assume so, given the furious noise at the moment. Certainly, and unusually around the world, the EU has firm rules on state aid: selective industrial subsidies are generally banned if they damage competition and trade between member states. The EU rules are aimed at preventing the sort of thing that happens in the US, where rival states fling subsidies at big companies like Amazon to persuade them to create local jobs.

Yet most EU countries make more use of state aid than the UK has recently done, which rather undercuts claims about Brussels tying our hands. In economic reality, state aid is unlikely to do much good without some clear thinking about where the money goes—and why.

States giving aid to industry are sometimes trying to buy jobs—and often placing a bet that the private sector thinks is unprof-

itable or too risky. There are particular dangers in trying to foster high-tech businesses, as this government clearly wants to do. A good example: in July, the UK government put £400m into OneWeb, a bankrupt satellite operator, in spite of being warned by a senior civil servant that taxpayers might lose the lot with “no wider benefits accrued.”

Governments will sometimes have broader objectives that justify this sort of investment, but they are also subject to pressures or ambitions that can entice them to do silly things. Certainly, they find it just as difficult as any investor to know whether they are backing a winner or simply bailing out a loser. After all, the people taking the decisions—politicians and officials alike—aren't used to backing a winner with their own cash. Very few people with experience of making large investments from positions of senior management in the corporate sector end up in top ministerial jobs. One who did—David Sainsbury, minister of science under Tony Blair—recounts in his recent book *Windows of Opportunity* that the civil servants in his department, whose remit included industry, “had very little systematic knowledge about the performance of British industry, and apparently did not see any need to have it.”

Sometimes, state support for one purpose can end up paying huge (metaphorical) dividends elsewhere: think of DARPA—the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency—whose R&D, financed by the US Defense Department, has bred a string of innovations with profitable civilian applications such as computer networking and the basis for the modern internet. But putting money into defence projects does not guarantee such spillovers into the wider economy, nor indeed successful spin-offs or marketable products for the companies concerned. Rather like when governments subsidise fundamental scientific research, there *may* eventually be benefits to companies that create products from the findings—but the uncertainty about the outcome explains why the private sector won't invest in much basic scientific research in the first place.

State aid tends to go disproportionately to manufacturing, which is these days capital- rather than labour-intensive—even in Germany, manufacturing employs only one worker in four, and the proportion steadily dwindles as productivity grows. So it rarely generates many jobs directly. Amid a second

wave of the pandemic, some of the appeal of Rishi Sunak's "Eat Out to Help Out" subsidy may be lost, but it remains an impressive rarity in one sense: state aid targeted at an industry with a large number of low-paid jobs, rather than a few high-paid ones.

Long before coronavirus made state aid more urgent, decisions about rescuing companies were increasingly complicated by patterns of international ownership, which raised questions both about exactly who was being bailed out and whether or not they needed that help. Thus the government dithered over rescuing Flybe, which serves so many small regional airports. It is owned, as former British Airways chief executive Willie Walsh pointed out, partly by Virgin Atlantic, which in turn is part owned by Delta, one of the world's largest and most profitable airlines. (BA itself, meanwhile, is owned by a company registered in Spain.) In an open economy like the UK, where many big companies are foreign-owned, it will often be hard to see whether taxpayers' cash ends up in British jobs or foreign pockets.

Right now, lots of companies are being bailed out in a scramble to salvage jobs and businesses amid the pandemic. That may make sense in the short run. And there are areas—such as environmental policy—where state help, alongside state rules, may accelerate desirable but uneconomic change. Generally speaking, though, there are better ways to help companies than by simply writing cheques. Companies are pro-

foundly influenced by the burden of regulation—and that is particularly true of those that compete internationally. Rules about health and safety, about workers' rights, about product specifications—mostly set by and policed by the government, or government-sponsored regulators—have an immense but often surreptitious impact on corporate decisions, especially for small and middle-sized companies.

"The government put £400m into a bankrupt satellite operator, despite warnings taxpayers might lose the lot for no benefit"

I sit on the board of a small spin-out from Oxford University that has developed a product that exactly mimics ketones, which the human body produces and which allow athletes to run or swim for longer. But the process of providing the information about it required by the Advisory Committee on Novel Foods and Processes was so laborious that the company decided to move manufacture and distribution to the US. America's Food and Drug Administration was more flexible and accommodating.

Most legislation that applies to companies and employers has implications for economic activity. Labour laws that offer more

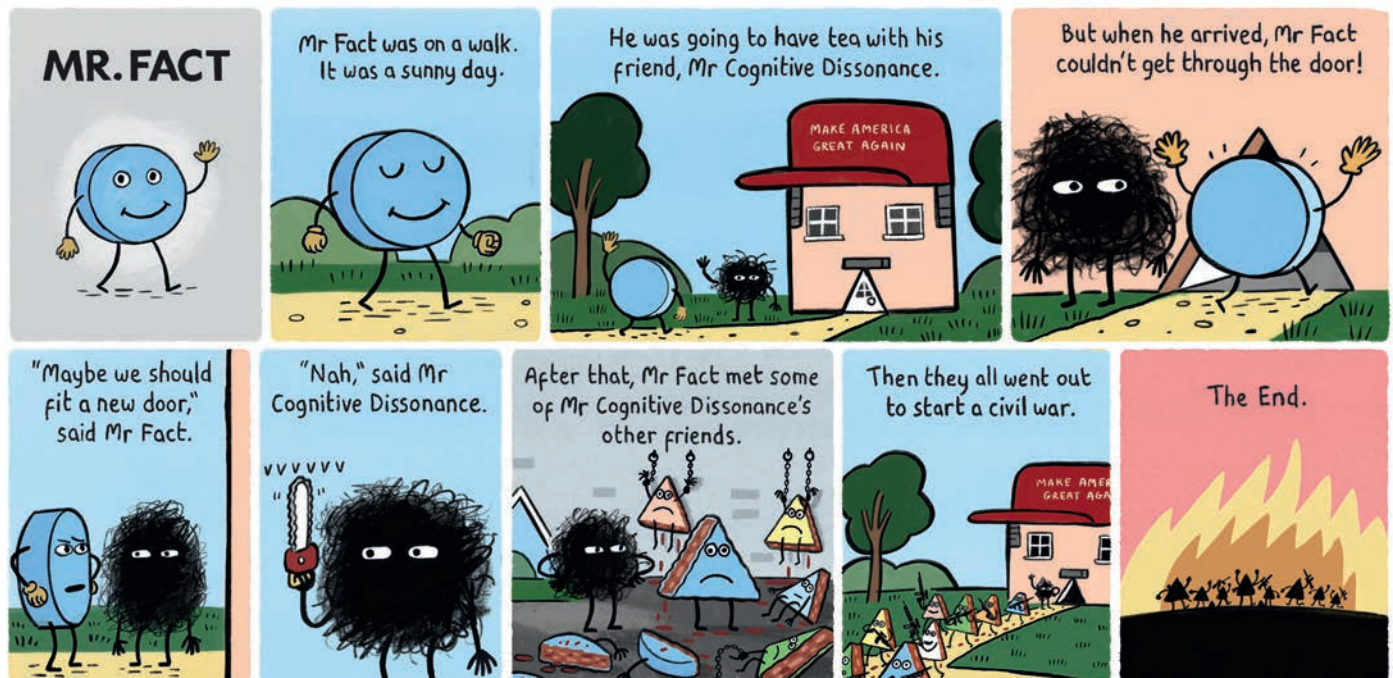
generous leave or tougher safety checks are not cost-free. The consequences for jobs, profits and company growth may be hard to measure and take time to become apparent. The benefits to society may outweigh the costs to an individual entrepreneur. But this is, in a sense, the flip side of state aid: what one might call "state drag."

Significantly, the most prominent academic rehabilitator of industrial policy is Dani Rodrik of Harvard, who argues less in favour of direct public investment than of subtle collaborations between governments and the private sector. That is a far cry from conventional state aid. But focusing on ways that government can nudge and stimulate may not only be cheaper than old-fashioned state aid: it may lead to less wasted public cash and fewer international squabbles. And improving the quality and impact of regulation may help more companies—and create more jobs—than state aid could ever do.

When governments step in where commercial investors fear to tread, they inevitably take a bigger risk than the market is prepared to. The market is not perfect—but there were good reasons why Routes and British Leyland floundered. Through the months ahead, many firms may justifiably need a state-financed lifebelt. But that is different from using taxpayers' cash to bet against the market. A reputation for unreliability killed the Hillman Imp.

Frances Cairncross is an economist, journalist and former Rector of Exeter College, Oxford

Stephen Collins



Stephen Collins (w. apologies to Roger Hargreaves)



AT LAW

An enabling act could happen here

David Allen Green

The last five years have shown that authoritarian populist nationalism is not always just for other countries. The politics and policies that once seemed to be a problem abroad have turned out to be something that can manifest just as easily in the US and the UK.

And if politics and policies can take this authoritarian turn, then so, in principle, can laws. The question then becomes how far could a government go, if it wished, in imposing a system of law by ministerial decree and without parliament? Could, for example, an enabling act really happen here?

We need to be precise as to what this means. The legislation most people think of when they hear of an enabling act is, of course, that enacted in Germany in 1933. In the aftermath of the Reichstag fire, in the makeshift assembly in the Kroll Opera House, a short bill was passed that went on to enable the personal rule of the new chancellor Adolf Hitler.

What is often not realised is that the 1933 Act was not that unusual at the time. Before 1933, the unstable Weimar Republic had seen a succession of enabling acts to bypass constitutional inconveniences. The Nazis simply took the idea a step further. On the face of it, the 1933 legislation even contained protections against abuse and was time-limited. These protections failed, of course, and the Act was renewed and then made perpetual. The 1933 Act is now the notorious archetype of enabling legislation, but it is not the only example.

In the UK, as in other democracies, provisions already exist that empower ministers to issue laws in specific and exceptional contexts, with these having the same effect as if they had been passed as statute. An enabling act would just make this existing practice the norm, not the exception. To say that a government may want to introduce such an enabling act is not to affirm “Godwin’s law” about all internet conversations descending into Hitler comparisons, but to instead state that authoritarian leaders tend to dismantle what stops them from carrying out their will.

The key to understanding enabling acts is that, necessarily, they are also disabling acts.

They proceed by way of equal and opposite reaction—enabling a government to do something it otherwise would not be able to do, because of some check or other restriction. The legislation operates by disapplying that impediment. And so whenever we have enabling legislation, the crucial questions are: What is being disabled and why?

In America, an enabling act would be difficult. This is because any fundamental legal change is difficult by reason of their codified constitution, which entrenches many checks. Even though Trump’s rhetoric is dismissive of any restraint to his power, it would be hard for him to institute government by decree. Even his many so-called “executive orders” often have no legal consequence.

“With enabling legislation, the crucial question is what is being disabled—and why?”

But in the UK, where the constitution is not codified and thereby more malleable, the situation is significantly different. If a government went about it in a certain way, there would be no barrier to the enactment of sweeping enabling legislation here. There could feasibly be a series of Acts of Parliament that would allow ministers to issue regulations and directions with full legal effect across all policy areas.

There are two general reasons why this would be possible. The first is the doctrine of parliamentary sovereignty. Once a statute is enacted, it cannot be gainsaid by any court. The exceptions are if there is an inadvertent conflict with other legislation, when judges would need to decide which law takes priority, but that eventuality can be avoided with careful drafting. The fiction adopted by the courts would be that the sovereign parliament “intended” for ministers to have these wide powers.

If a government can get a suitable law through parliament, it can obtain absolute legal power. In some fields, there are already laws that give ministers the power not only to

make regulations, but to amend other statutes. During the pandemic, ministerial regulations were easily imposed that infringed fundamental rights to movement and assembly, creating the broadest possible criminal offences. By the time a challenge was heard by the high court, the judges shrugged and said the challenges were “academic” because the government had since changed the laws.

So far the only limits have been what both houses of parliament have been prepared to pass and what the government has sought to get away with. But this is a self-denying ordinance and offers no real protection, especially with the worrying readiness of British governments since 2015 to trespass upon the norms and conventions of the constitution, as seen for example when parliament was abortively shut down last year.

The second reason why an enabling act would be possible in the UK is the lack of entrenched civil liberties beyond the reach of any illiberal statute. The Human Rights Act, despite notoriety with the populists, is a weak regime that enables the government to rely on wide qualifications to almost all relevant rights and, even if an infringement is finally established, it provides no ultimate remedy against any primary legislation at fault. Even if a judge finds a violation of a fundamental right, the plain wording of an Act of Parliament still has to be applied. And, of course, courts are routinely sympathetic to “national security,” “public health” or any other important-sounding justification.

There are perhaps certain things a British government could not get away with through an enabling act. It is unlikely that any legislation could abolish the supervisory jurisdiction of the high court, as it is a truism that it falls to a court to interpret and enforce the meaning of legislation. But given the habitual deference of judges, the government probably would not need to do so.

And any legislation ultimately depends on the goodwill or at least cooperation of the governed, and so an enabling act could be undermined in its implementation if it was seen to go “too far,” but that is hardly a satisfactory safeguard. The ugly truth is that an enabling act could all too easily happen here.

David Allen Green is a lawyer and writer



VIEW FROM SWEDEN

The twisty tale of Dr Tegnell

Richard Orange

If you look back at what Sweden's state epidemiologist Anders Tegnell said in March, it's interesting to see how much he got right. Lockdowns, he said, could only be kept in place "for a very limited amount of time before people get tired," so should be reserved for when you really need them. Closing schools, he warned, would damage not just children but the functioning of society, by keeping parents at home. The pandemic was "a marathon not a sprint," as it would be at least a year before vaccines became available. It was better to impose national restrictions light enough to keep in place for long periods—measures that were "sustainable."

When I last wrote a letter from Sweden at the end of April, it was an open question whether the country had been right to eschew hard lockdown. By June, however, it looked like Tegnell had lost the argument. Lockdowns had dramatically reduced infection in Europe, while cases in Sweden had yet to reach their peak. The death rate was creeping towards that of Italy, and opposition politicians were finally turning on Tegnell's agency, with the leader of the populist Sweden Democrats calling for his resignation.

Today, though, the story looks far from clear cut. In July, Sweden's infection rate began to drop, sinking at the start of this month below that of its Nordic neighbours.

While Denmark had opened amusement parks and even let crowds back for football games, Sweden, sticking to Tegnell's light-but-steady strategy, had kept its 50-person limit in place. Now that the UK and other European countries are wrestling to bring a resurgence under control without reimpos-

ing strict lockdowns, Tegnell is regaining his status as a sort of rock star, finding himself, to his evident discomfort, praised by the libertarian right. He is doing non-stop international TV interviews. He has even been in to brief Boris Johnson. Sweden's newspapers, meanwhile, have begun to gloat, particularly over rising cases in Denmark, which raised hackles in June by refusing to open borders to its harder-hit neighbour (prompting the *New York Times* to dub Sweden "a pariah state").

When the *Sun* in September described Tegnell as a "hero," the Swedish *Expressen* tabloid gushed that the strategy was being lauded worldwide. But it's worth pointing out what Tegnell got wrong. He initially maintained that China would contain the virus. He told Swedes in February it was safe to travel during the country's spring "sport holiday"; Stockholmers brought back so much infection the city had one of Europe's worst outbreaks. He claimed Sweden's age segregation would make it easier to protect the elderly; the virus cut a swathe through care homes. He said Stockholm could reach herd immunity in May; antibody tests and a recent rise in infections suggest the city still isn't there. Europe's lockdowns have also arguably been both more effective and better tolerated (at least the first time around) than he warned. Last month, Tegnell drew criticism even in Sweden after linking the country's death toll to a string of mild flu seasons, before admitting he'd got the idea from a discredited YouTube video by an Irish diet faddist turned lockdown sceptic, knocking his credibility.

Nonetheless, with few countries willing to go back into lockdown, many now see the Sweden strategy as the way forward. As early

as April, Mike Ryan of the WHO was promoting Sweden as "a future model," with citizens learning to avoid infection situations voluntarily. That does now seem to be happening, with Carl Heneghan, of Oxford's Centre for Evidence-Based Medicine, claiming the UK's new measures represented "a move towards Sweden." He cited Sweden's decision to keep bars and restaurants open, but with table service only to reduce contagion.

A move towards Sweden today, however, is not an acknowledgement it was right to impose only light restrictions in March. By pushing infections into the future, lockdowns gave countries time to source equipment and get test capacity and contact tracing up and running (or attempt to). Sweden in April was testing much less than most European countries today. Hospitals across Europe have also got better at treating serious cases. Some who died in Sweden would not have done so had they become ill today. Finally, Sweden is itself shifting strategy. Cases in Stockholm nearly doubled in one week in late September, leading the city's health chief to warn that "far too many have stopped following the Swedish Public Health Agency's recommendations." The government delayed a planned increase in the maximum crowd at seated events.

Tegnell, meanwhile, has for the first time said he is willing to close schools, make face masks mandatory, and impose other heavy measures. The authorities plan to target these new restrictions as tightly as possible on areas with outbreaks, and then lift them within two to three weeks. Ever the outlier, as the rest of Europe "moves towards Sweden," Sweden is moving towards something else.

Richard Orange is a journalist based in Malmö



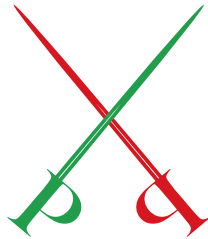
Beachgoers in Lomma, Sweden, this August. Was the country's lax lockdown inspired or foolhardy?

The Duel

Is Britain overpopulated?



Robin Hodgson
YES



Norma Cohen
NO

YES Certainly by the standards of western Europe. The citizens of Hong Kong and Bangladesh live far more densely, but I doubt whether the citizens of the UK would wish to live similarly. And we must anticipate, unless policy changes, that the UK's population density will continue to increase. This natural growth—the excess of births over deaths—currently runs at 115,000 per annum. Those children will in due course need schools, homes, offices and hospitals.

In the late 1990s, when the Blair government decided to encourage large-scale immigration, the population of the UK was 58.3m—at last count it was 66.8m. The Office for National Statistics' projection for 25 years from now is 73m plus. Over half a century our population will have increased by 25 per cent—a significant figure in a country with some very densely-populated regions. Around 2050, the UK will overtake Germany to have the largest population in Europe, and England will overtake the Netherlands to have the greatest population density.

But the UK is not simply at risk of becoming overpopulated—73 per cent of the country believes it to be already! The electorate can be denounced as wrong and ignored, which has serious ramifications for democracy, or it can be seriously engaged with. My view is we opt for the latter, which is why the government must urgently tackle this issue or risk widening the gap between people's expectations of policy and its delivery, and fostering even more extreme politics.

Most of the arguments in favour of a growing population focus on economics. One can argue whether these are well founded. But vanishingly little weight is given to

inevitable impacts on our environment, ecology and society. My own preferred solution is to establish an independent authority, the Office for Demographic Change (ODC), where rational, evidence-based discussions can take place, and from which carefully considered policy decisions can flow.

NO The question of what it means to be overpopulated was asked—and answered—by Thomas Malthus in 1798. Human population, he noted, grew at an exponential rate, while the quantity of food grew at a linear rate. An overpopulated world was one where the number of humans was growing faster than the rate at which their lives could be sustained. Ironically, shortly before Malthus's work was published, the industrial revolution began to take off in Britain, setting off a lightning-fast round of technological developments that made it possible to avert famine, for example by shipping food to where it was needed most. Infant mortality began to fall sharply, if not uniformly.

“The excess of UK births over deaths runs at 115,000 per annum”

Today, of course, a dense population does not imply poverty as in Malthus's time. On the contrary, data from Eurostat shows GDP per head in the Netherlands (with 511 people per square km) at 128 per cent of the EU average, that of Belgium (377 people per sq/km) at 117 per cent, while that of Britain (275 people per sq/km) is at 105 per cent.

Moreover, the number of projected British births is hardly likely to lead to disaster; with fertility rates at 1.6 children per woman aged 15 to 44 years, Britain is not even producing the 2.1 children needed to keep the population stable when life expectancy is constant. The fastest-growing segment of the population is those of retirement age: over time, elderly folk will grow to be a larger percentage of the population than they are today.

Your proposed solution—an “Office for Demographic Change”—is little more than a thinly-disguised, pseudoscientific mechanism tailored for those hoping to limit immigration, even at the price of an economic hit. Already, new “points-based” rules will take effect from January 2021. The Office for Budget Responsibility calculates that lower immigration numbers will translate into a loss of income tax and National Insurance receipts that will reach £0.6bn in 2024-5. It is easy to insist that the UK is already overpopulated if you ignore how curbing migration will hit current residents in the pocket.

YES Gosh, that is a tired, narrow and dated response. First, a proper demographic policy has to include a forward look. So we need to plan for the fact that by the 2040s, England *will* have overtaken the Netherlands as the most densely populated country in Europe, and the UK *will* have overtaken Germany (which has a land area one and a half times the size of this country) to become the most populous.

As for Malthus, should we really fall back on an 18th-century definition to rebut worries in 2020? Is merely “sustaining life” really the top priority of government? Should we

not consider wellbeing in its broadest sense, to give every one of our citizens the ability to thrive and the space in which to achieve this?

Next, your economic arguments are mostly ill-founded. GDP, beloved by politicians as some sort of virility symbol, is a poor measurement. Our population has gone up by eight million plus in the last 25 years, so if total GDP had not gone up that would be astonishing. Meanwhile, the real wages of the bottom 10 per cent are now 12 per cent below those of 2008. We need to rethink our approach by drilling down to assess the full economic impacts of population change, and also taking into account the environmental, ecological and societal aspects that play such a large part in human health and happiness.

Squeezing more people into this country has undesirable consequences. No one enjoys sitting in traffic, missing out on a school place for their child or struggling to get an appointment at the doctor's. These realities cannot be measured in pounds and pence.

When trust between the government and the people breaks down, as on this issue, it undermines the whole political system. Far from a "pseudoscientific" bid to limit immigration, we need a serious attempt to acknowledge the views of the electorate and address them in a non-partisan way. According to David Attenborough (not known to be a pseudoscientist), "all of our environmental problems become easier to solve with fewer people and harder—and ultimately impossible—to solve with ever-more people." Perhaps he could be the ODC's first chairman?

NO Without defining "overcrowded," this is a meaningless debate. The reason that Malthus's work is cited today is that he sets out a clear definition of overpopulation: an overcrowded nation is one that has more people than it can keep alive. This is a term that no one, pretty much anywhere, would apply to the UK today. Moreover, even though Britain's total population is expected to grow quite a bit more in the years to 2050, there is nothing on the horizon to suggest that population will outstrip resources.

Predictions of doom have long bounced around. For example, in 1958, Professor John Dykstra, writing in the *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, concluded: "overpopulation is not a hypothetical possibility of the future; it is a pressing problem that demands immediate attention." The nation in question? The Netherlands, whose population had more than doubled to 10.4m between 1899 and 1952. Steps must be taken, the professor wrote. However, since then, the Netherlands' population has nearly doubled again, hitting 17.4m in 2020, and the nation appears none the worse for it.

Nor is there any evidence that densely populated areas are less happy. Islington and Kensington and Chelsea are the third and fourth most densely populated local authori-

ties in Britain respectively, and it is difficult to characterise their residents as long-suffering.

To the extent that people face long queues for a school place or a visit to the GP, that is a greater reflection of government cuts than anything else. What may matter much more is the percentage of population able to contribute to economic output in general. Here, Britain faces a challenge. The percentage of those over age 65 will account for a quarter of the total by 2050, while the proportion over age 80 will nearly double, to just under 10 per cent. Given that the greatest concentration of healthcare spending occurs in the last 18 months of life, it is easy to see that competition for scarce resources will come not from the arrival of new immigrants, but from rising numbers of ageing Britons.

"The Dutch population has doubled since the 1950s and they appear none the worse for it"

YES So you want a definition of "overpopulated." Two facts immediately spring to mind. First, our ecological footprint is currently running at 301 per cent of our bio-capacity, meaning that by 1st May every year we have used up our share of natural resources for the whole 12 months. Second, we can ask what people feel—and nearly three quarters of Britons believe the UK is overcrowded and that the government should introduce policies to address the challenge.

You focus on the ratio of those of working age compared to those in retirement. But the maths is inexorable. To fix the dependency ratio (with young dependents included) at the levels of 2000-10, the population would have to reach 100m by 2060—a 50 per cent increase. That cannot be sensible. Already, the rate of population growth "crowds out" opportunities, with the consequent societal strains: young people forced into zero-hours contracts, members of minority communities locked into low pay, and the over 50s finding it increasingly difficult to get jobs even as we begin to raise the retirement age.

We have now built over about 20 per cent of the UK's available land space and will develop another area the size of Bedfordshire by 2040. Let me turn your question round: when would you agree that the UK was becoming overcrowded? Only when the last blade of grass had been tarmacked over!

You focus on economic issues. But the challenges of too large a population are many: degraded agricultural land, impending water shortages, five out of six species in the UK in (sometimes terminal) decline, loss of open spaces, and last but not least a feeling among many of our fellow citizens that they have lost their country. That is why it is

so important to examine, measure and report on these issues in a transparent, authoritative way. Not only will it help us plan better for the future, it will reassure people that their concerns are being addressed—so helping to restore trust in our system of government.

NO You are reaching into areas of public policy and environmental planning that have everything to do with income distribution and nothing to do with population size. First, let me say that I am very sympathetic to the argument that environmental strains threaten the continued existence of life on earth. However, even if total global population threatens the planet, its distribution is less important. The environmental damage that you describe is happening everywhere regardless of local population density. Indeed, some of the most high-profile damage is occurring in countries with far lower densities than Britain. These include Australia with its massive wildfires (nine people per sq/km) and Brazil with its disappearing forests (65 people per sq/km).

Moreover, global population is forecast to go into decline, beginning in 2100, due to the collapse in fertility rates. Indeed, a new study funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation suggests the decline will begin in the third quarter of this century and be particularly acute among industrialised countries.

And let's talk about Britain's ecological capacity and biological footprint. According to the WWF, some of the highest footprints are found in areas that rely on cars, not densely populated cities. Indeed, the average St Albans resident has a transport footprint 55 per cent larger than that of a Londoner. Mercifully, local government in Britain is now undertaking projects aimed at sustainable development. I hope that you and others who share your views will happily pay higher tax to cover the costs of green local projects.

There is not a shred of credible evidence that blames rising population for zero-hours contracts, low pay for minorities or scarce work for older adults. If growing populations caused these things, they should surely have been endemic throughout the industrial age. Countries with more enlightened governments find ways to address such problems.

And finally, let's examine the heart of the overpopulation thesis: that most Britons simply do not want to mix with too many non-natives. Yet for all the antipathy you cite, millions have shown they are perfectly happy to see immigrants as their customers, suppliers, workers and neighbours. Keeping them out as part of some pseudoscientific project would be a foolhardy endeavour. **■**

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The new American civil war

A graphic of red barbed wire with sharp points, running horizontally across the top right of the page.

Two tribes, one election
and a Union in a state

A graphic of red barbed wire with sharp points, running horizontally across the middle and bottom of the page.

SAM TANENHAUS



With the arrival of autumn (or fall, as we say), much of the western United States was engulfed in flames. Two dozen wildfires, covering more than three million acres in California, had been raging for two weeks and had swept up the coast to Oregon (with possible help from arsonists) and Washington: entire towns ablaze with flames fed by dry forest timber and parched fields, tens of thousands of people fleeing their destroyed homes under apocalyptic orange skies, smoke and ash billowing east across the continent.

All the while that other great hovering orange nimbus, President Donald J Trump, kept his distance from California, preferring to jab at its troubles from afar. “I see again the forest fires are starting. They’re starting again in California,” Trump told a campaign crowd in the critical battleground of Pennsylvania. The problem, he explained, begins with California’s poor forest management. “I said, you gotta clean your floors, you gotta clean your forests—there are many, many years of leaves and broken trees and they’re like, like, so flammable, you touch them and it goes up.”

Needless to say, scientists have pointed to other reasons, beginning with volatile weather systems caused by “extreme climate change.” But Trump is not so sure. “I don’t think science knows, actually,” he told officials in California. Nor is he especially curious to discover more. There is a federal fire science budget, but Trump “has twice tried unsuccessfully to eliminate it altogether,” the *Washington Post* reported.

Trump’s blaming of the afflicted states also ignored another fundamental fact. Many of the charred square miles are federal lands—“nearly 60 per cent of the forests in California, ▶

25 per cent of the forests in Oregon, and 44 per cent in Washington,” as Politico noted. This implies that the federal government has responsibilities—or would, if Trump’s Interior Department was on the case. It is not. Trump’s government is an extension of himself, his cabinet undistinguished and often uncredentialed replaceables, shuffled in and out like underlings in his one-man sham business empire or contestants on *The Apprentice*. His current Interior Secretary David Bernhardt, who used to be an oil lobbyist—ideal for Trump’s cabinet—did fleetingly make the news when he issued a ban on the purchase of drones (made in China) used to control forest-burning.

And yet Trump’s Republican Party, once again, chose not to desert him—for his personal ambitions continue to mesh neatly with their own more ideological ends. As we were reminded when the “October surprise” that so often upends the last phase of presidential elections arrived—weeks early, on this occasion.



Another slot to fill

In mid-September, Supreme Court justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg died aged 87 after a long battle with cancer. Ginsburg was a transcendent figure, who had drafted and delivered arguments that in the 1970s helped end legal discrimination against women. Appointed to the Court in 1993, Ginsburg grew into something unheard of for a jurist, a folk hero to young women. They quoted her humane and spirited dissenting opinions, defying the Court’s conservative majority; watched the documentary film *The Notorious RBG* in which Ginsburg, tiny but indomitable, is shown doing her rigorous gym workouts, complete with medicine ball and barbells; flocked to her onstage interviews in which she commented mordantly on life and law in a tart Brooklyn accent and inspired *Saturday Night Live* skits.

Older Americans, however, prized something else—stories of Ginsburg’s close friendship with her opposite number on the Court, Antonin Scalia, a brilliant theorist of conservative doctrine. The two were charming opposites—drawn together by their love of opera as well as proud outsiderism, the shy Jewish girl from Brooklyn, the exuberant Italian Catholic from Queens, who had followed very different paths that converged at the heights of American jurisprudence. “Nino’s” wicked humor, often in open court, drew laughs from poker-faced Ruth. Ginsburg-Scalia as bosom-buddy adversaries were celebrated in Washington and beyond. Together the two evoked a distant, much-missed time, when American “greatness” began not in truculence and resentment, but in confident hope and possibility, rooted in the belief many Americans had that their nation was young and aspirant, not aged and wheezing, its best days behind it.

Our dark moment has paired Ginsburg and Scalia in another way: via death. When Scalia died in February 2016 (at 79), the president was Barack Obama, who following normal procedure waited a month and then nominated a replacement, Merrick Garland, for Senate approval. Garland’s pedigree was unsurpassed: the conservative current Chief Justice, John Roberts, had previously served alongside him on an Appeals court and said, “anytime Judge Garland disagrees, you know you’re in a difficult area.” But resistance was immediate—not to Garland himself, but to Obama for presuming to present a candidate. The Senate majority leader, Mitch McConnell, made a novel argument. It was, he said, an election year, and Obama was in his second term; a new president was bound to succeed him. It was only right that

“the people” be given “a voice in filling this vacancy.” McConnell simply refused to hold confirmation hearings.

It was a radical break with precedent, and wholly partisan. It is a longstanding curiosity of American politics that the branch of government that might seem to have the least overt connection to political debate has in fact been the arena in which ideological armies have clashed most bitterly. For many decades now, conservative ideologues whose overriding ambition is to reduce the size and reach of the federal government have made the Court their platform of resistance, by honing a judicial “philosophy” that seeks to impose the restrictive letter of the law, as written in the late 18th century, on to 21st-century social policies. They have also looked to the Court to fortify the status of the privileged, and been rewarded—as when, for example, it entrenched the “right” of corporations to spend limitlessly at election time, and restored certain “rights” of governments in Southern states to place obstacles in the way of voters, who just happen to be poor or black.

“Trump is keenly interested in what his base wants, even if he doesn’t care personally”

McConnell, who is second only to Trump as a hate-figure for Democrats, is dedicated to all of this. He is also the most Machiavellian and hence most effective Senate majority leader in modern history, the best vote-counter and floor manager since “master of the Senate” Lyndon Johnson in the 1950s. His obstinate stand against Obama was a calculated gamble. If the next president turned out to be a Republican—at that point scarcely anyone imagined it would be Trump—he would assuredly nominate a more conservative justice than the centrist Garland. If the Democrat—presumably, Hillary Clinton—won, yes, it was possible an even more liberal justice could be nominated. But there was still at least the possibility that Senate Republicans might hold on to their majority and be able to block her choice.

And then to everyone’s surprise Trump won the Republican nomination and soon saw the utility of playing up his devotion to Court conservatives. The major issues for much of the base were social and cultural—opposition to abortion and same-sex marriage, and support for the rights of gun-owners and “religious liberty” for conservative Christians who wish to discriminate on religious grounds. Trump was himself indifferent to these matters. But he is keenly interested in what his base wants. And if conservatives in Iowa and Mississippi were mad for “strict constructionist” or “originalist” judges, or whatever they called themselves, he would delightedly appoint them. Not only that, he floated the names of possible appointees even before he won. It was one of his many small infractions, shocking to judicial purists concerned to preserve at least the appearance of a clear line between jurisprudence and electoral politics. But Republicans loved it, with hardline insiders thrilled that the names on Trump’s list had all been furnished by the Federalist Society, the legal think tank that has become the gatekeeper for conservative jurists wishing to get ahead.

To old-fashioned Americans the Supreme Court Justices were the most revered officials in the land, appropriately robed high priests. And to most Americans, it is a good idea that the



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Trump can tear gas the streets to clear the way for a decidedly awkward pose with the Bible, but the religious right won't worry about his sincerity—as long as he gives them “the judges”

country's final backstop for resolving legal and constitutional controversies should be peopled by minds that command wider respect. But to Trump, the most “transactional” of “deal-making” politicians—and one of whose sisters was for many years a judge—seats on the Supreme Court bench are just another slot to fill. Another presidential candidate—perhaps *every* other presidential candidate—would be embarrassed by the naked political trade, and at least nod at high considerations of jurisprudence. But he was then, and still is, willing to give his constituents anything that might keep them happy, so long as it didn't cost him anything. All he had to do was give them “the judges,” and they were his.

This calculation was thoroughly vindicated on election day. Post-mortem surveys indicated as many as one fourth of his votes—more than 15m—came from Republicans who liked his “position” on appointing conservative judges. And now, as the 2020 election approaches, he has been handed a chance to cement the Court—whose judges sit for life, continuing to etch opinions into history into their 80s—as a conservative bastion for 30 years to come.



The other side

It takes two sides to tussle, and that is true even in conflicts where one side is aggressor and the other is merely defending itself. The American right has been pursuing politics as war since the 1990s, becoming wilder after the election of Barack Obama. With Donald Trump's encouragement it has finally shed any residual sense of patriotic commitment as something distinct from party advantage. In opposite and less-than-equal reaction, the American left has gone perilously far in demonising the nation's past, has indulged in slogans—“defund the police”—that may resonate on campuses but are

unlikely to in housing projects populated by people of any race, and has also itself forgotten about some of the old norms that the right has been smashing.

Back in 2016, Ginsburg had assumed Hillary Clinton would win. She loathed Trump—and made the mistake of saying so publicly, blurring out to a journalist in June 2016 that she considered him a “faker,” with “no consistency about him. He says whatever comes into his head at the moment. He really has an ego.” Presciently, as it would turn out for 2020, she also added an awkward question: “How has he gotten away with not turning over his tax returns?”

Millions were saying the same things every day. But not Supreme Court justices. Trump was the Republican nominee, and so just conceivably the next president. Humiliatingly, Ginsburg had to apologise for this breach of etiquette. And then Trump did win. He appointed a conservative, Neil Gorsuch, to Scalia's seat and then, when a second became vacant, filled that too. His choice, Brett Kavanaugh, was dubious from the start. He had a long history in the Beltway culture wars. In the 1990s he had been one of the exuberant young conservatives who tried to destroy Bill Clinton's presidency. But then, midway through already contentious Senate hearings came new testimony from Christine Blasey Ford, a professor of psychology, who said she had been sexually assaulted by Kavanaugh when both were in high school. Blasey Ford was a highly credible and sympathetic witness—even Trump said so at first—but Republicans rallied around Kavanaugh, and pushed the appointment through. The conflicting “he said-she said” testimony made for riveting live TV, and also mobilised the dependable base in rural states in the mid-term elections, thus shoring up the Republican majority in the Senate even as the “blue wave” swept Democrats into control of the House under Speaker Nancy Pelosi, McConnell's equal and bitter foe. Congress was now ▶

split in two, and out of this came the bifurcated politics of Trump's last two years, summed up in the House impeachment followed by the Senate acquittal.

But the House has no role in Court confirmations, and the Kavanaugh appointment meant it was now majority conservative—dominated by Federalist Society heirs to Nino Scalia, hardline ideologues and smart technicians, lacking Nino's flair and mental elegance. They were there to advance the agenda, not to share evenings with Ginsburg at the National Opera house.

And she was sick. There were progressively dire diagnoses and treatments: malignancies in the lung and a second attack of pancreatic cancer in 2018. Ginsburg battled through both and endured, desperate to outlast Trump's first term in the hope a Democrat would replace him and restore balance to the Court. In January 2020 she pronounced herself, wondrously, "cancer free" after radiation treatment. But she wasn't. Immunotherapy didn't take, a scan turned up liver lesions in May 2020. Her public was only half aware she was dying, the large brain and tiny body wasting. There was universal shock when the news of her death finally came. The deathbed note she dictated to her granddaughter underlined how she had held on so long: "My most fervent wish is that I will not be replaced until a new president is installed."

The message was worthy of the opera she adored, a confession of the reality Ginsburg knew was closing in on her. She knew how politics worked in the age of Trump and McConnell. The *mise-en-scène* of February 2016 would be restaged again, only with the opposite result. McConnell—adroit, partisan, fanatically dedicated to packing the bench—would bin the script he contrived when Obama was president, and instantly write a new one. For him, too, the urgency was great. Democrats gamely tried to make something of Ginsburg's last plea, suggesting she was urging only that the Senate wait for the election, no matter what its outcome might be. But Republicans easily brushed it aside. "New president"? Obviously she meant a different one, Joe Biden.

Meanwhile, shrewder than his detractors will admit, Trump showed unexpected discipline. Feigning surprise about her death when journalists asked him about her after a rally in Minnesota, he seemed spontaneous when he expressed his sorrow and called her "an amazing woman, who led an amazing life." It was left to Fox News to remind the conservative base of exactly what he had originally tweeted when Ginsburg had criticised him: "Justice Ginsburg of the US Supreme Court has embarrassed all by making very dumb political statements about me. Her mind is shot—resign!"

More recently, Trump had been waiting for her to die. He had her replacement ready, an accomplished Federalist Society-approved former law professor turned federal judge Amy Coney Barrett, a protégé to Scalia, whom she had clerked for, and ideologically rock-solid: anti-abortion, sworn enemy of "Obamacare," pro-gun-rights—the Democrats' nightmare, and the Republicans' dream.

It was one thing to nominate anti-abortion male judges. Quite another to name a fluent, attractive and

devout Catholic mother, only 48, with seven children, one with Down's Syndrome, and two black, adopted from Haiti. For many Americans, they will put her and any controversial opinions she has on voting rights or anything else, beyond suspicion of racism. The voices that soon rose from the left fringe denouncing her as being in the grip of a white saviour syndrome, only added to her plausibility with the country at large; the coming weeks will reveal whether it is enough to overcome the broad American public's initial resistance to a rushed nomination that was recorded in polls before her name was known.

But the nomination instantly sent conservatives into raptures. And Trump openly discussed something else too—having his own appointee in place to break the potential electoral stalemate, which he is working so hard to create: "I think this [the election] will end up in the Supreme Court, and I think it's very important that we have nine justices." Trump's party once again lined up behind him, not so much to help him win a second term—in truth, after his show of unhinged rage in the first debate some might privately welcome a spell of Biden-restored calm—as to see the Court become truly their own in a way unseen since the 1930s. Back then, reactionary jurists ruled unconstitutional large parts of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, which provided popular relief from the Depression but was deemed "Bolshevistic" by the era's conservatives. In frustration, Roosevelt audaciously tried to expand the Court by adding new members chosen by himself. The proposal was stopped by Congress, but the mere threat softened the Court's resistance to Social Security and union rights. And so now Democrats, angered by the last-minute nomination of Barrett, whisper about reviving Roosevelt's "court-packing" plan should their party prevail on 3rd November.

Trump's Union Divisible

The Court row will entrench bitter division, and focus it on the institution where it can do most to threaten the stable running of a republic under the rule of law. A rushed nomination by a minority president, prospectively confirmed by a Senate majority itself returned by a minority of Americans concentrated in the rural states, feels like a fix. And it pushes the basic ground-rules of politics to the heart of the partisan battle.

None of this worries Trump. In his own mind he is president not of the United States—an idea he treats like a fiction—but discrete parts of it, such as the "heartland" populations in the rustbelt and the Deep South, the places that did just enough to get him over the line last time despite his shortfall in the nationwide vote, the people who must now rally behind him again if he is to win a second term. He faces a stubborn poll deficit, but as the final stretch comes into view, deliverance still seems conceivable, as he expertly exploits America's cultural, ethnic and ideological fissures.

Contrary to what his detractors think, Trump did not create these divisions. He has merely outdone all



forerunners in exploiting them. Even a politician as polarising as Richard Nixon, leaving office, summoned up the dignity of a departing “president of all the people.” Trump has been the first president to trample that idea underfoot. All sorts of dark questions about the viability of government of, by and for the people rear their heads when the very notion of a unified people is retired. And yet here—once again—Trump has uncovered a deep truth, long buried in the history that has not and never will go away.

The US really is a divided nation: it has been since its founding, was violently so during the Civil War and its aftermath, and remains so to this day. America’s venerable faultlines define the modern Republican Party, which became “Southernised” in the 1960s, when the Democrats stopped indulging their segregationists and became the party of civil rights. The Republicans responded by welcoming “Dixiecrats” into their camp, politicians like Strom Thurmond, who inveighed against the evils of race-mixing, and went to his death in 2003 at 100, having refused to acknowledge to the end the black daughter he had fathered with his parents’ 16-year-old maid. Presidents Nixon and Reagan were subtler in courting this vote, but the party came to rely on it. In 2008, when John McCain was routed by Obama, one wag said, “congratulations, John McCain. You’re now the president of the Confederacy.” It was true. He carried almost all of its original 13 states, and the 11 that eventually seceded and went to war with the Union, to protect its “peculiar institution” of slavery. Trump won those states too in 2016, and may well do so again.

“Contrary to what his detractors think, Trump did not create all of America’s divisions”

The states he won’t win are the northern, coastal, highly populated ones. He particularly loathes California whose rising Hispanic population has made it increasingly Democratic over the last generation. Clinton’s four-million vote margin over him in the state in 2016 was on its own enough to deprive Trump of victory in the popular vote nationwide, which still rankles. Oregon and Washington are hated blue states too. In Trump’s world, in Trump’s America, they can all go up in flames.

This formula is not limited to forest fires. The first day of autumn marked yet another grim milestone for the US: its 200,000th Covid death, far more than in any other country, about 20 per cent of the global total, though the US has little more than 4 per cent of the world’s population. Trump’s negligence and his anti-science denialism worsened things horrifically—36,000 lives could have been saved if the administration had “imposed social distancing measures” only a week earlier, said researchers at Columbia University (Trump: a “disgraceful, liberal institution”). He has awarded himself an “A plus” for his administration’s “phenomenal” handling of the pandemic, rationalised by his reading the numbers in a particular way: “If you take the blue states out, we’re at a level that I don’t think anybody in the world would be at.” The disease would be at a “very low level. But some of the states, they were blue states and blue state-managed.”

These remarks come not in muttered asides, or private conversations leaked by adversaries. They are proud, defiant assertions, made by Trump in the calculation that his base delights in rhetoric whacking it to “blue states” even as they burn. But that base, though substantial, is not large enough to reelect him. Unless he can again win a chunk of “switch” voters—those thousands who carry their politics lightly enough to have voted for Obama in 2012 then Trump in 2016—his obvious routes to victory narrow down to the point where he can win only by cheating, or with help from either the Republicans in Congress or state legislatures or the Republican-dominated courts.

The *New Yorker’s* Jeffrey Toobin and the *Atlantic’s* Barton Gellman, the biographer of the Bush era’s chief Machiavel Dick Cheney, have written scary, in-depth what-ifs which lay out the myriad paths by which Trump can effectively mount a legal or legislative coup. “Let us not hedge about one thing,” Gellman writes:

Donald Trump may win or lose, but he will never concede. Not under any circumstance... If Trump sheds all restraint, and if his Republican allies play the parts he assigns them, he could obstruct the emergence of a legally unambiguous victory for Biden... He could prevent the formation of consensus about whether there is any outcome at all. He could seize on that uncertainty to hold on to power.

His rambling in the first debate about the inevitability of electoral fraud prepares the ground for a contested outcome, the very scenario where Justice Barrett may come in. Anything less than an assurance that she would recuse herself if the Court considers Trump’s election should, as the eminent historian of American politics and the Catholic Church Garry Wills put it to me, “be enough to disqualify her on the one task Trump has assigned her.” But due process is not order of the day with Trump, who has recently refused to say whether he would accept a “peaceful transition of power” if the vote went against him, later adding: “We’re going to have to see what happens.”

These words sent waves of astonishment and even fear through the capital. And Republicans were quick to distance themselves from it. “What he says doesn’t matter,” said one Republican senator. “He says crazy stuff,” said a second. “We’ve always had a peaceful transition of power. It’s not going to change.”

But the last four years have shown that, when it comes to the crunch, Republicans on Capitol Hill will always back the president, if the alternative is ceding an inch to the Democratic Party. They have not lifted a finger as he denounces as rigged a vote that hasn’t yet happened and plants the seeds of insurgent post-election protests, uses his influence over the US Postal Service to curtail the mail-in balloting that is democracy’s best hope in a pandemic, and openly destabilises all electoral traditions—or at least, all those traditions established after 1860, when the election of Abraham Lincoln prompted an immediate secession of the same states now most loyal to Trump. Why not?



My enemy’s enemy

In the first years of Trump’s presidency, his low approval ratings were news. Today the opposite is true, and it is his unwavering support—even if the numbers have never changed all that much—that deserves attention. In late September Trump’s approval ratings were a bit north of 40 per cent, actually up on two years ago—this, astonishingly, after: (1) his impeachment; (2) a bipartisan ▶

Senate panel released a thousand-page report detailing, in the *New York Times's* precis, “an extensive web of contacts between Trump campaign advisers and Kremlin officials... and others tied to the country’s spy services”; (3) the pandemic—the worst public health crisis in 100 years; (4) a sudden collapse in the economy unmatched since the Depression; (5) the estimated 20,000 false or misleading statements he made in his first three years as president, before we get to his praise of despots like Kim Jong Un and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

The dogged support of a large minority would be inexplicable, were it not for the logic of a civil war: all can be forgiven by your own side, just as long as you are merciless with the other. The same logic colours the interpretation of other news that really ought to shock. In late September, the *New York Times's* revealed Trump had gone long years without paying any income tax, reporting huge business losses to the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) while telling the world that only he knew how to win. At the same time the *Times* showed Trump has not only been enriching himself through private business deals made from the White House with authoritarian governments (in Turkey, for one), but also owes more than \$300m in debts which will come due in the next four years. Trump initially brushed aside the report as “fake news” but the story wouldn’t go away because—as he well knows—the evidence came from federal tax documents. His next tactic was to denounce the leakers. Whoever they might be, they belong to the nameless, faceless enemy who are always there in our new civil war—hordes of invisible others, hidden in ambush.

“In civil war logic all can be forgiven by your own side, just as long as you are merciless with the other”

The suspicion grows that the Oval Office has become Trump’s sanctuary and that his actual motive in seeking a second term is to escape the several prosecutions that will greet him the instant he steps off White House grounds and becomes mere Citizen Trump. Apart from the IRS, he faces two “advanced” investigations in New York—both looking into his company’s finances, one involving payoffs he made to women who have said they had affairs with him. He is also being sued in New York for defaming a writer who has credibly accused Trump of raping her in the 1990s. All this may explain his abrupt decision a year ago to change “domiciles” from Manhattan to Palm Beach, where New York prosecutors and juries can’t reach him. To be fair, Trump has soured on his home state for other reasons too. It went almost as heavily for Hillary Clinton in 2016 as California did—she got nearly 60 per cent of the vote there—a stinging rebuke, from the neighbours who know him best. What did New Yorkers think of Trump’s spurning them for Florida? Goodbye and good riddance. “It’s not like Mr Trump paid taxes here anyway,” New York’s governor Andrew Cuomo said at the time. “He’s all yours, Florida.”

One might think that there would still be conservative patriots alarmed by all of this. And indeed, the former Republican strategist, organiser, and pundit William Kristol was at one point provoked to tweet: “That feeling when the political party you’ve belonged to almost your whole adult life turns into a cult of per-

sonality worthy of a banana republic.” Kristol belongs to a small nucleus of “Never Trumpers,” all journalists and writers. Others include the *New York Times* columnists David Brooks and Bret Stephens, the *Washington Post's* Max Boot and Jennifer Rubin, and the *Atlantic's* David Frum. In the first months of Trump’s presidency they seemed an important breakaway group, guardians of a serious conservatism. (I wrote about them myself.)

They remain interesting—and worth reading—but exert very little influence on the right, in part because they speak to and for a world that no longer exists. All are Jewish, neoconservatives, admirers of George W Bush, and were connected at one time or another with publications like the *Wall Street Journal* editorial pages, the *Weekly Standard* magazine, and the monthly *Commentary*. But the first has gone over to Trump, the second went out of business, the third occupies an ambiguous place—not exactly against Trump but not quite for him, much easier to decipher in its zealous criticism of Democrats and progressives. Between the trenches of this civil war, there really isn’t much room for right-wing dissent.

For the moment at least, the Trump firm has a grip on the conservative future. At August’s Republican National Convention, staged on the White House grounds in almost certain violation of election law, the Trumps were paraded as a “ruling family” with the principal speakers besides the President being his wife, his two daughters, and two sons. One, the hardline Donald Jr, is spoken of seriously as a candidate in 2024. It was he who was actually caught in flagrant “collusion” with Russian operatives in 2016, hoping to get “dirt” on Hillary Clinton that could be useful to Dad. Yet a poll of Republicans ranked him behind only Vice President Mike Pence, and well ahead of established Republicans like Senator Ted Cruz, who finished second in the 2016 primaries, and the 2012 nominee Mitt Romney.

Within the world of active politics—office holders, advisers, policy thinkers—there is scarcely a strongly anti-Trump conservative to be found. They are instead his supporters and in some cases champions. Why? Do they really share Trump’s boastful ignorance about science and health, his ideas about women and people of colour, and “shithole” foreign countries, his contempt for Nato and western democracies?

One revealing answer came in a widely read and discussed *Washington Post* op-ed essay by the foreign policy expert, Danielle Pletka, a senior fellow at the right-leaning American Enterprise Institute, one of Washington’s top think tanks. “I never considered voting for Trump in 2016,” the essay was titled, “I may be forced to vote for him this year.” Pletka does not pretend to like or admire Trump, his “erratic, personality-driven decision-making.” Bad as he is, however, she deems “the leftward lurch of the Democratic Party” even worse on issues like climate change, health care and immigration. And she fears that Joe Biden, a man with a centrist record that stretches back 50 years, is in fact captive to his party’s “hard-left ideologues”:

I fear the grip of Manhattan-San Francisco progressive mores that increasingly permeate my daily newspapers, my children’s curriculums and my local government. I fear the virtue-signaling bullies who increasingly try to dominate or silence public discourse—and encourage my children to think that their being white is intrinsically evil, that America’s founding is akin to original sin. I fear the growing self-censorship that guides many people’s every utterance, and the leftist vigilantes who view every personal choice—from recipes to hairdos—through their twisted prisms of politics and culture.” ▶



Two sides of the Trump operation:
the family of his fluent and appealing new
judicial pick, Amy Coney Barrett, and the
Proud Boys who he has put on “stand by”



And so “Trump, for all his flaws, could be all that stands between our imperfect democracy and the tyranny of the woke left.” Here, then, is how the polarising logic of the new civil war is expressed by the educated right. When pushed by an interviewer on why policies such as the sort of socialised medicine present in all other western democracies frightened her so, Pletka clarified that she did not believe that “socialised medicine was somehow going to end our democracy. I merely said that it was going to usher in things that were irreversible that were not going to be good for our country.”



Slippery slopes

This is the slippery slope argument well known to veteran observers of American conservatism. It was made by those intellectuals who rallied with Joseph McCarthy against Communism in the 1950s. (“This isn’t patty-cake we’re playing with the Russians,” said one. “You need a McCarthy to flush out the enemy.”) The same sort of intellectuals later backed Richard Nixon against anti-war and civil rights demonstrators in the 1970s when, in a preview of our own angry days, white vigilantes and black militants were secretly amassing arsenals in anticipation of the “Second Civil War.” Then, in the 1980s, they championed Ronald Reagan, when the enemy was “political correctness” and calls for divestment from apartheid South Africa. Later, after the 9/11 attacks, they rallied behind George W Bush’s crusade against “Islamofascists.”

In each case the thinking began in emotion and it does so again today. But long years of economic disappointment across swathes of the country have bred resentment, which today combines with the unhinged id in the Oval Office, to create a definite sense that the emotion could play out more dangerously this time. How dangerous? No one knows, but in late September the *New York Times* published a story under the headline: “At Pentagon, Fears Grow That Trump Will Pull Military Into Election Unrest.”

What makes this all the more frightening is that the President is—determinedly—looking for the threat in the wrong direction. Intelligence reports indicate that the gravest danger to the republic comes from the organised “alt-right”—its gun-toting militias, online conspiracists such as QAnon (a now not-so-subtle presence in the Republican Party of Texas), and avowed “chauvinists” who don black shirts, like the so-called Proud Boys. At the Cleveland debate, however, Trump insisted “almost everything I see comes from the left-wing, not from the right-wing,” and primed the extremists for action: “Proud Boys, stand back and stand by.”

Those on the intellectual right may not overtly support such manoeuvres. Instead they won’t talk about it and keep saying—against the evidence—that the true danger comes from elsewhere, from Black Lives Matter protesters. And they wouldn’t demur from Trump’s follow-up to the incendiary “stand by” line—“I tell you what, somebody has got to do something about antifa [“anti-fascist” activists] and the left.” The right’s deeper

enmity, however, is aimed at homelier targets—legislators writing bills to introduce a “Green New Deal” and social-democratic professors on the Ivy League campuses who fill the heads of impressionable students, often enough the sons and daughters of conservatives, with the revisionist picture of America so upsetting to Danielle Pletka.

This is the war being fought within the postal “zip codes” where the well-to-do, Republican and Democrat alike, all dwell together, in palmier days carpooling and play-dating, now mingling at the proper social distance and trading pleasantries muffled by their Covid masks. Don’t be fooled by the proudly maskless Trumpist army; in the upper echelons, conservatives are as mindful of their health as of their investment portfolios. It is out of concern for the second that they smile at the unwashed Trumpists who can be counted on not to play patty-cake with troublemakers who advocate “socialised medicine” or disrespect the old stories about America’s exceptional greatness, as the “indispensable” nation, and a land of limitless opportunity.

In truth, there are no ladders up for many Americans today, including some who support Trump, and there never were many that went all the way to the top: they were only ever scaled by rare examples, such as the savants “RBG” and “Nino” Scalia. But it is in the name of a mythical past that our revolutionists of the right make their impassioned case.

Amey Coney Barrett embodies both halves: notional continuity with past American “greatness,” and disruption to the American present. “Should I be confirmed, I will be mindful of who came before me,” she said after Trump formally introduced her to the public: “The flag of the United States is still flying at half-staff in memory of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg to mark the end of a great American life.” Does it matter to Barrett that Ginsburg struggled mightily against death in the hope of keeping a jurist like Barrett off the Court? If so, Barrett knows better than to say so, just as she knows better than to say that her own years as a justice are likely to be spent in repudiating every cause Ginsburg tried to advance.

In this sense, too, Trump has remade his party and the conservative movement. They are all transactionists now, going through the motions of a shared civility while remorselessly advancing a divisive agenda. But they are not only transactionists: they also harbour an authentic fear that the world they know is disappearing or will be changed into something they don’t recognise. That the change is coming about democratically makes no difference. If democracy is making these bad things happen, then democracy itself must be stopped. This is the common ground where the gilded pro-Trump elite meets the scruffier pro-Trump base.

Donald Trump did not create these conditions. They created him, and will outlast him no matter what happens in November. What the country will look like afterwards—whether the idea of the United States of America will survive this moment or become something drastically different—is a question that is now all but impossible to avoid. **P**

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Speed data

America's Electoral College

TOM CLARK & DAVID MCALLISTER

Electoral systems are a subject for nerds in very thick glasses—until the moment something goes wrong.

Before 2000, the “college” of elders that America’s founding fathers had imagined would wisely pick a president was a quaint anachronism. Its potential to turn a loser into a winner was of theoretical interest only, since it hadn’t happened in well over a century. Even when George W Bush triumphed with marginally fewer votes than Al Gore in that year, it looked like a fluke produced by the very close result.

In all modern elections, the College had worked to multiply the more popular candidates’ advantage several-fold, the only exceptions being three photo-finishes, two (1960, 1968) where leads of less than a point were magnified by more than you would have expected, and then 2000, when the process went into reverse.

But in 2016, Hillary Clinton’s chunky 2.8 million margin wasn’t enough to stop Donald Trump, and projections for this time suggest that America’s shifting psephology is entrenching a permanent handicap for the Democrats.

If that weren’t explosive enough, 2016 saw an unprecedented number of “faithless electors” who ignored their states’ vote and went their own way. Amid expectations of chicanery, it’s time to don the thick glasses, and swot up on those fusty old rules. **D**

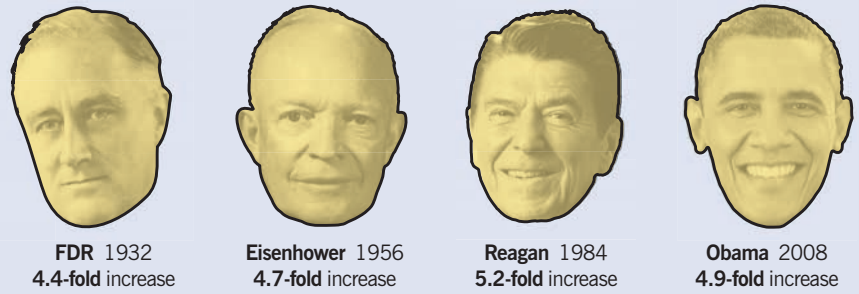
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SOURCES: CHART 1: ELECTION FIGURES FROM USELECTIONATLAS.ORG BY DAVE LEIP. CHART 2: ANALYSIS FROM NATE SILVER OF FIVETHIRTYEIGHT.COM, SEPTEMBER 2020

1 Popularity plus

For generations, the US Electoral College worked to turbo-charge the victory of the more popular candidate. Typical leads (like 2008) and landslides (like 1984) were often multiplied in much the same way

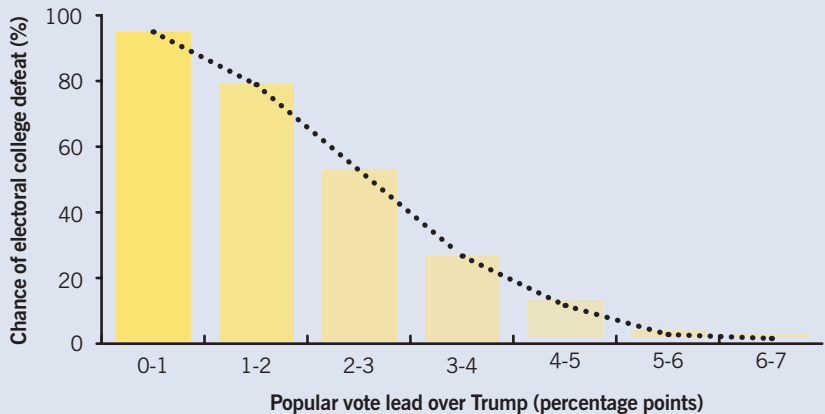
How popular vote advantages multiplied into bigger percentage-point leads among College electors



2 Losing by winning

In 2016, Hillary Clinton was the first candidate in well over a century to lose after winning the popular vote by more than one point. But this could become a pattern. Analyst Nate Silver’s numbers suggest that even if Biden is a couple of points clear, the odds will be against him

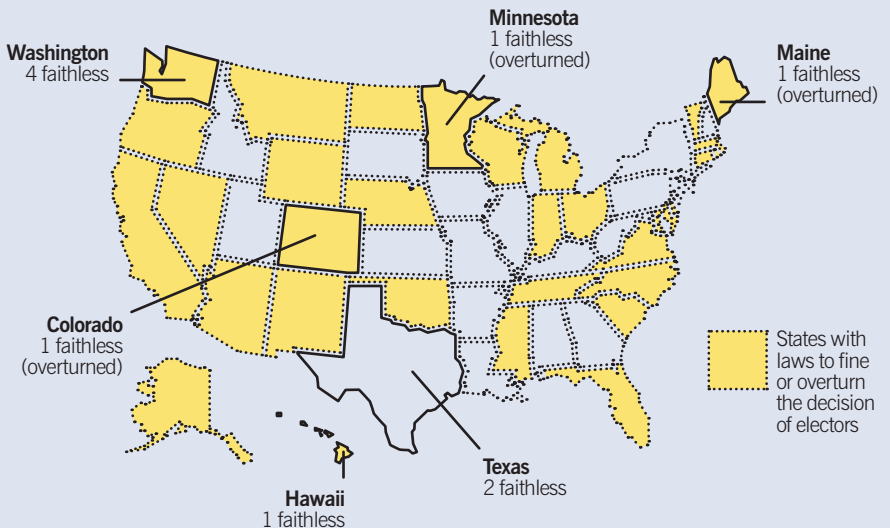
Biden’s chance of defeat in the electoral college with different popular vote leads



3 Faith no more

Nothing in the constitution obliges the 538 individual electors who make up the College to follow the vote in their state, though sometimes state laws do. In the century of elections before 2016, no more than one ever went rogue. But last time ten tried to go their own way, and seven succeeded

Faithless electors in the 2016 presidential election





A world awash with debt

The pandemic has landed treasuries everywhere with whacking great overdrafts. Debt denialism is dangerous, but panicked prudence will self-defeat. There's no easy escape: the only serious option is learning to govern while deep in the red

BARRY EICHENGREEN

Covid-19 changes everything, or so it is said. It is certainly true of public finances, which have been drastically changed and not for the better. The United States entered the Covid crisis with federal government debt held by the public of 80 per cent of GDP, already twice what it was in 2008 before the financial crisis blew a hole in the books. This debt will now approach 100 per cent of GDP by the end of 2020, according to the country's bipartisan fiscal watchdog, the Congressional Budget Office. It will reach 110 per cent of GDP by the end of the decade, assuming that nothing more is done, and continue rising.

In the UK, public sector net debt hit £2 trillion this summer for the first time in history. According to the Office for Budget Responsibility, net debt was up by 20 per cent of GDP on a year earlier, to 100.5 per cent, more than keeping pace with the US. As for the next few years, even before the Covid crisis hit, public debts were set to grow—the Office's latest fiscal forecast, which dates from March and scarcely allowed for the virus, envisaged a rise of 15 per cent over the coming five years. The crisis will now mean slower growth and even heavier debts. So how worried should we be? And what are the prospects for repairing the damage?

We know how the last great shock to hit the public finances was handled in the UK: by the austerity programme of the Cameron government, which was heavily tilted towards retrenchment in public expenditure, with taxation playing only a supporting role. This time, with public services already palpably frail, Chancellor Rishi Sunak, former investment banker though he is, was said to be contemplating tax rises to “repay” the government's coronavirus support in his autumn Budget. In the end, as a second wave hit, he abruptly cancelled the event, and substituted an emergency statement which introduced a new wage subsidy scheme and extended one temporary tax *cut*, all told loosening the purse strings by an estimated £5bn, and at a time when new social restrictions will likely depress the economy and with it government receipts. The continuing lack of any official plan to reduce the debt, or even official costings for the new policies, adds to a sense that Britain will be living in its shadow for a time to come.

Meanwhile in the US, the jumble of promises that is an inevitable feature of election season does not conceal that the two parties are contemplating different approaches to the same problem. Joe Biden is proposing higher taxes on households with incomes above \$400,000, while Republicans in Congress are looking to limit spending. But just looking at the numbers and the way they have risen, it is natural to wonder whether *any* of this is going to be

enough to bring down the liability. The prospective US debt levels are much higher than anything in recent memory.

But take a longer view, and we have been here before—“here” being debts exceeding 100 per cent of national income—including after the First and Second World Wars and, in Britain's case, after the Napoleonic Wars. Over nine decades ending in 1913, Britain's Napoleonic-era debt was reduced from nearly 200 per cent of GDP, twice current levels, to just 28 per cent. The US reduced its post-Second World War debt ratio from 121 per cent of GDP in 1946 to just 34 per cent in 1973, the UK from a staggering 270 per cent to 55 per cent over the same period.

So, can we again “repair the damage” in anything like the same way? Don't bet on it. Circumstances today are, as we shall see, different in ways that will prevent us from replicating these historic achievements. Instead, we need to accept the reality that we're going to be rolling debts over for many years to come, and managing them by resisting the dangerous appeal of premature prudence while also being ready to make tough choices the moment they are required.

A long squeeze?

A first theoretical option would be to accept the long squeeze needed and repay the debt, not unlike what Britain did in the 19th century. But when Britain's post-Napoleonic debt consolidation began, the franchise was still limited to just 2.5 per cent of the British population. There was huge overlap between the government's creditors on the one hand, and an elite electorate and its Members of Parliament on the other. Even after the Reform Acts of 1832 and 1867, it was hard to find a Member of Parliament who was not also an investor in government bonds. After the third Reform Act, in 1884, three in five Englishmen had the vote, but Gladstone's doctrine of sound finance, which meant running surpluses and limiting the debt, remained firmly entrenched.

As a result, through the long and often-deflationary Victorian era, spending on social programmes, mainly welfare relief for the disenfranchised, was held in check. Creditors who wanted the value of their claims respected and their loans repaid could insist that the government do so by running budget surpluses, not for years or decades, but for the better part of a century.

Circumstances today are different. Every interest group is now enfranchised, and potential tax increases will be strenuously resisted by those groups upon which they would fall. Pressure to maintain or increase social spending will be intense, the coronavirus crisis having laid bare inequalities of opportunity and gaps in ▶

the safety net. It is fanciful to imagine that democratic societies emerging from a public-health emergency will—over the long decades that would be required to bring public debts down to earlier levels—now commit to paying off the government’s creditors at the expense of health, education and infrastructure.

Even the deep and controversial cutbacks of the austerity years never yielded an overall budget surplus: they merely reduced the overdraft. Indeed, if one asks which countries in the modern era have succeeded in running a so-called primary budget surplus (net of the interest payments required to keep the debt ticking over) of at least 5 per cent per annum for a decade, which is how long it would now take to halve the UK or US debt ratio, one finds just three: Singapore after 1990, Belgium after 1995, and Norway after 1999. Norway’s surpluses were associated with a passing North Sea oil windfall, and the government paid revenues it knew would flow for just a few years into its petroleum fund for the benefit of future generations. Singapore had a strong, technocratic government insulated from popular pressures and concerned to build up a reserve against contingencies, and so paid current revenues into its sovereign wealth funds. As for 1990s Belgium, a country whose modern identity is bound up with the European Union, it had the highest debt/GDP ratio of any member state, and so felt an urgent need to pay down the debt in order to convince its partners that it deserved to be admitted to the developing Eurozone. Special circumstances all, none of which prevails in the US or UK today. Any government that sought to pay down the debt in the way it was done after Waterloo—by asking the populace to take the pain, year after year, decade after decade, generation after generation—would be inviting the electorate to punish it at the ballot box.

Inflating away?

The main practical alternative to austerity without end is growing the denominator of the debt-to-GDP ratio. This can be done by actually growing the economy so the debt weighs less heavily, by raising inflation such that debts issued in yesterday’s money are simply worth less, or by a combination of the two.

Faster economic growth is the painless solution to this as to other problems. It was a large part of the answer to debt after the Second World War. Alas, we lack the magic elixir to produce faster growth. Compared to the mid-20th century, our demography is less favourable, and productivity growth has slowed. Economic dynamism, as measured by rates of firm entry and exit, has declined, and follower firms are more sluggish than they used to be in catching up with technological leaders. Educational attainment is rising more slowly than in the 1950s and 60s—past expansion means there are now far fewer uneducated folk for schools and colleges to enrol.

What about inflating away the debt? For a start, there are questions over the ability of the authorities to generate inflation today. Central banks produce inflation by purchasing government bonds with cash.

At the moment, they’re purchasing them big time, yet struggling to get inflation up to 2 per cent.

These circumstances lend a superficial plausibility to so-called “Modern Monetary Theory,” the newly-fashionable strand of thought that questions whether central bank bond purchases, whatever their amount, will produce faster inflation. However, the explanation for the absence currently of higher inflation lies not in the fact that governments and central banks have magically discovered the ability to engage in limitless spending without causing inflation, but rather in the offsetting behaviour of the private sector. Although governments are spending more, households and firms are spending less: the many threats to income posed by the Covid crisis have reminded them of the inadequacy of their financial reserves. In the same way that the Great Depression impressed on the 1930s generation the importance of prudence, inculcating caution in personal spending and hesitancy in commercial investment, those who have endured the Covid crisis will have been taught, by painful personal experience, to spend less and save more. Insofar as current government largesse is simply offsetting the resulting reduction in private spending, there will be no excess demand. No inflation need result. And judging from the pricing of assets such as index-linked bonds in financial markets, investors envisage this offsetting continuing for years, with inflation remaining on or near the floor for as far as the eye can see.

“The idea that the central banks can keep inflation safely in that range for an extended period is the equivalent to thinking you can be half pregnant”

Investors could be wrong; it wouldn’t be the first time. In a newly-published book, Charles Goodhart and Manoj Pradhan predict that inflation will rise in short order to “more than 5 per cent, or even on the order of 10 per cent...” But even then, inflating away the debt would not be straightforward. Between a third and a half of the central UK government’s sterling debt is either index-linked (and hence can’t be inflated away, because repayments rise with prices) or else borrowed short-term (and so will need to be refinanced on new and costlier terms, as soon as investors see they need compensation for inflation). The Bank of England would have to maintain inflation rates of 5 to 10 per cent for the *better part of a decade* to reduce the overall debt ratio by half. Many economists see the idea that the central bank can keep inflation safely in that range for an extended period without having to raise rates as the equivalent to thinking you can be half pregnant. The risk is that workers, not unreasonably, will respond by ▶

The Iron Duke’s victory at Waterloo was followed by iron discipline over the books; the bills from Churchill’s finest hour were dealt with by decades of inflationary growth; neither option is open to chancellor Rishi Sunak amid the “war” on Covid-19



demanding higher wages, pushing inflation up further. The government, meanwhile, would soon be forced to pay higher interest on new bonds it issues. The central bank will then be forced to push inflation up even higher to engineer the same reduction in the real burden of the debt. Every existing contract would be second-guessed. Double-digit inflation would not be good for investor confidence. It never is.

Irrespective of whether or not engineered inflation is an attractive answer to debt in theory, there would be serious resistance to overcome before it could be pursued in practice. The idea that a low and predictable rate of inflation is a prerequisite for growth is at least as deeply ingrained in official circles as is the belief that indebtedness should be contained. And that is before we get to the politics of interest. If central banks were to boost inflation suddenly and significantly, they would be inflicting large financial losses on the pension funds, insurance companies and banks who hold government bonds. These are big and powerful players in our economies, and the retirees who save through them are a big and powerful voting bloc in our ageing electorates.

In sum, it is doubtful that inflation ever was a “get out of jail free” card for states with big debts. Even if it were, it doesn’t look like one that can be played today.

Thinking the unthinkable?

If growth, inflation and sustained austerity are all implausible strategies for rapidly dealing with the debt, then one other logical avenue remains open, at least in principle: namely default. It sounds shocking, but some analysis has suggested that in the extreme circumstances of the 1930s, countries that refused to repay some or all of what they had promised to lenders, including much of Latin America and parts of Europe, actually did better than those that honoured their obligations. So could things get to the point where nations again think the unthinkable?

“Underlying differences with indebted Japan mean inflation could pick up here in a way that’s not been seen there”

In judging whether there is even a potentially practical option here, it is first necessary to distinguish between domestic and foreign-held debts. Outright default on domestic debt has historically been rare, because people with significant funds to lend to their own government will, inevitably, be a powerful interest group. As a historical survey by Carmen Reinhart and Kenneth Rogoff concludes, “overt domestic default tends to occur only in times of severe macroeconomic distress.” Given the temporary nature of the Covid lockdown, there must be doubts about whether our current slump will qualify. We can at least hope that it won’t be as severe and extended as that of the 1930s! Even if it is, in modern stakeholder societies—where individuals manage their own retirement accounts, often invested in government bonds—outright default would be seen as an affront, and would engender more powerful resistance than engineered inflation.

As for defaulting on foreign-held debt, this may have been a least-bad option for countries in the unhappy circumstances of the 1930s, when international markets were collapsing and eco-

nomie life was being reorganised to emphasise what Keynes called “national self-sufficiency.” In those circumstances, the inevitable costs—loss of access to foreign finance and to export markets—were things countries were anyway having to live with. Today, trade and financial globalisation may have hit a rough patch, but no one thinks it’s about to unravel entirely. Hence the calculations of governments have to be different. A 21st-century country’s prosperity is intimately bound up with the way it fits into the world economy, and so—especially for an open economy like “Global Britain”—telling the rest of the world that debts won’t be repaid is not a sensible risk to run.

The last-gasp “unthinkable” option for getting rid of the debt, then, turns out to be unthinkable indeed. The conclusion is now inescapable: there is no quick way out. High post-Covid debt levels are not going to be reversed out anytime soon. They will be with us for many years. So what results should we expect? And how should we approach them?

Turning Japanese

To see how things might play out, look at Japan. In one sense at least, Japan is in precisely the position the US, UK and other highly indebted countries will find themselves in once coronavirus is history. Its public debt exceeds 150 per cent of GDP, even higher than in western nations. (And that figure is net debt, subtracting the government’s assets, both liquid and illiquid, from its total liabilities: subtracting only liquid assets as such, following UK practice, would make its debt look more formidable.)

For some years prior to the Covid-19 crisis, Japan’s debt ratio was going neither up nor down, anticipating the stasis we are now likely to see in the west. Private spending was chronically weak, consumers having lived through an extended economic and banking crisis and learned prudent habits from the experience. Risk-averse Japanese corporations built up their reserves, while households ploughed their savings into government bonds. Thus, interest rates on those bonds remain low despite the huge debts. And inflation still remains subdued, even though the Bank of Japan has been buying government bonds for years and now owns fully half the outstanding stock.

The consequences for Japan of being saddled with this vast public debt have been negative but not catastrophic. There is an uneasy awareness that extraordinary measures—the Bank of Japan holding vast amounts of government debt—have become the indispensable precondition for ordinary financial conditions. There are worries that the liquidity of the bond markets has been damaged by the central bank having taken so many bonds out of the market. A tempting path back towards normalcy might seem to be to somehow pressure banks, insurance companies and pension funds to increase their bond holdings so that the central bank no longer needs to mop them all up and can gradually contract its balance sheet. But going down this route can be fraught: push too hard, and the banks become sorely exposed in the event of any rise in interest rates: it would push down the value of their stock of bonds, and so ramp up the dangers of a financial crisis.

As for the broader economy, since 2011, GDP per capita has risen at about two-thirds the rate in the US, and at just about the same disappointing pace as in the UK. While low investment is partly to blame for sluggish productivity growth, and while it may be tempting to ascribe this to the public debt overhang, doing so would be mistaken. To the extent that government debt “crowds out” private investment, it does so by raising interest rates and borrowing costs. But Japan has seen no rise in interest rates.

Rather, firms have been hesitant to invest because of the chronic weakness of consumer demand, the problem that the US, the UK and other advanced economies are about to confront.

Conceivably, the costs of Japan's high public debt could be lurking elsewhere. Because its government is already so heavily indebted, it may be constrained in responding to the next crisis. But this fear can be overcome as well. Like other countries, Japan was heavily affected, economically and in terms of public health, by the Covid-19 pandemic. Yet the fact that it entered the crisis with a public debt in excess of 150 per cent of GDP did not prevent it from mounting an aggressive fiscal response. According to the IMF's Covid policy tracker, the combined additional spending and foregone revenue in Japan represents a larger share of its national income than in any other G20 country except the US. To be sure, if and when interest rates rise to more normal levels, it will be much more difficult, even impossible, for the Japanese government to respond in this way. Again, however, this hasn't happened yet.

Revenge of the Austerians

In practice, Japan's problems have been gratuitously compounded by a series of government own goals. Perplexing as it may seem, given the staggering size of the debts and the regularity of Japan's deficits, Tokyo has in fact contributed to the problem of stubbornly weak demand by failing to substitute adequately for the missing private spending. Worries about the debt have led to premature belt-tightening, in the form of tax rises before the sustained recovery of private spending.

It has done so not once but repeatedly. It raised consumption taxes in 1997, which hit consumer demand, and overall growth weakened by 3 percentage points over the subsequent 10 quarters. It raised them once more in 2014, and in a fiscal year where 1.4 per cent growth had been forecast, the economy ended up contracting by 0.3 per cent. It raised them again in October 2019, leading to a sudden slide in consumer spending and an overall economic contraction at the sharp annualised rate of 6 per cent in the final quarter. As a result, measures intended to lower the debt ended up leaving it weighing even more heavily on a stagnant economy.

There are echoes here of the post-financial crisis debate over austerity. A favourite argument of the Austerians was that fiscal consolidation could be expansionary in heavily indebted economies. Since high debt posed all manner of risks, narrowing the deficit, they argued, would inspire confidence and, through that channel, boost investment and growth. The experience of the world's most heavily indebted country is inconsistent with this view. Japan's experience thus serves as a warning that a panicked scramble to shrink debts prematurely—before private spending has durably recovered—would be damaging and counterproductive.

Will history rhyme?

But maybe Japan's history is not, in fact, Britain and America's destiny. Perhaps the scar of the Covid-19 crisis will heal more quickly than that of Japan's banking

crisis and extended economic slump, and British and American households will quickly revert to their earlier spending habits. Perhaps the main explanation for the caution of Japanese investors and the subdued spending of consumers is not the demoralising effects of the country's banking and economic crisis but rather its aged population, the older simply being more cautious and thrifty. Perhaps there is even an upside to the notorious inequality of the Anglo-Saxon economies—if it produces more “hand-to-mouth consumers,” who can be relied on to keep spending instead of saving, because virtually everything they earn has to go on paying the rent and putting food on the table. And perhaps corporate investment will recover more quickly in the west, where CEOs do not share the temperamental caution of their Japanese counterparts.

But if any of these potential differences is indeed important, and Britain and America do not go Japan's way, that is not necessarily reassuring. All of them imply that at some point or other, private spending in the west could bounce back from Covid-19 in a way that Japan never did from its earlier crises. If so, inflationary pressures *will* intensify in a way that they have not in Japan. And one thing we know about heavily indebted countries is that when such pressures begin to be felt, inflation and interest rates will tend to pick up especially sharply, unless and until public policy grips the problem. Central banks will then have to stop financing deficits and governments would be forced to rein them in. Specifically, they will have to turn to some combination of higher taxes and lower public spending—and quickly—to avert a spiral of rising inflation and rates.

Raising taxes and cutting public spending will not be easy in politically polarised societies recently traumatised by an historic pandemic. Do so too late, and inflation will take off, putting the sustainability of recovery at risk. Do so too early, however, and there will be no recovery to jeopardise. It is said that in politics, as in love, timing is everything. The same is true of fiscal policy.

Hopefully, the pandemic will soon pass into history. But the debts racked up as governments sought to cushion its effects will remain facts of economic life for the foreseeable future. Bringing them back down to pre-crisis levels will take decades, even generations. While economic collapse would have been worse, this shouldn't blind us from the consequences of the actions taken to avert it. The preservation of financial stability will become more challenging, and stretched governments could well be more constrained when it comes to confronting the next emergency, whatever that may be. Governments must be ready to make painful decisions on tax and spending—potentially at short notice—but they must also resist tightening before the recovery is established, because premature shows of prudence are doomed to self-defeat. In a world awash with debt, hawkish rigidity and dovish denialism are equally dangerous. **■**

Barry Eichengreen is, with Asmaa El-Ganainy, Rui Esteves and Kris Mitchener, currently completing a new book on public debt. His last book was “The Populist Temptation: Economic Grievance and Political Reaction in the Modern Era” (Oxford)





Prospect Portrait

Mr cold eyes

The new Director-General of the BBC, Tim Davie, is a marketing man with a Conservative background. But as the corporation faces a determined assault from the right, **Jean Seaton** argues that he could be precisely the man to defend it

ILLUSTRATION BY TIM MCDONAGH

“Can you survive being DG?” Tim Davie asked me when he was temporarily catapulted into the job of Director-General of the BBC in 2012. Davie had previously been passed over for the job in favour of George Entwistle, who came and went in 54 days as the BBC was engulfed in a scandal that struck at the institution’s soul. Having been too quiet for too long on the rumours about Jimmy Savile, the corporation had then broadcast false allegations of paedophilia against an unnamed conservative politician, soon identified online as the former Tory chair Lord McAlpine. Amid this mess, Davie was watching *Skyfall* with his wife and three sons in a Reading cinema when he got the call from the BBC Chair Chris Patten.

Eight years later he has the job outright, after waiting undercover like a cheetah—with the presence and the power to spring. And he’s hungry for it too. Last year, he turned down an approach to head the Premier League on a salary significantly higher than he will earn at the BBC. Indeed, Davie is taking a £150,000 pay cut from his current position as head of the commercial arm, BBC Studios. The person who one former BBC journalist described as “this South London geezer who is proud to have made it” could be the one to shift the BBC from its current defensive posture.

The challenges are epic. Domestically, Davie faces a new order of political

attack. Boris Johnson’s government has the BBC in its sights as part of its (so far) successful game plan to turn established institutions into enemies of the people—so that their independence can be stymied and their authority tamed. (The rumour is that the last Director-General, Tony Hall, adroitly retired in August to protect the independence of his successor’s appointment from any potentially hostile new BBC Chair—David Clementi steps down from that post at the end of this year.) For some key players in government, hostility towards the broadcaster long predates the BBC’s Brexit coverage, which Leavers have regarded as being biased towards the Remain side. A 2004 blog post by the New Frontiers Foundation, a short-lived think-tank run by the Prime Minister’s now-chief aide Dominic Cummings, states: “There are three structural things that the right needs to happen in terms of communications... 1) the undermining of the BBC’s credibility; 2) the creation of a Fox News equivalent/talk radio shows/bloggers etc, to shift the centre of gravity; 3) the end of the ban on TV political advertising.” Lee Cain, No 10’s current communications chief, is consistently hostile towards the corporation. Government ministers refused to appear on the *Today* programme until Covid-19 sent them scampering back. Rows over so-called “liberal bias”—such as whether patriotic songs can be sung on the Last Night of the Proms—erupt with increasing frequency and there is

now a politically concocted campaign to “defund the BBC.” BBC-bashing is a useful distraction for politicians. The corporation has its high-profile stars and it is ever-present on televisions, radios and our phones. And, crucially, because the institution is paid for by all of us, it has a unique responsibility to cater to everyone and so is bound to disappoint somebody.

There are vast international pressures. Not only does the BBC face competition from some of the world’s largest companies—Amazon, Netflix and YouTube—it is also the target of well-funded foreign competitors from China and Russia spreading disinformation. Then there are the more underground attempts to undermine certainty, science, and trust in institutions.

These existential questions will inevitably be in play with the renewal of the BBC’s charter in 2027. But they could be up for debate much sooner, because the government is signalling that the mid-charter stocktake in 2022 will be much more than a formality. So does Davie have what it takes to reform, renew and rescue the corporation by putting it at the heart of modern British lives, and pitching it successfully in a global market?

Davie comes from a modest background in Croydon. “My base wiring is *Blue Peter*, suburban Britain. The BBC was absolutely part of what I was,” he said in a Royal Television Society lecture in 2015. Born in 1967, his father was a wine and spirit salesman ▶

and his mother was a psychiatric nurse and teacher. When he was 11 years old, his parents divorced. Like a number of BBC directors general (Lord Reith, Alasdair Milne, Mark Thompson), the space left by an absent father gave Davie a lot of room to fill. He was a scholarship boy—also like a lot of DGs—and went to the private Whitgift School, his passport to Cambridge in 1985. He read English at Selwyn, one of the first colleges to take women, and was taught by its first female fellow, Jean Chothia. Davie wrote a dissertation on the mid-20th century novelist Ivy Compton-Burnett that so impressed Tony Tanner, a great Cambridge literary figure, that he awarded it an almost unheard-of mark of 80. Novelist Penelope Lively once wrote that Compton-Burnett created “a Sartrean world... the subject matter is the malign exercise of power.” Useful training for a career at the BBC, perhaps.

The student idealism of the 1960s had changed by the late 1980s. Thatcher’s children had a more pragmatic take on work, business and the world. But Davie wanted to be a DJ. At Cambridge, he played bands like Underworld at a now-defunct nightclub called Route 66 with Christian Tattersfield (still a close friend), who later became CEO of Warner Music.

After Cambridge, Davie joined Procter & Gamble as a graduate trainee, part of a golden generation who all went on to become media executives (Gavin Patterson went on to run BT, and Jeremy Darroch became head of Sky). After working on accounts including Crest toothpaste, Vidal Sassoon and Old Spice, Davie joined PepsiCo as the Marketing Manager for 7UP before being promoted to Marketing Manager for the Pepsi brand itself. He turned the Pepsi can blue in 1996 with a celebrity launch at Gatwick Airport (he has a “taste for stars,” says one BBC colleague). In one stunt he painted Concorde blue and he ran attack ads against Pepsi’s big rival Coke. He talked in unabashed marketing-speak: “We are defining the future, while the competition has created a retro brand.”

Davie went on to become Vice-President of Marketing and Franchise at PepsiCo Europe, and had a stint in their New York office. Asked why he came back from the US, he said his wife Anne was missing her mum. As well as being a devoted husband he is a “tender father,” said one observer, and is very close to his mother (whom he takes to the Proms).

He stood, unsuccessfully, as a Conservative councillor in Hammersmith in 1993 and 1994—at a time when it was profoundly unfashionable to be Tory in creative circles—and reached the dizzying heights of ward deputy chairman. If he was building up political capital for the future, he was also taking on some baggage as well. One of his first steps as DG was to tell the *Daily Telegraph* he would be cracking down on left-wing comedy. Some on the left are worried that satire, which naturally takes as its target the party in power, will be stifled by the move. His comments presumably went down well in Downing Street. But it would be a mistake to interpret his intervention as prefiguring a crude lurch to the right in editorial policy. It may be a shrewd bit of tactical repositioning, but the thing to watch—from a DG who has confidently re-asserted the centrality of BBC impartiality—is the commissioning that follows from it. Interestingly, he has set ambitious targets for changing the staff profile at the BBC to increase gender and racial diversity.

“One of his first steps as DG was to tell the *Daily Telegraph* that he would be cracking down on left-wing comedy”

Davie joined the BBC in 2005, when Mark Thompson, the most strategic of DGs, head-hunted him. Thompson says he was consciously trying to “widen the gene pool” of BBC leaders, and chose Davie because he was “really commercial, really fresh and loved quality content.”

Davie’s first job was as Director of Marketing, Communications and Audiences. He was an enthusiastic belt-tightener, making deep job cuts in his department, which also enabled him to create a team in his own image. His commercial nous is clear, but to get to the top of the BBC you have to work on the creative side. Taking his chance, he became Director of Audio and Music within three years, sitting on the board with responsibility for all the BBC’s music output and national radio networks. He proposed to cut BBC Radio 6 Music, the alternative digital station beloved by discriminating younger listeners. If this was a cunning feint it worked—public objections saved the station. One observer

said he was “sophisticated in how he won BBC mandarins over.” Davie became an insider while keeping a touch of outsider. When he became acting DG in 2012, he impressed everyone by immediately bringing calm and order, overseeing inquiries into the Savile scandal.

The investigative journalist John Sweeney, who has given headaches to many BBC executives, bumped into Davie in the corridor on his second day as temporary DG. Sweeney had just had an edgy *Panorama* investigation into the billionaire Barclay brothers, who own the *Daily Telegraph*, stalled by George Entwistle. Sweeney said Davie grinned and said plainly that the programme was at the top of his “High Risk” list. Days later he approved it. Sweeney told me: “He is a boss who is interested in you and what journalism you are doing.”

When Tony Hall was lured back from the Royal Opera House to become DG in 2013, Davie moved on up to head BBC Worldwide, the arm that sells BBC content around the world. In 2018, he became head of BBC Studios—giving him detailed knowledge across the whole sweep of both the commercial and creative sides of public service content production. The accusation that Davie is a mere marketing man who has never made a television programme in his life is irrelevant. The biggest challenge for the BBC in a time of political threat and technological flux is to understand how to maximise the BBC’s relevance and unique added value. A talented “brand man” who can distil the mission for staff in a pithy way and has a strategic vision for the BBC may be what is needed.

Another potential advantage is that Davie, in the age of fraught identity politics, comes to the job with “no liberal guilt,” in the words of former senior BBC executive Mark Damazer. He has “an unusual brain, he is comfortable in his own skin, at ease with himself.” Soon after his appointment, he saw off a row over the supposed racism of the Last Night of the Proms. John Mair, who runs the Media Society and is a Davie enthusiast, saw Hall as “woke and weak” in caving to those who objected to the lyrics of “Rule, Britannia!” which had been sung ironically for decades. Although Davie was suspected of ingratiating himself with the Prime Minister, who had condemned the move to ditch the singing, he had already made up his own mind to

Kind of blue: Tim Davie rebranded Pepsi in 1996



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reinstate it. Davie had brought in key people connected with the Proms and heard them out, before telling them: “Don’t worry. This is my decision, not yours.”

Davie doubters may put this together with the move on “left-wing comedy” and against the opinionated (and normally liberal) tweeting of TV stars (whom he told that social media campaigning was “a valid choice” but not for those “working at the BBC”) and begin to see a pattern. But if they think he is anything other than focused on non-partisan broadcasting they are reading him wrong.

When he talks about the BBC it is with an intensity missing in the marketing-speak of his Pepsi days. Interviewed by the Royal Television Society soon after his appointment (wearing a black T-shirt, a nod to the Steve Jobs executive look), he talked of impartiality as though it were a sacred compact with the audience, almost like a marriage: “We have together to renew our vows on impartiality. It is the bedrock of who the BBC is.” Helen Boaden, who spent 30 years at the BBC and was head of Audio and Music, said that Davie has made a “cracking start,” but that “it’s the lived experience of impartiality, the hard cases, which will

be his real test. He’s inheriting a young staff who are very bright and unusually woke. He may find them as much of a problem as the *Daily Telegraph*.” Yet a decision to downgrade the role of the editor of policy and standards may mean more of the toughest calls land on his desk, and may come back to haunt him.

“He likes to remind Tory critics that broadcasting is not a zero-sum game where the BBC crowds out competitors”

Davie feels the power and responsibility of the BBC’s universality keenly. In a moment of shocked recognition at actually having got the top job, he looked out onto the streets of Britain from a train. He realised that it was his job “to deliver value into every home.” The challenges of reimagining the BBC are huge. Broadcast is dying, online is everything, and he needs to be revolutionary. The licence fee is in peril. Young people do not own televisions and the business model faces a threat as never before, as a Conserva-

tive government warns it may decriminalise non-payment. Davie has a forceful answer to those on the right who want a subscription model. “I do not want a subscription BBC that serves the few. We could make a decent business out of it... But it would make us just another media company serving a specific group.” He pays tribute to the success of the UK’s creative industries, which he puts down to “a rather enlightened blend of the free market and smart universal interventions like the BBC.” He likes to remind Tory critics that broadcasting is not a zero-sum game, where the BBC is crowding out competitors. “Other companies benefit from the capacity of the BBC to grow markets.”

On the question of funding the licence fee for over-75s—originally a Gordon Brown pledge in 2000 that David Cameron’s coalition government told the BBC to pay for—a compromise has been reached whereby those receiving the means-tested Pension Credit will still be exempt while richer pensioners pay. Davie calls this “fair and just.” While he hopes that it will put the public controversy to bed, the deal still leaves the finances stretched: research by the ▶

charity The Voice of the Listener & Viewer calculates that, since 2010, total public funding for the BBC's UK services has, allowing for inflation, been cut by 30 per cent.

Davie is refreshing the definition of the BBC's Reithian values for a digital age. He wants the online service to be more seamless by shaking up the old-world way of commissioning, as well as put a stop to organising content by channel rather than theme. He wants to end the BBC needlessly competing with itself (the clash between the BBC Sounds app and iPlayer is silly). His answer to the challenge of other giant global media brands is not to engage in an arms race for talent but rather to narrow the focus of what the BBC does: the corporation's distinctiveness is based on creativity and impartiality. News remains at the heart of the mission: Davie quotes Ipsos-Mori figures that show 60 per cent of the British population trust the BBC first above all other news sources (the next nearest was at 8 per cent), and the BBC is more trusted than any American outlet is in the US. "In an age of fake news, social media campaigns, echo chambers of opinion, and noisy partisan media outlets, this, surely, is our time," he has said.

Damazero said that Davie is "very focused at getting to the heart of the problem, not complicating it and with no pretensions." One observer called him "Mr cold eyes," always calculating. Others say he is a straight arrow. Carrie Gracie, the correspondent who left the BBC amid a high-profile fight for equal pay, told me: "He might disagree with you. But he isn't a trimmer and he isn't afraid." Davie is very competitive, against himself as much as others—he has completed the London Marathon in just over three hours and has run the gruelling 156-mile, six-day Marathon des Sables across the Moroccan desert. He is a firm Crystal Palace supporter.

Yet is this undemonstrative man too rational for our raucous age? The cultural commentator Peter York said that Johnson and Cummings are at war with the BBC, and that it won't be able to deal with the challenge if it doesn't acknowledge this harsh reality. "The problem with Davie is that he is a very very good market deal-maker, and marketing is a rational world... But you can't make a logical deal with ideological politicians."

Criticism of BBC timidity over Brexit comes from the other side too. In 2018,

Nick Cohen wrote a caustic essay in the *New York Review of Books* centred on suggestions that an episode of *Panorama*, on alleged Russian interference in the Brexit referendum, had been pulled: "The BBC's report of the scandals around the Brexit referendum is not biased or unbalanced: it barely exists." On top of this come the international pressures, of which the alleged Brexit meddling was just one part. Yet this gives Davie one big



Outsider turned insider: Tim Davie's marketing background might be an asset in running the BBC

card to play: the BBC is the only media organisation in the west that has the heft to deal with the new information wars. It has certainly proved its worth during the pandemic, offering reliable information and vital help for parents home-schooling their children.

Tough as it is, there is nothing Davie can do about what Mark Thompson calls "the political weather—it blows in." He has to focus on the best defence of the BBC, which is making programmes that weave themselves into people's lives.

That the new Chair of the BBC will be from the reigning Tory establishment associated with Johnson and Cummings was not inevitable. (Charles Moore, the biographer of Margaret Thatcher who has in the past refused to pay the licence fee, is mooted as the government's

favourite candidate. Former *Daily Mail* editor Paul Dacre could become chair of Ofcom, which regulates the BBC.) Though there are complex checks and balances most people, even the civil servants who have been close to it, think that No 10 will ride roughshod over any BBC objections. Some previous Trojan horses have proved surprisingly good for the BBC in the long run; but there won't be a long run unless the corporation can hold together. Things fall apart when the chair and the DG cannot work together.

Yet Davie is playing a cunning game. He never sets the BBC up against other players—he is always praising competition from the likes of local broadcasters, Netflix and other news organisations—and is always banging home the unique and distinct position of the corporation in this mixed ecology. In answer to almost any question he has a four-layered response—first, "we are doing well, don't beat ourselves up"; second, "of course we have to try harder"; third, "we will do it by being more focused on being the best BBC"; and, fourth, "everybody else is doing well." It is a neat formula, which can do a lot of work in managing moods. But where does it lead you in terms of decisions?

Davie's first comments to staff reaffirmed the mission with clarity: "The BBC is the triumph of the idea that in an increasingly diverse society, the things that hold us together can be bigger than those that force us apart. The BBC is a force for good." But Mark Thompson, fresh from revolutionising the *New York Times*, said: "The BBC can be a successful force for forward change or you can make it a museum," adding that this extraordinary bit of British kit *should* be used to change things: "It is operational, it can do things, it builds things."

But is Davie sufficiently protective of the corporation's independence to harness all this potential? There is a story several people told me about him standing up to No 10. Whether it is true or not, it is telling that people find it convincing. In conversation, Davie apparently said, "I will get on with my job. I will sort the BBC. But don't mess with us." The new Director-General cares deeply for his organisation and will defend it from attack—and perhaps kill enough prey to survive.

Jean Seaton is the author of "Pinkoes and Traitors: The BBC and the nation, 1974 to 1987" (Profile)

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The care conundrum

Everyone agrees ‘something must be done’ about social care—but nothing ever is. Will the wave of Covid-19 care home deaths finally jolt us into grappling with the way we look after our frail and elderly?

NICHOLAS TIMMINS

ILLUSTRATION BY BETH GOODY

Social care—the huge, unloved, frequently neglected arm of Britain’s welfare state—has been put under the spotlight as never before by Covid-19. It started with the move to protect the NHS by emptying hospital beds to cope with the huge surge of cases that was to come. Thousands of patients untested for the virus were discharged to care homes. With that came a desperate failure to provide personal protective equipment fast enough, let alone tests for the coronavirus. There have since been perhaps 20,000 deaths in care homes in England alone, along with more deaths among those receiving care at home, who include not just the elderly but people with learning and other disabilities. It should not be forgotten that around half the social care budget is spent on adults of working age.

But with those grim statistics has come a focus, for once, on the low pay and lack of status of the sector’s staff, and a recognition of the heroics that many have performed in the face of enormous odds. The social care workforce numbers around 1.5m, roughly the same size as that of the NHS. But it is so much less visible, so much less valued. And, as the endgame of Brexit approaches, it is worth noting that around 250,000 of them are non-UK nationals, with no one, even now, clear what the final impact of breaking with the European Union will be.

It is almost 30 years since the last big reform of social care in England (Scotland is different and not covered here). But the judgment of the author of those reforms, Roy Griffiths, that social care is “a poor relation; everybody’s distant relative, but nobody’s baby” still has a horrible ring of truth. So now that the pandemic has highlighted the problems of social care as never before, we are going to fix it, right? Sadly, that would not be a sensible wager.

Social care reform is one of the great public policy failures of the past generation. Why? Perhaps in part because it is not actually one big problem, but at least three. Who pays for it? What do people get for that? And how and by whom should it be provided? Worse, there is no perfect answer to any of these questions. All solutions will require compromise at a time when there is not a lot of compromise in the air.

Before Covid, the debate around social care usually started with the one part of the problem that the pandemic has not highlighted: who pays for it? This coming spring, it will be a full quarter-century since Stephen Dorrell, the Health Secretary in the dying days of John Major’s administration, launched a consultation over the funding. Since then there have been over a dozen green and white papers, one Royal Commission, and the inquiry by the economist Andrew Dilnot—on the basis of which the coalition government actually legislated, before pulling the plug. In his first speech as Prime Minister, Boris Johnson promised to “fix the crisis in social care, with a clear plan we have prepared.” And still we wait and wait and wait...

Why is it all so hard? Partly thanks to history. The modern origins of what we now call social care lie in the National Assistance Act of 1946. Its opening sentence—passed in the same years as the legislation that established the NHS—boldly claimed to “abolish the poor law.” But it didn’t quite. The NHS remains largely free at the point of use and open to all, with entitlement to treatment still essentially dependent only on a clinician’s judgment that you need it. Social care, by contrast, remains first needs-tested, and then means-tested—the shadow of the infamously stringent poor law relief lingers on.

Individuals require a very high level of need (loosely defined in legislation) potentially to qualify for taxpayer assistance. Only potentially, because the next step is for your assets to be factored in. Until your savings are down to £23,250 you are on your own. The council may provide your care, but it can charge for it, even if you have assets worth somewhat less than this. Entirely free help only kicks in when your assets are down to £14,250. The rules, and especially their interaction with social security, are so complex that even a long article like this can’t explain them. But there is a crucial—certainly politically crucial—issue over housing. If you’re cared for at home, the value of that home is ignored. Go into residential or nursing care, however, and the value of your house is taken into account—which contributes to the great anguish over inheritance as, on top of whatever lifetime savings may have disappeared from the bank, the value of the family home can also be eaten up by the cost of care. ▶

Splitting the bills

This, then, is the first of the big three problems. Where should the balance lie between the individual and the taxpayer in paying for care? The options that have been canvassed are almost limitless. Back in 2009, Andy Burnham, now Mayor of Greater Manchester but then Health Secretary at the fag-end of Gordon Brown's government, proposed a National Care Service, to sit alongside the NHS. Free personal care, both at home and in a home, paid for by a limited, earmarked, levy that people could pay at age 65 or have reclaimed from their estate on death. Instead of consuming virtually all of some people's savings and assets, while leaving others untouched, everyone who reached what was then the state pension age would have contributed. The Conservatives dubbed that a "death tax" and put up posters of a tombstone with the letters "RIP OFF" on it. Eight years later, Theresa May attempted to sell an incomplete version of the Dilnot reforms (explained below) with the twist that the value of the home would be taken into account in the targeting of domiciliary as well as residential care as a nod towards making the sums add up. It was—in similarly intemperate language—branded a "dementia tax" by Labour. An enforced U-turn soon followed, contributing to the loss of May's parliamentary majority; another reminder of how the politics conspires against getting anything done.

“Social care remains, as Dilnot pointed out, the one big risk in life that is effectively uninsurable”

May's proposal aside, most Conservative proposals have tended to focus on various "partnership" schemes: mixing private insurance with somewhat more generous public provision. Take out private insurance and the state—the taxpayer—will allow you to retain more of your assets. The problem here is that there is no real private insurance market for social care—it remains, as Dilnot pointed out, the one big risk in life that is effectively uninsurable. Without a cap, the huge costs involved for those needing long years of care—which can amount to £250,000 and more—and deep uncertainty about how many more will incur such costs in an ageing population, thwart any commercial interest in covering this liability.

Then there are social insurance approaches, such as those adopted in Germany and Japan. Everyone—or, at least everyone over, say, 40—pays a social insurance levy in order that those who need it receive state assistance. Whatever their advantages, such schemes take time to mature and have proved more costly than expected.

Whatever solution is preferred, it will need to take on—right at the start—an argument that has helped ditch past proposals. Namely that *any* reform of the financing will provide more to the better off, and will

thus be accused of being "regressive." Labour MPs have levelled this charge against Tory proposals in the past, and Conservative MPs against Labour ones. "Regressive," and indeed "progressive," are used here in the way they are in economics—which does not chime with how the words are used elsewhere. A tax, for example, is regressive if it places a smaller burden on the rich than the poor. A service is likewise progressive in economic jargon if the better-off pay more and the least well-off pay less—or, as in the case with social care currently, the least well-off get something for free, but the better off have to pay for it.

But viewed through this particular economic lens, the National Health Service is decidedly regressive: those who could afford to pay for it do not have to. And yet we as a country appear remarkably proud that the health service is open to all, with care being provided on the basis of clinical need alone, irrespective of ability or inability to pay.

When it comes to social care, however, two sets of values clash—and it is important to note that they clash *within* political parties, as well as *between* them. In the Conservative Party there are those who believe that the purpose of savings in old age is to care for oneself, and if that destroys inheritance, so be it. But there are equally Conservatives who are committed to the principle of inheritance. In the Labour Party, while there may be more who instinctively believe in more communal provision of social care, there are also those who understand the natural desire of parents to leave something to their kids.

The one thing split parties can still agree on is to sock it to their opponents, and so end up with MPs on each side opportunistically charging any reform emanating from the other as unacceptably "regressive"—when the plain fact is that any reform to the financing is bound to be that. Indeed, if you want a *truly* "progressive" system then... do nothing. The current one tightly targets help on the least well-off, since you are on your own until you are down to your last £23,250. The much better-off can do without the help; the least well off get their care free. It is all those in between who are left sorely exposed, a real social problem which—in everyday rather than economics language—it might be described as progressive to tackle.

Dilnot sought to bridge these divides. Essentially, under his proposal, in its final legislative form of the Care Act of 2014, people would always keep £100,000 of their assets. They would, however, have to meet the first £72,000 of their costs (assuming they had these resources on top of the £100,000 allowance). This sounds a huge sum. But because the taxpayer would be covering the long tail of very high costs for those in care for a long time, the hope was that the insurance industry would develop products to cover costs up to this £72,000 cap. The Dilnot plan was not without its problems. Individuals would need to get their care needs assessed early, and re-assessed as those needs increased, in order to keep track of their approved expenditure up to the cap—and some may struggle to understand that. But Dilnot did offer a compromise, ►

A welfare state after-thought from the off, social care—or rather the lack of it—has sparked rage from the general public in recent years



providing more taxpayer assistance to prevent people facing ruinous costs, without expecting the taxpayer to foot the whole bill.

The crazy thing is that these proposals are already on the statute book. A government truly serious about tackling this part of the social care challenge could implement them tomorrow as a first step towards “fixing” social care.

Cut-price compassion

Doing so, however, would only solve one part of this three pipe problem—namely the balance between the individual and the taxpayer. The other two issues are the quality of care and its organisation.

Quality first. Funding for social care has never been generous. But after 2010, thanks to austerity, social care budgets were badly squeezed and funding is still not back to where it was then. The level of need required to qualify has risen in many authorities. Other impacts include the now notorious 15-minute visits for those receiving care at home, which may allow for only one basic task (such as help with showering, the toilet, cooking, getting changed or anything else) when several may be needed, and which can leave those with dementia utterly bewildered. Then there is low pay, zero-hours contracts when many employees would prefer something different, and council fees for the homes which are often below what it would cost to stay at a cheap hotel chain, let alone provide any care on top. That is hardly conducive to quality.

“For huge numbers of individuals, there is no clear line between the personal and the medical aspects of the problems they face”

Homes struggle to stay in business on the local authority fees, and so they charge more—40 per cent more on average—to those who pay for their own care. Like the eating up of a lifetime of savings by care home bills, this cross-subsidy could be called “progressive”—the better off are subsidising the least well off—but it naturally leads to deep resentment from those who pay.

Sharp suits, blurred lines

The third big problem might be dubbed organisation, though it is a multi-faceted one, involving relations with the NHS, commissioning, and provision. It is perhaps the toughest of the nuts to crack. The NHS, despite the incredibly complex structures introduced by Andrew Lansley’s 2012 Act, remains just about recognisable as an organisation. Social care is not. It is hugely fragmented.

There are 152 local authorities who buy care in from some 18,000 organisations, with 34,000 establishments that include care homes, home care agencies and providers for adults of working age. And all this started out separately from the NHS commissioning of care for “clinical needs.” In more recent years, in the best places, health and social care have worked more closely together. But the fact is that for huge numbers of individuals with—say—dementia or severe arthritis, there is no

clear line between the social or personal and the medical aspects of the problems they face, and this separation of services can create disjoints and confusion.

The social care providers range from a small number of larger corporates, who collectively host a mere 12 per cent or so of the care home places, to—quite literally—single home operators, and anything and everything in between. Every shape and size of outfit is found in both the for-profit and charitable sectors, and across both the domiciliary and residential operations.

To understand how this has arisen, a little history is again needed. Social care provision has always been a mixed economy. Back in 1946, there were many fewer older people and their life expectancy was shorter. There were genteel private residential homes for the better off, and some limited voluntary or charitable provision. Councils were the dominant employers of home helps, and some retained residential places in the old work-houses. Much long-term care back then, however, took place in the often grim, geriatric “back wards” of hospitals, where many of the least-well off spent their final years. As late as the 1980s the NHS still had around 50,000 “long stay” beds. Much of this old infrastructure was in desperate need of updating. But in the late Thatcher era, the NHS lacked the capital to do that.

From the 1950s on, councils started to build care homes. But at the end of the 1970s, the era of the first great modern waves of public-sector retrenchment, efforts to pass on the growing bills began to reshape the way this worked. First, cash-strapped charitable homes discovered they could get social security to pay for their poorer residents. Private homes soon took advantage of that too, and shortly afterwards both councils and the NHS realised that they could escape the cost of care by handing it over to the independent sector, paid for by social security. The bill for that rocketed from £10m in 1979 to £2.5bn by 1992. By then, a quarter of a million residents were having their care paid for by social security. All the incentives were for people to go into care homes, whether or not they would have preferred to be cared for at home, and indeed would have been better supported there. The bill, and the buck-passing, was becoming unsustainable. So following the Griffiths report, the social security cash was transferred to local government on condition that officials assessed where it was best to support people, and whether hopeful applicants required such support (the needs test). In keeping with the tenor of the times, there was a second condition that local government then used a large chunk of that cash to commission services, buying them in through outsourcing, rather than using a directly employed workforce to provide them. Independent sector provision mushroomed, while the remaining NHS long stay beds withered away.

The net effect has been that provision is almost entirely in the private sector, with next-to-no public capital investment in this area for decades. Almost all the money to build or refurbish homes has had to be raised from the markets—via banks or private equity. At one extreme that has produced the small number of private equity-backed, debt-laden corporates, run by highly-paid executives seeking big returns in the hope of tidying up the business and selling it on, when, in a labour-intensive sector, there are few true economies of scale. Southern Cross went bust in 2011 and Four Seasons, one of the biggest providers, appears to be in apparently endless financial trouble. That business model does not feel right for social care. But the total reliance on private investment combined with the misery of the low council fees makes life hard for many smaller undertakings, including the not-for-profits. And in this privatised and fragmented landscape,

there is no single voice for social care, limited mutual aid and—as the pandemic has highlighted—a desperate lack of good data about what is going on across the sector.

No one of any influence is proposing nationalising social care provision, and yet the splintered delivery makes co-ordination difficult. It also complicates relations with the NHS, where arguments persist about who should pay for those with the most demanding needs. Families are left bewildered. As Marie, a social care manager who was a long-distance carer for her elderly mother, told the Barker Commission back in 2014, “I have a social work qualification. I know how the health and social care system is supposed to work, but I was powerless to influence mam’s care at a distance. Nothing was joined up.”

This leads some, with tidy minds, to propose either that the NHS takes on the commissioning of social care, or that local government takes over a chunk of NHS commissioning—the community side of the service, so to speak. But to try either would launch a political war that should daunt even a government with an 80-seat majority. Social care is the largest single local authority budget and local government would bitterly resist its removal while arguing that giving it to the NHS would lead to a “medicalised” model of care, while muddying its more or less sacred “free at the point of use” approach. Stripping the NHS of community commissioning—for example primary care, community nursing and the like—would merely create another boundary between community and hospital services. Not only that, there is no guarantee that having a consolidated single budget for medical and social care would, on its own, help. There is one in Northern Ireland, but it still has many of the same challenges. Best to build on the progress being made, pre-pandemic, in the current NHS-led plans for Integrated Care Systems, where, in some places at least, care is being much better co-ordinated.

Finally caring?

All this helps explain why reform has proved so difficult. There are conflicting principles and views here. Should we protect inheritance, or require those with assets to pay for their own care? Should we take on the decades-old culturally ingrained NHS/social care divide? In which case, in which direction? Should we revisit the highly privatised care economy by balancing it better, perhaps by providing some public sector capital, which, right now, is cheap?

The fact that the issues are hard, however, has long ceased to be an excuse for inaction. As things stand, vulnerable people can be left without the sort of help that we would all like to think we will be able to rely on in our old age. All three of our problems contribute here—the jigsaw delivery can leave people confused and caught in the cracks; the stringent “needs test” can deny or severely ration care for those who are still frail; and, anxieties about what the means test will do to a family’s finances can result in the decision to seek care being postponed. Things that might help on all three fronts

are easy enough to envisage. The Dilnot reforms are on the statute book in the form of the Care Act. There are plenty of examples of better integration of health and social care round the country that could be built on. Just getting some more money into social care would, undoubtedly, improve its quality.

But the crunch does, of course, come with the money. So should the taxpayer pay more to have a better social care system? And, if so, how should the money for that be raised? The Treasury—understandably enough—is always wary of an extension of this arm of the welfare state when increasing pensioner wealth, and an unchanging means-test with thresholds frozen in recent years ensures that the rising costs of care for the growing numbers of elderly falls far more on private than on public funds. But the effect on family carers does not enter its economic calculations. Not fully factored in either, as campaigners point out, is the risk that public-sector penny pinching can sometimes produce problems for the state longer term: if people received support earlier, then later heavier demands as they age might be postponed, and some hospitalisations would certainly be avoided.

Nonetheless, the fact is that we would be talking billions of pounds upfront to restore the present system even to where it was before austerity, and many billions more to reform the funding system. It is the cost, as much as anything, that has for so long stopped successive governments from acting.

There are plenty of options around for raising the substantial funds required—including innovative ones such as charging a low rate of capital gains tax on house sales. But all are likely to require those past pension age contributing collectively in one way or another. For older voters, like everyone else, the certainty of taxes today weighs more heavily than the risk of ruinous costs tomorrow. And the elderly vote.

In the lengthy post-Covid queue for resources, social care will be just one part of it, and not necessarily at the top given the NHS demands for cash to tackle what are now huge waiting lists, the need to help those thrown out of work in a changed world to retrain, and many other imperatives. The politics of this remains hard. Should Covid-19 finally trigger long-needed reforms to social care? Absolutely. Will it? Don’t bet on it. **P**

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History wars on a plate: a 17th-century ceramic basin from Puebla, Mexico, borrows the Habsburg double-headed eagle motif. Is it cultural appropriation or supplication to an imperial power?

Museum peace

Today the very idea of disinterested curiosity is under siege in the culture wars. We must acknowledge the past is inevitably political, argues the director of the V&A, but also trust our institutions to mediate between conflicting narratives

TRISTRAM HUNT

On the lower ground floor of the Medieval and Renaissance Galleries at the Victoria and Albert Museum in Kensington is a small, 15th-century beechwood casket, mounted with gilt copper alloy straps, and painted with four pairs of seated tawny lions. It is an object of deep beauty elucidating the history of northern European design and, as a jewellery box, reveals habits of aristocratic gift-giving.

But behind the casket stands another story. It belonged to the collection of the politician Ralph Bernal (1783-1854), part of a cadre of wealthy Jewish individuals—most famously Lionel de Rothschild—who successfully broke into the upper echelons of mid-Victorian British society. Born in Tower Hill, into a Sephardic family of Spanish descent, Bernal converted to Christianity and made his way through the law and Westminster before ending up as President of the British Archaeological Society. On his death, hundreds of items—from the casket to Sèvres porcelain to stained glass—entered the South Kensington collection, but Bernal’s Jewish heritage and his role at a crucial moment in Anglo-Jewish integration have never been properly highlighted in the museum’s interpretation.

There is an alternative path towards Bernal. His entry into politics was funded by an inheritance from his father, Jacob Israel Bernal, euphemistically described as “a merchant trading with the West Indies.” The elegant artefacts that were acquired by the V&A were, in fact, paid for by the profits of the Richmond Estate in the parish of St Ann in the colony of Jamaica. Here it was that enslaved Africans worked the sugar cane fields. “They have no half Fridays, no payment for extra labour, no salt fish, no field cooks. Invalids get no food, nor old people any support from the estate,” as two English eyewitnesses wrote, while Bernal junior opposed abolition in parliament, and happily augmented his porcelain collection. And, again, until recently, no mention was made of the hideous provenance of Bernal’s wealth and how slave profits have seeped into the V&A galleries.

Now, step across the entrance hall and into the Europe Galleries where you will find, in Room 7, a sumptuous blue ceramic basin from Puebla, Mexico made in the later 17th century. On the rim and inside wall of the basin are painted compartments in Chinese style with floral motifs, but in the centre is a crowned, double-headed eagle. While eagles were a feature of central American pottery from the Aztecs on, this tin-glaze design is clearly a Mexican interpretation of the double-headed Habsburg Eagle, the symbol of the rulers of Spain and its colonies until 1700. How best to approach this marvellous work of earthenware? Is it an act of cultural appreciation, or appropriation, or

perhaps supplication in the face of imperial authority? And, if so, should such virtuoso ceramic design even be displayed at all?

Every day, in pretty much every room of the V&A, the challenges of running a “global” or “encyclopaedic” museum (the very terms feel loaded) in an era of increasingly assertive identity politics becomes apparent. In a museum of art, design and performance, what should be highlighted in a 60-word interpretative label when it comes to presenting the Bernal casket: the aesthetic lineage; the Jewish heritage; the slave wealth? Similarly, should we celebrate or lament the Pueblan inflection of the Holy Roman Empire’s double-headed eagle?

The conversation feels fraught. Right now we are caught between a populist right determined to defend “our history” from the pulling down of statues, the moving of busts (as the British Museum has recently done with one of its founders Hans Sloane over his own links to slavery), renaming of college buildings (goodbye William Gladstone, goodbye David Hume) and “cancelling” of various Great Britons from Darwin to Churchill—and a cultural left just as committed to reclaiming public spaces from racist monumentalism (such as Edward Colston in Bristol), decolonising the curriculum, supporting the restitution of colonial-era artefacts, and prioritising the lived experiences, emotions and cultural traditions of underprivileged groups. As the Museum of London curator Danielle Thom puts it, “If we are actually embroiled in a ‘culture war,’ even a manufactured one, then museums are battlegrounds, because they shape and reflect cultural contexts.”

Harried by chauvinism and iconoclasm, museums need to transcend identity politics and avoid joining one side of two warring factions. Activists may decry the notion of “neutrality” (does not every object mounted entail a cultural or political choice?), but amid such campus- and social media-driven sectarianism, mediation feels profoundly necessary. Our role must be to provide a civic space, in which all feel ownership, that helps both to situate contemporary concerns within broader histories and also, through the scholarly and challenging display of beauty and wonder, to move beyond the limitations of prescribed identities. But we must seek to do so with a frank understanding of the museum’s own history: both its place within Enlightenment or colonial practices (with their implicit racial assumptions) and the manner in which its collections were acquired and displayed.

My starting point is that museums have much further to go in contextualising their collections. Today, the public is rightly curious about how objects were acquired, and who they belonged to and where they came from. If the V&A has traditionally foregrounded design history—craftsmanship; materiality; ▶

creative influence—there is now a stronger focus on provenance and ownership. The museum, for instance, holds a small array of copper alloy weights formerly used in the gold trade in Asante communities in what is now Ghana, West Africa. Accompanying them are several gold and silver items—anklets and pendants—from the Asante court regalia. These were acquired at auction, but their route to South Kensington was via a “punitive raid” by Major-General Sir Garnet Wolseley on the Asante state capital, Kumasi, in 1874. As our curator Angus Patterson explains, “The gold was not taken simply for its financial value. By removing the regalia from the Asante court, Britain had stripped the Asante rulers of their symbols of government and denied them their authority to govern.” While historically, these items might have been presented primarily as a source of inspiration for design students and goldsmiths, today we explain their place within the ugly history of “imperial trophy hunting” and, inevitably, how the South Kensington Museum (as we were originally known) was enveloped in such exercises of colonial violence. In time, we hope to share these items far more equitably with museums and cultural institutions in modern Ghana.

“The role of the museum is to unleash more insight and awe—and, where justified, anger”

As well as displaying differently, we also strive to make good on the ambition to be a truly “global” museum. The origins of the V&A lie partly with the East India Company Repository, which was the location for much of the “collecting” (sometimes gifts; sometimes purchases; sometimes loot or booty) which agents of British colonialism carried out in South Asia. This means that while our Fashion Department holds, for instance, superb collections of Indian fabric, the textile and fashion heritage of sub-Saharan Africa is poorly represented. This material omission of such a significant source of global creativity necessarily distorts how we are able to curate and, in turn, how the public can appreciate questions of influence, appropriation, even “civilisation.”

The historian William Dalrymple has recently called for a Museum of Colonialism to address Britain’s imperial history (much of which, in the past, he has played no little hand in romanticising). But this seems an abnegation of the responsibility of national, local and university museums to address the colonial past through their programming and interpretation. Here, of course, the battle lines are starker: many committed anti-racist campaigners are seeking to denounce all artefacts of imperial history, even though empire would have seemed the natural form of government for millions of people for thousands of years before European colonialism. The reach and longevity of empires

produced myriad, important material representations. At the same time, many conservative polemicists fail to appreciate that the structures of race which underpinned the ideology of the British Empire still support inequality, prejudice and discrimination in ways that cannot be ignored. Beginning with the object, and involving as many voices as possible, the role of the museum is to unleash more insight and more context (as well as more awe and, where justified, more anger) into the discussion of this contested past.

This calling becomes all the more important when in a multicultural, diverse society, visitors rightly expect to see their identities and concerns—not least the systemic racism highlighted by the Black Lives Matter movement—reflected in the museums and galleries that their taxes help to fund. At the V&A, staff and volunteers have created highly successful Black Heritage Trails, LGBTQ+ tours, and (to return to Bernal) accounts of Jewish heritage within the museum. But in our staff composition, collections strategy and programming, we have a long way to go to speak to minority-ethnic Britons, who simply do not attend their national museums in the numbers they should. In the words of the arts educator Errol Francis, “there is a connection between questions of what to do about colonial provenance, imperialist narratives of history and civilisation, the lack of diversity of the workforce and the lack of interest from BAME and working-class audiences in what museums are doing.” The “ambient racism,” to use my colleague Gus Casely-Hayford’s phrase, which surrounds too many cultural institutions needs to be addressed from the boardroom to the guardroom on a daily basis.

At the same time, it remains paramount that museums are places where all can be present together. One of the founding fathers of the V&A, the political refugee, ally of Prince Albert and architect, Gottfried Semper, described public collections as “the true teachers of a free people.” Part of the purpose of museums was, in that improving mid-Victorian manner, to nurture the curious, educated and polite habits of citizenship essential for an evolving democracy. Museums were cast as consciously cosmopolitan, civic spaces whose ethos and collections extended beyond class, politics and gender. Even if they often embodied anachronistic understandings of hierarchy and inequality which no public institution could nowadays condone, the broader mission of sustaining civil society remains. Today that also entails challenging tradition, entrenched identities and myths of ethnic certainty. In the words of the Getty Trust President James Cuno, “Without encyclopaedic museums, one risks a hardening of views about one’s own, particular culture as being pure, essential, and organic, something into which one is born... The collective, political risk of not having encyclopaedic museums is that culture becomes fixed national culture.” Nicholas Thomas of Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology argues: “What is good about museums” is that “they respond to and sustain curiosity of all kinds, and that curiosity is... fertile and necessary, not only for people in general, but specifically for those of us alive in the 21st century.”

Open and shut case? The unsettling questions unlocked by Ralph Bernal’s casket make it a latter-day Pandora’s box



From New Delhi to Washington, Beijing to Budapest, the vogue for populist, nationalist governments makes the role of the museum—with its galleries born of exchange, adaptation and migration—more important to civil discourse than ever. Whether it is the contribution of Mughal culture to Indian civilisation, the debt of Chinese ceramics to Iranian influence, or other politically uncomfortable narratives, material culture contains the power to puncture the chauvinist myth. What is more, in this dangerously post-truth moment in which propaganda threatens to reign unchecked, museums can still hope to be trusted arbiters, disinterested distillers of history as they find it, and even—at a stretch—“neutral,” or at the very least honest, guides to the present. In a Britain divided into disgruntled factions by Brexit, and amid sustained political assault on the independent institutions of civil society—the BBC, universities, parliament, the legal system—there is more need than ever for autonomous, research-focused and public-minded museums.

But if the right think us too “woke,” a growing body of opinion on the cultural left regards museums as reactionary vestiges of the colonial past, with looted collections and an inexplicable refusal to use their privilege to promote a radical version of social justice. To them, the only real proof of virtue is to pursue this justice in a way that overrides other interpretative priorities that may arise from scholarly curiosity or aspects of the educational mission. For instance, to return to the Bernal collection, the most important element of the medieval casket would not be the design history or even its Anglo-Jewish heritage, but the slave-owning origins of the wealth that acquired it. In this school of thought, museums can never be trusted to hold the ring on our history given the way their pasts are so intertwined with previous inequalities and racist assumptions. What matters most is an urgent condemnation of the past for the good of community cohesion in the present.

At this point, the radical left and populist right effectively join forces in their hostility towards cultural bodies and any claims to be progressive components of civil society. Whether the perceived charge is the conservatism of unchecked privilege or of metropolitan elitism, museums that should aim to do something for the understanding of all of us are dismissed as one more partisan actor, pursuing a selective agenda, and entitled to no trust.

Fortunately, away from the fringes, the general public are in a completely different place. Before the lockdown, the V&A was attracting four million visitors to South Kensington annually, while the British Museum, Tate Modern and the National Gallery drew in more than six million each. Around the country, museums are more popular and admired than for a generation. That will only remain the case if we stay above the battleground and focus on our civic mission, in an era of ever more combative cultural politics. But we can, for example, explore all three of the narratives that Ralph Bernal’s casket stirs—of medieval design, of Jewish heritage as well as the story of what the profits from the exploitation of enslaved Africans ended up paying for. It is then up to our visitors to decide what that complex history might mean for the present. **P**

Tristram Hunt is Director of the V&A museum



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How the Arab world turned against Hezbollah

The “Party of God” won support across the Middle East for its fierce defiance against Israel’s invasions of Lebanon. But its decision to prop up Syria’s brutal dictator Bashar al-Assad has caused many to change their minds

LIZZIE PORTER

“I never really knew who he was as a Hezbollah soldier,” Jawad told me from a Beirut apartment block. A look of intense concentration knitted his features together. “I knew him as a brother, who once convinced me that eating my own toenail would make a foot grow in my stomach—he was the biggest jokester and prankster ever. He really was the soul of the house. A grey cloud has sat in our house ever since his...” He tailed off.

The death of his brother in Syria in 2014, during a combat mission with the Lebanese Shia group Hezbollah, still hurts Jawad (not his real name). It happened only months after he had himself decided against joining the Iranian-backed political party and militia. He clearly remembers his moment of refusal: “I talked to my martyred brother, who was alive at the time, and mentioned that this life might not suit me. He told me: ‘It’s OK, but I’m disappointed.’ After that conversation, we never really made amends. We never really talked about the subject again. The last thing he said to me was, ‘I’m disappointed,’ and it kinda still rings in your head.”

Jawad’s loss is one consequence of a complex web of personal grief, violence, geopolitics, regional rivalries and convenient alliances that has shaped—and been shaped by—Hezbollah’s

intervention in Syria. Though it has faded from western television screens, the Syrian war will have raged for a decade by March next year. It has claimed hundreds of thousands of lives and forced millions of people from their homes. It has destabilised the region and created enormous challenges for governments dealing with its refugees. With the militants of Islamic State (IS) and their extreme form of Sunni Islam often dominating the headlines, Hezbollah’s role in the conflict remains under-examined. But without its armed intervention in Syria—the exact timing is unclear, but fighters’ bodies were returning to Lebanon as early as 2012—it is unlikely the Assad regime would have survived. Hezbollah’s commanders have trained and led multiple Iran-backed forces from Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan, fighting across the Iraq-Syria border. The group’s violations of humanitarian law in the conflict may not have been as openly gruesome as those by IS, but they are real, and in combination with the propping up of a hated dictator have alienated many previously sympathetic Syrians, Lebanese and Palestinians.

Plucky Hezbollah

Hezbollah was formed in Bekaa Valley in Eastern Lebanon as a response to the 1982 Israeli invasion; the nation remained occu-

pied by Israel until 2000. From the start, the group was supported by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), the military force established by Ayatollah Khomeini after the 1979 revolution. In Arabic, Hezbollah literally means "Party of God," and derives from a Quranic verse promising dominance to those who ally themselves with God. The faction has since evolved into a political machine. It is one of the main Shia parties in Lebanon's confessional political system—which allocates seats in parliament to Christian, Sunni, Shia and Druze communities—with 13 MPs at present. It also has an extensive social service network including schools, mosques and a scout brigade.

But its continuing *raison d'être* is as a fighting force. Its armed brigades have fought multiple wars with Israel, as well as developed training camps and weapons depots inside Syria with the permission of Damascus, even before the conflict there. Widely designated as a terrorist organisation, including by the US, UK and Gulf countries, Hezbollah intervened in Syria without the official approval of the often-creaking Lebanese state, which has been headed by multiple cabinets in the past decade. Hezbollah, and its allies in some of Lebanon's Christian parties, has held ministerial positions throughout this time. (The country is currently without a government, following the resignation of Prime Minister Hassan Diab after the catastrophic explosion at Beirut's seaport on 4th August.) Hezbollah occupies a grey space: it is both a state actor usually with ministerial powers, and a non-state paramilitary organisation. And so while Beirut's official policy is "disassociation" from regional conflicts, Syria included, Lebanon's weak state has in practice done little to stop Hezbollah fighters crossing the border.

“Fighting for the Assad regime has disrupted a long-nurtured image of Hezbollah as a resistance against Israel”

For many people across the Middle East, Hezbollah fighting on the side of the Assad regime—which stands credibly charged with war crimes, including chemical weapons attacks—has disrupted its cultivated image as a “resistance” defying Israel.

Before the war, many Syrians had accepted this portrayal. Some, who weren't politically interested, did so passively. Others more positively embraced Hezbollah as an anti-Israel force. Thirty-five-year-old Ghaith al-Hallak, who spoke to me from northern Italy where he fled after being conscripted into the Syrian army, said he remembers how pictures of Hezbollah's leaders were ubiquitous in Syria during his childhood. At times, images of the Assad family—the dictatorship-dynasty that has ruled Syria since Hafez al-Assad took control of the country in 1970—were varied by pho-

tos of his son Bashar alongside Hassan Nasrallah, the Hezbollah leader. “I think the peak was in the year 2000 when the Israeli forces withdrew from the south of Lebanon, which gave Hezbollah great popularity,” Ghaith told me.

Plenty of Palestinians also admired Hezbollah's battles against Israel. “I remember we were glued to their TV station Al Manar 24/7,” explained Marwa Fatafta, a Palestinian activist and researcher. With no state of their own, Palestinians “were so relieved and happy that finally there was that non-state actor able to stand up against Israel and protect its own land using armed resistance. There was actually action as opposed to empty rhetoric,” of the sort many Palestinians associated with their own leadership.

Resisting the resistance

But views about Hezbollah across the region soon began to change. In the 19 interviews conducted for this article, Syrians, Lebanese and Palestinians described growing feelings of unease towards the group—and sometimes predating its Syrian intervention.

In May 2008, its militants took over central Beirut by force, following a Lebanese government proposal to curb their private communications networks. At the time, Ghaith al-Hallak was watching events in the Lebanese capital from Aleppo in northern Syria, where he was studying IT at university. “They took control of streets, squares, and they prevented people from going out and protesting. It was bad behaviour,” he recalled. “For me, that was the turning point, where I started to see the other side of Hezbollah.”

In Beirut a 14-year-old Shia girl, who I'll call Lamia, from a Hezbollah-dominated southern suburb, met her older sister after school. “I remember my sister picking me up and she said, ‘They're killing each other,’ and she was crying. I remember the whole way back home, masked people would stop us in the car to see if they wanted us to pass or not, and it was very scary,” she said. (Lamia, who is now 26, asked to remain anonymous because she is worried about criticising Hezbollah publicly.) “I think it's then fully that they became an antagonist in Lebanon for me. They didn't hurt me directly, but were a big threat to me.”

Three years later, protests broke out across the Arab world, including in Syria. With the demonstrations came hopes of freedom, the rule of law and justice after years of rule by ageing dictators. But as Syria's security forces quelled the popular uprisings across the country with violence, Hezbollah began to advise the Assad regime. It soon sent its own combatants in support—much fiercer fighters than the conscripted Syrian army—and in spring 2013 led operations to seize the rebel-held town of Al-Qusayr, on the Syria-Lebanon border. Despite its military prowess, some of its fighters, like Jawad's brother, would be killed in battle. Hezbollah has not released any official casualty figures, but independent estimates put the number of men killed in action in Syria at over 1,100.

Lamia began to see the results on home soil. Funerals for fighters killed across the border meant whole ▶



Questionable partnership: demonstrators in Yemen parade with images of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad and Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah



A funeral procession for Hezbollah military commander Jamil At Tiri, who was killed in Syria. While official numbers have not been released, it is estimated over 1,100 Hezbollah soldiers have lost their lives in the conflict

streets were cordoned off as processions weaved through the city. “Suddenly there were mass burials and no one knew publicly yet that they were fighting in Syria,” she explained. “I remember thinking, ‘Where are all these dead people coming from? I don’t understand.’” Those processions led to a Beirut graveyard designated for Hezbollah combatants known as the “Garden of Lady Zaynab,” after the sister of Imam Hussein, one of the most revered figures in Shia Islam. Protecting Zaynab’s grand shrine in Damascus from Sunni rebels opposed to Assad was one of the main reasons Hezbollah gave for its Syria intervention, which it has described as *al-difa’ al-muqaddas*—a “holy defence.” Other rationales are protecting the Middle East and Islam from Israel, the US and the Sunni and politically conservative Gulf kingdoms, all of whom have anti-Assad connections. Hezbollah’s media arms have blamed these states for forming an “American-Saudi-*tafiri* project.” *Tafiri* is a pejorative term applied to Sunni rebels including IS, which at its height controlled swaths of Syria and Iraq. The sectarian with-us-or-against-us rhetoric obscured how a US-led coalition, with Iraqi and Syrian allies, was bombing IS.

“We do not fight them because of who they are, but we are fighting their Israeli-American project,” said Husayn, a Hezbollah unit commander, referring to Sunni rebels. “They say that we are the ones who came to their lands, but we are actually fighting their project, not fighting them.”

But not all Lebanese Shia are convinced by the religious reasons given for the conflict. Some see Hezbollah using sectarian branding to silence criticism. “They utilise this [the religious pretext] so aggressively,” said Lamia, who added that Hezbollah’s interpretations of Shiism do not represent her faith. “Now if you don’t approve of the fight of Hezbollah, you’re not approv-

ing of Imam Hussein and immediately you’re not a good believer, you’re not a good Shia, you’re not a good Muslim.”

Over the border, Syrians who once admired Hezbollah have turned on them. Among them is Ahmed (not his real name), now 32. He lived under a siege imposed by Hezbollah and Syrian regime troops in the mountain town of Madaya for nearly two years. “Before the war, I was completely with them,” Ahmed told me from Turkey, where he fled after the siege was lifted in April 2017. “I thought: they are fighting against oppression and injustice, but they are not.” Hezbollah’s role in the siege of Madaya—once popular with tourists from nearby Damascus for its clean air and hills planted with fruit trees—has been extensively documented by human rights organisations. “Syrian government and allied Hezbollah forces tightened the siege around the town, displacing residents to an ever-smaller geographic area,” said a 2016 report co-authored by the organisations Physicians for Human Rights and the Syrian American Medical Society.

The disillusion does not stop in Lebanon and Syria. “Many Palestinians stopped supporting Hezbollah,” said Omar Shaban, the Gaza-based director of the Pal-Think for Strategic Studies think tank: “It’s not about Shia or Sunni—it’s that Hezbollah was helping a regime that many Palestinians don’t like.”

Marwa Fatafta said that Hezbollah’s intervention in Syria made many people question who the group was really representing: “[The Syrian war] was a true test to understand whether that solidarity with the Palestinians—is it a genuine act, is it a genuine solidarity with a just social and political cause?” she asked rhetorically. “Or was it some sort of rhetoric that helps advance certain actors’ political agenda, and serves their own propaganda, and to legitimise them further in the eyes of their people and in the eyes of others, such as Palestinians?”

The Iranian connection

Hezbollah's involvement in Syria has not only muddied its reputation, but revealed the depth of its ties with the highest levels of IRGC leadership. Senior Hezbollah commanders would go back and forth to Damascus alongside the powerful Iranian commander Qasim Soleimani, who was assassinated by the US in January. They would share meals and relax with Soleimani, who ran the Quds Force, which is responsible for the IRGC's external operations.

Hezbollah members remember Soleimani fondly, and do not disguise the extent to which he was calling the shots. "He was flexible. He was able to simplify any problem for the young guys, so they could understand it and then solve it step by step," said a senior Hezbollah official who met Soleimani in Syria, who spoke to me from a driveway at the end of a mud track in the Bekaa Valley. "He was evidently intellectually and analytically mature." The official went on to deny that the general had harmed the Syrian people: "Syrians oppressed themselves with this war," he insisted. His expression was unfeeling.

By contrast with these warm words about the Iranian commander, Hezbollah fighters sometimes speak with disdain about the Assad regime's army. "We respect their leaders," Husayn, the Hezbollah unit commander, said of Assad and his associates, but about the Syrian rank and file he was much less kind: "They are not human and they seem to be from another world," he said. "There are traitors among them. Some of them have killed many of us. They shot us from the back several times while we were attacking. A number of our fighters were martyred because of them." Another Hezbollah fighter interviewed for this piece vented similar feelings about the Syrian army.

The mistrust is mutual. Even Syrians who support the Assad regime aren't too happy about Hezbollah sticking around, now that the bulk of the country has been retaken from the rebels. "There are a certain number of forces in Syria that are not doing anything—a lot of fighters from Hezbollah. These fighters are creating some problems in the areas they are present in, and aren't welcomed," said Nawar Shaban, an analyst based in Turkey. "Now pro-regime Syrians don't see that Hezbollah is a must in their area—they see that Hezbollah doesn't have to stay there in Syria because there is no actual role for them."

Enemy of "the people"?

Opposition to Hezbollah is building back home. Its reputation among its traditional Shia support base is suffering as a result of the country's ongoing financial crisis. The Lebanese lira has lost more than three-quarters of its value since October 2019, causing the price of imported goods to rocket. Hundreds of thousands of people were losing their jobs even before the coronavirus pandemic. A dollar shortage caused banks to impose arbitrary limits on withdrawals last autumn. Although not proven to be directly responsible, and whether fairly or not, Hezbollah is being blamed for the Beirut port explosion, which killed nearly 200 people and left hundreds of thousands homeless. The party is part of the political elite in Lebanon, and as such is seen to shoulder some responsibility for the general neglect and corruption that allowed thousands of tons of improperly stored and highly explosive materials to lie in the port for years. After the disaster, protestors carried gallows through Beirut, complete with noosed models of political leaders, including Hassan Nasrallah of Hezbollah. (At the time of writing, investigations into the blast are ongoing.)

While Hezbollah members and fighters receive salaries in US dollars, its ordinary supporters are bearing the brunt of the debauching of Lebanon's currency along with everyone else. The party's access to a supply of fresh dollars—from where exactly remains unclear—pits the Hezbollah haves against the have-nots. "Their non-full-timers don't get paid in dollars—even the Hezbollah fans—and they're struggling, really struggling," said Lamia. "They're not the people's party anymore."

“Even Syrians who support the Assad regime aren't too happy about Hezbollah sticking around, now that the bulk of the country has been retaken from the rebels”

On the ground just as much as in the popularity stakes, Hezbollah's ambitions can lead to the running of risks. By building connections with local smugglers, businessmen and communities along the porous Syria-Lebanon border—near Al-Qusayr, the town Hezbollah took from Syrian rebels much earlier in the war—and by creating its own security network, including detention centres, Hezbollah is today dedicated to consolidating its own control as an end in itself. Through "relationships with strong local entities in Syria," explained analyst Nawar Shaban, Hezbollah has "now secured their presence for a couple of years, or even more." And if this strategy works militarily, it potentially does so at the cost of human lives: "Before this," said Shaban, channelling the thoughts of the group's opponents, "I knew that to target Hezbollah in Syria, I needed to target Hezbollah locations. But now that Hezbollah is depending on local entities, how to know which to attack?" All this creates "very complicated, and very dangerous" confusion.

As his involvement in Hezbollah's combat in Syria continued, Jawad's brother became more and more reclusive. After months deployed in Syria, he would recoil into himself during his short rest periods back at home. "The more he was part of Hezbollah, the more of a shut-off person he became," continued Jawad, pensively. "It was very weird for me to see this transformation taking over my brother from being such a fun person to being such an enigmatic and secretive person. I thought, what did they do to him? What did he see? What did he experience? And I never really got those answers because he would just refuse to talk."

Losing his brother in Syria has reinforced Jawad's opposition to the Hezbollah. "The number one thing that infuriates me is that they target young people," he said. "Then when they grow up with that dogma integrated in their mind, they actually start believing it themselves." He has decided that he cannot live in Lebanon any longer, and will leave at some point. "As difficult a decision as it's going to be, it's going to do me good," he said.

Ahmed, the Syrian in Turkey, is moving soon too. He will settle on France's Swiss border, in mountains very different from the hills of Madaya where he was besieged by Hezbollah. "They don't care about anything but their interests," he said. **P**

Lizzie Porter is a journalist based between Iraq and Lebanon, writing on politics, energy and security, with a sideline in stories on religion

The female iconoclast

In the 50 years since Germaine Greer wrote *The Female Eunuch*, she has remained astonishing, brilliant and incendiary

HADLEY FREEMAN

The *Female Eunuch* was published in 1970, five years before the Sex Discrimination Act was passed in parliament, and six years before the Domestic Violence Act. Back in 1970, married women didn't do their own tax returns because their income was seen as belonging to their husband; health clinics demanded that a married woman obtain permission from her husband before fitting her with a coil; single women struggled to get mortgages; and if your husband raped you he would not be prosecuted because, according to the law, by marrying him you consented to have sex with him, whenever, wherever and however he so pleased.

This was the world that this book—and its Australian author, Germaine Greer—burst into like an electrifyingly disruptive shooting star, and the effects of both the book and the writer

are still being felt today. Books had certainly been written about feminism before—from Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1792 to Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* in 1964. But *The Female Eunuch* arrived among them like an intimidatingly cool new kid at school—by lunchtime everyone is copying her mannerisms, so overawed they don't know whether they love her or loathe her. It is hard to imagine a feminist book written today that isn't in some way influenced by *The Female Eunuch*, even if the author professes to detest Greer.

Let's not make any bones about this: Greer did not come here to be liked. "Hopefully this book is subversive. Hopefully it will draw fire from all the articulate sections of the community," she writes at the beginning of *The Female Eunuch*. Her hopes were fulfilled: the book was subversive, and it did draw fire—and so does she to this day. Greer is the most famous, most instantly

**Not here to please:
Germaine Greer
remains just as
subversive as ever**



recognisable feminist in the world, and her renown is not something that has ever seemed to cause her much unhappiness. You don't agree to go on *Big Brother*, and then storm out calling it a "fascist prison," if you abhor attention. Greer has enjoyed the glories that have come with her success, from posing naked in an erotic magazine to a youthful affair with Martin Amis; true to form, in 2015 she released the 30,000-word love letter she wrote to him 40 years earlier, professing herself to be "helpless with desire" for him. Whatever else anyone wants to say about Greer—and they have said pretty much everything over the past half-century—no one can say she didn't know how to enjoy herself.

Greer was never part of the traditional feminist group, or, indeed, any group at all. She was and remains feminism's naughty, troublemaking sister—the Lydia Bennet to Gloria Steinem's Elizabeth. While her contemporaries were getting bogged down in the politics of 1970s feminism, Greer was hanging out with the Rolling Stones and having her vagina photographed. (If you want to see what Greer very much wasn't interested in, read Nora Ephron's 1972 essay "Miami," about the National Women's Political Caucus.) Greer is, characteristically, pretty dismissive of Betty Friedan et al in *The Female Eunuch*—like I said, she did not come here to make friends. But then, she is not an activist, like Friedan and Steinem. She would describe herself as an academic, but, really, she is an iconoclast.

Rereading *The Female Eunuch* in 2020, it's still easy to see why it caused such a sensation in its time, even if its influence has in some ways worked against it. Her arguments about how body-shaming is used to oppress women are so familiar that they appear in most women's magazines on a monthly basis. But it was Greer who wrote about it, if not first, then certainly with the most rage and passion. Feminist tracts aren't known for their humour, but my God *The Female Eunuch* is funny: "If you think you are emancipated, you might consider the idea of tasting your menstrual blood—if it makes you sick, you've a long way to go, baby," she declares. Greer is famously erudite, and the book is studded with literary references. But *The Female Eunuch* is the only book I know of that leaps from Charles M Schulz's Peanuts cartoon to Strindberg's *The Dance of Death* to Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* and *A Doll's House* in a single sentence.

The humour in *The Female Eunuch* is born out of fearless rage: few write anger better than Greer. "Women have very little idea of how much men hate them" is probably the most famous line in the book. But to my mind, the most powerful comes a few pages later: "Women are reputed never to be disgusted. The sad fact is that they often are, but not with men: following the lead of men, they are most often disgusted with themselves."

And yet, *The Female Eunuch* is not ultimately a sad or even an angry book. It is a joyful book, in which Greer ecstatically imagines a still-yet-to-be-realised utopian future for women, in which they are freed of the shackles of femininity and patriarchy, where they enjoy sex gloriously and raise their children collectively, visited occasionally, and only if necessary, by the fathers of their offspring. That feminism has yet to achieve this—and has failed to save so many women from femininity, disappointing sex and themselves—is not Greer's fault. But it is part of the reason her book continues to pack such an astonishing punch.

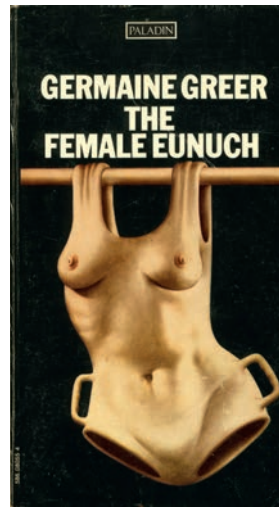
Greer is unfashionably clear on how women need to achieve liberation. Hers is a feminism that is miles away from today's incarnation, which celebrates all women's choices and sees censure as patriarchal. Greer has no time for such niceties, and she is uncompromising on what women need to do to lead fulfilling lives: not be tied down by a man or children, not wear certain clothes, not accept femininity on any level. In today's feminist landscape, in which sex work is fiercely defended as just another form of work, *The Female Eunuch* feels, in many ways, like it's not from another era, but another planet.

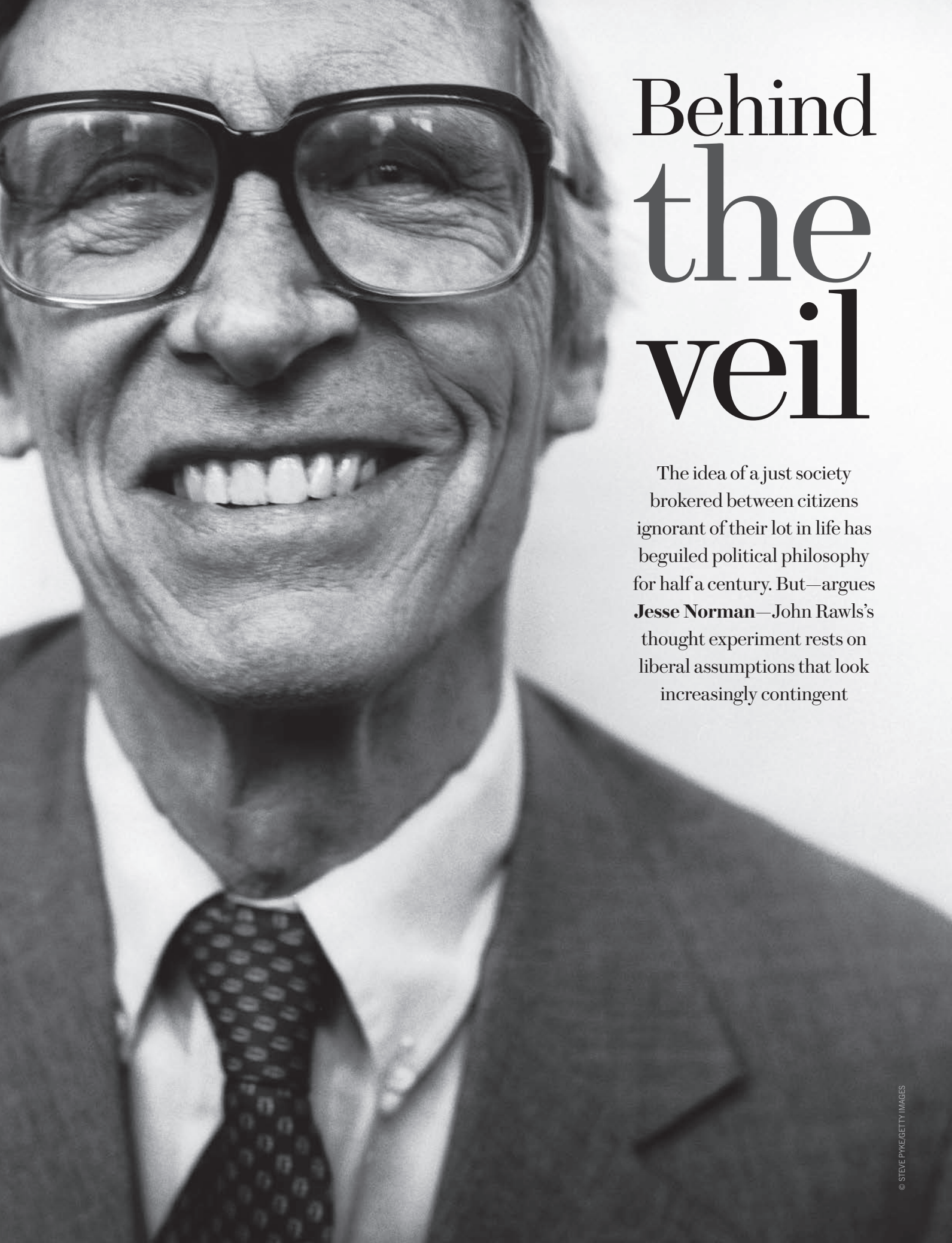
That's not the only theory of Greer's that will feel out of lock-step with modern consensus. Her more recently voiced thoughts on trans people, insisting "I don't think surgery will turn a man into a woman," have led to her being no-platformed by students. But her opinions are hardly a shock, given Greer's decades-long abhorrence of the idea of an innate gender and the artifice of femininity. In *The Female Eunuch*, she writes about April Ashley, one of the first British people to have gender reassignment surgery, and sees her as being as much of a victim as any natal woman: "As long as the feminine stereotype remains the definition of the female sex, April Ashley is a woman," Greer declares. It may not be the kind of acceptance trans rights activists today campaign for, but Greer was engaging with issues of gender versus sex long before many of them were born. And given that she emerged in an era in which men could abuse women with impunity, it is not surprising that some of her generation might be sceptical about the idea that gender identity trumps physical reality. That many people today think differently is, ironically, thanks in part to Greer, who wrote so powerfully that women should be able to define themselves.

It is a profoundly narcissistic endeavour to read books from the past and expect them to reflect the morals of the present day. But from a 2020 perspective, there are some shocking clangers in *The Female Eunuch* about sexuality ("Most homosexuality results from the inability of the person to adapt to his given sex role") and race ("That most virile of creatures, the 'buck' negro..." she wrote, invoking a popular cliché of the time). Anyone who defends Greer for her work in feminism, as I do, without acknowledging her—to put it mildly—more problematic sides is helping neither themselves nor her. There is an oddly Freudian tendency among young women to trash the feminists from the generation before, a kind of mother-killing, a means for the new generation to make room for themselves (although, ladies, please: there's always room). Figurehead feminists are especially vulnerable to expectations of perfection, and any infractions result in them being flung overboard.

I have never understood this hardline approach of rejecting everything about a person because you object to some things about them. And what a waste it would be to discard her, because Greer was right—so thrillingly right—about misogyny and self-loathing, and the lies women were and are sold about what constitutes a good life. Greer was and is far from perfect, but learning to accept female imperfection is the moral of this book. Just like her book, she is astonishing, brilliant, absurd, infuriating, incendiary and part of the canon forever. **P**

This is an edited version of the introduction to the 50th anniversary edition of "The Female Eunuch," out on 15th October from 4th Estate





Behind the veil

The idea of a just society brokered between citizens ignorant of their lot in life has beguiled political philosophy for half a century. But—argues **Jesse Norman**—John Rawls's thought experiment rests on liberal assumptions that look increasingly contingent

Imagine a human society not so very different from our own, on which a cataclysm is about to fall. Thousands, perhaps millions, of people will die. Many others will lead shorter and less happy lives; the financial and human costs will be felt for decades, if not forever. Looking in from the outside, and thinking in terms of big ideas such as equality, justice, fairness, human rights and the rule of law, what kind of society would you want to emerge from this catastrophe? What core principles should lie at its heart?

Covid-19 has thrown these fundamental questions of political philosophy into stark relief. In their scale, complexity and level of abstraction they form a sharp contrast with everyday ethical issues of honesty, integrity and the like; indeed we may sometimes wonder whether *philosophy* as such can make any difference at all in political contexts dominated by health, economics and party rivalries. Yet help is at hand in the life and work of John Rawls, who did more than perhaps any thinker since the Second World War to connect the practice of political philosophy with its most basic principles. His thought, inspirations and influence are explored by Katrina Forrester and Andrius Gališanka in recent books, which have achieved new relevance in the shadow of the pandemic.

The name of Rawls may not strike much of a chord today. But for three decades after the publication of his first and greatest book, *A Theory of Justice*, in 1971, he set a benchmark for political philosophy: substantively, methodologically and linguistically. Woe betide the exam candidate who confused the “difference principle” with the “veil of ignorance,” or other key terms in the Rawlsian argot. As Robert Nozick remarked in 1974, “political philosophers now must either work within Rawls’s theory, or explain why not.” And sure enough, Nozick made his own reputation in part by attacking Rawls vigorously in his own book *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*.

To many people today, Rawls will seem the quintessence of privilege: a privately educated white male who taught a subject rooted in a canonical western tradition for more than half a century at a succession of elite institutions, latterly as holder of a named chair at Harvard. A modest and self-aware man, Rawls would not have contested this description. He might rather have highlighted the advantages he received in early recognition of his ability, the support of senior colleagues, and the extraordinary scope he was given to work out his ideas over time. At the age of 50, before *A Theory of Justice*, his reputation rested on little more than a few well-received articles. As Immanuel Kant, one of his greatest influences, had done after publishing *The Critique of Pure Reason* in his mid-50s, Rawls then devoted his final decades to a series of works that largely refined and extended his original theory. Such a life was unusual in its time; it is all but unimaginable today, given the ever-present pressures for publications and quantified “impact” that beset much higher education.

If Rawls himself appeared not of his time, nor did *A Theory of Justice*. It was published in the dying years of the Vietnam War. Gone were the high ideals of Kennedy’s Camelot and Johnson’s Great Society; the airwaves were dominated by the war, conscription, student unrest, radical protest and the escalating movements for racial and sexual equality. Commentators today often bemoan the loss of the centre ground in politics: the question in Rawls’s time was whether politics was possible at all.

His answer was a resounding yes. For Rawls, humans are broadly rational and reasonable beings, and politics is about how they can live together in mutually respectful ways. The task of political philosophy is to clarify under what conditions this is possible, given the diversity of people’s views, beliefs, interests, loyalties and talents. A society in which all could agree how best to live together would automatically have a legitimate state, according to Rawls, and the fact of people’s agreement would make both society and state self-sustaining over time.

How, then, to procure that agreement? And what principles should be chosen to order such a society? Here Rawls offers a fascinating thought experiment. Clearly, if Jane knows she is rich, clever and healthy, she will have an interest to opt for rules that favour the rich, clever and healthy. But what if she *doesn’t* know that? What if none of us knows it, about ourselves or others? How would we want a society to be structured if we were in what Rawls calls the “original position” and were choosing different principles, in a normal, broadly self-interested way, from behind a “veil of ignorance”?

No one would have a superior bargaining position, or the ability to consult their personal or group interests before choosing. There would be no coercion or deception. As with a game, everyone would start from the same point, first agreeing to and then being bound by the same universal rules. Rawls’s beguiling idea is that such a society would be a just one.

He allows that there are many potential conclusions to such a thought experiment. Even from behind the veil a strict utilitarian, for example, might still opt for rules that aim at the greatest good for the greatest number, regardless of their effect on a minority. But Rawls thinks we would and should reject this approach, according to which some unlucky minority might have to make intolerable sacrifices for the benefit of the majority, as incompatible with human dignity and autonomy. Rather, he suggests, we should choose three principles: first, a principle of freedom, ensuring equal basic liberties for all; second, a principle of equal opportunity; and thirdly—and most notably—what he calls the “difference principle,” that policies leading to social and economic inequalities should only be permitted insofar as they benefit the least well-off. Amid a plethora of detail, the broad picture is that there are some liberties that cannot be traded off for economic or social gain, and that inequality should only be tolerated where it helps the most disadvantaged. It is, in Rawls’s words, a theory of Justice as Fairness.

Among much else, 1971 was the year of the Pentagon Papers, the My Lai massacre convictions and Nixon’s détente with China. It seems astonishing in retrospect that *A Theory of Justice*, all 587 carefully chewed pages of it, should have attracted much attention. But from the start it was a huge success, as Forrester notes, reviewed in a dazzling array of academic journals, many outside its purported discipline, and quickly acclaimed as the greatest work in its field since Sidgwick’s *The Methods of Ethics* in 1874. Ten years after its publication, a specialist bibliography on Rawls counted more than 2,500 works devoted to various aspects of his thought, and the pace of acclamation did not slow for many years after that.

In retrospect it is not hard to see the reasons for this appeal. The book stood in perfect counterpoint to the times: impeccably high-minded in its goals, meticulous in execution, optimistic in ▶

“Amid the horrors of the Vietnam War, the question of Rawls’s time was whether politics was possible at all”

its view of humanity. It was big philosophy, philosophy that looked to the horizon. It aspired not merely to offer guidance to the perplexed and even resolutions to real political dilemmas, but to put the great doctrines of utilitarianism and moral intuitionism in their place—and to do all this not harshly, but gently and in a spirit of reconciliation. It was original, substantive and rigorous.

The actor John Houseman—famous across America for playing an archetypally stern college professor—sonorously proclaimed in a banking advertisement of the time: “Smith Barney make money the old-fashioned way—they *earn* it.” So it seemed with Rawls. He was a throwback: a philosopher who not only did philosophy, but who actually *had* a philosophy. And Rawls’s rather saintly demeanour only added to the effect. The young Michael Sandel recalled his first days at the Harvard Philosophy Department: “Shortly after I arrived, my phone rang. A hesitant voice on the other end said: ‘This is John Rawls, R-A-W-L-S.’ It was if God himself had called to invite me to lunch, and spelled his name just in case I didn’t know who he was.”

But over and above the book’s sweep and quality, there were more specific reasons for the success of *A Theory of Justice*. Its basic ideas were not too hard to get one’s head around and they contained something for everyone. Philosophers rejoiced in the book as a new Ground Zero for political philosophy, indeed as a vindication of modern philosophy itself. Historians of ideas admired its lineage, drawing on Aristotle, Hume and Smith, Rousseau and Kant and Wittgenstein. Political libertarians found succour in Rawls’s worries about state intervention, while socialists saw in the difference principle nothing less than a new ratification of the welfare state. Economists delighted in Rawls’s immersion in the theories of games and rational choice, as well as his emphasis on welfare. Wonks addressed themselves to the book’s putative policy implications.

Better still, all could find points of disagreement. There were papers to be written, refutations to be published, careers to be made. The book was presented as an idealisation of human choice, purged of the contingent, the morally accidental and idiosyncratic. As such, it paid little apparent attention to the outside world—including the specific realities of being poor, and the particular experiences of women and people of colour, or of the infirm or other vulnerable groups whose status and wellbeing the difference principle was intended to protect. And it seemed to display a high-constitutional understanding of politics keyed to established political institutions, rather than to the informal, raucous and rapidly fragmenting reality of its time.

The explosion of Rawls-related commentary soon found substantive grounds for concern within the theory itself. Was it really coherent or fair to start from a position that ignored people’s specific talents and skills,

themselves often the product of long labour? Were Rawls’s principles really as fundamental as he claimed? Could they in fact, in certain circumstances, allow for societies so unequal they could hardly be called just? Was he right to believe that a Rawlsian society would be self-sustaining and remain legitimate over time? What *was* this core notion of justice, anyway? To critics of power and privilege, or those for whom all politics is disguised violence, Rawls’s insistence on the possibility of rational consensus could seem absurd—or an elite and deliberately self-entrenching political position.

These two new books tell the Rawls story in complementary ways. Both are works for specialists, as they say. Gališanka focuses on Rawls’s own formation as a philosopher and the intellectual prehistory of *A Theory of Justice*, while Forrester scrupulously examines the book’s reception and its wider impact on academic, political and social debates. And they have different ambitions, for while Gališanka’s is a fairly straight work of intellectual archaeology,

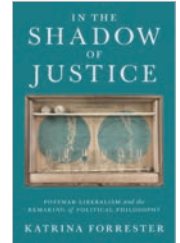
Forrester writes with more polemical intent. Her suggestion is that, for all its merits, Rawls’s pre-eminence had the effect of overshadowing and disabling other strands in liberal thought, even as his work lost its wider relevance. Her closing chapter is a muted call to arms for egalitarians to reach back to the past and out to other disciplines; and thereby breathe new life into a universalising liberal project, adrift and divided in part because it has for too long

dragged behind the single giant figure of Rawls.

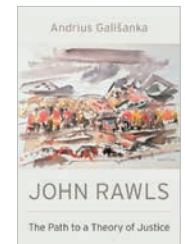
We must wait to see what radical new inspiration may bring, though current academic conditions are hardly propitious to carefully constructed grand theories. But the yearning to universalise perhaps itself misses another possibility. A crucial feature of *A Theory of Justice* is the priority it gives to the conditions of choice over its substance. Rawls’s society is one of free and independent individuals exercising rights to choose. It does not reflect any specific conception of human good—indeed it cannot, since to do so would infringe the conception of human autonomy that lies at the core of Rawlsian liberalism.

But this is also a frailty. Consider us, the British, as a concrete example. Any genuinely universalising theory must struggle to engage with a vast range of the unchosen institutions, attachments and obligations that, historically at least, have made us who we are, from the Church of England to the monarchy, the football club, the pub and the pantomime. Equally so with the hotly contested histories of empire, slavery and colonialism. Our attitudes towards these things are typically not rational, or rationally chosen, and yet they define us.

These legacies and continuities, for good or ill, can be obliterated by a liberal focus on memoryless choice and self-actualisation. The real question may be not whether the liberal project can be revived, but whether



In the Shadow of Justice: Postwar Liberalism and the Remaking of Political Philosophy
by Katrina Forrester
(Princeton, £30)



John Rawls: The Path to a Theory of Justice
by Andrius Gališanka
(Harvard, £32.95)

“Rawls was a philosopher who not only did philosophy, but who actually *had* a philosophy”

some post-liberal political philosophy—a philosophy which better acknowledges the facts and experiences of particular societies and particular identities—may not do more to elucidate and enlighten human life and human possibility. Paradoxically perhaps, by stimulating an exploration of liberalism in its loftiest, clearest and most comprehensive modern expression, John Rawls’s most enduring bequest may be to have opened the way to a post-liberal future.

Now, however, circumstances have thrust the questions Rawls asked back to centre stage. The pandemic has afflicted us all, yet some far worse than others: women, the young, the infirm, the less well-off and those of BAME origin. It has highlighted the dependence of society on public services, carers and manual trades, while profiteers and rentiers have been reviled. Governments across the world have been forced to take measures that would be deemed repressive in normal times, in the name of public safety. For many, Covid-19 marks an inflection point at which we must ask, collectively, what principles we regard as fundamental to a good society.

In all this, Rawls’s theory retains its value as a thought experiment. But in substantive terms the pandemic has raised the stakes, in three ways. First, it has undermined faith in the present liberal order. People have shown a natural but perhaps unexpected willingness to prioritise their health over their freedom, while questioning a system so free it can allow a lethal virus to spread rapidly around the world. These views suggest limits to the core liberal idea of the primacy of rational individual choice. This gives liberal theories that rely on that principle, including Rawls’s, additional ground to make up.

Secondly, the present crisis raises a more specific concern about the difference principle, the most distinctive of Rawls’s rules. The book’s apparent acceptance of inequality—provided it is to the benefit of the least well-off—raised questions in the 1970s, when US CEO pay was 25 times the average worker’s. Today that ratio is 280 times, and we are far more aware of the impact of material inequality and status differences on human wellbeing. It is easy to imagine that people in the original position today might wish to choose a stronger egalitarian principle. More broadly still, we might say, if there is little more agreement about what is fair than about what is just, then it is not so clear how useful it is to define justice in terms of fairness.

Thirdly, and most deeply, the very idea of freedom as a superior value may be coming to seem less the logically inevitable result of a Kantian insistence on moral autonomy, than the transitory product of a particular moment in western society. In 14th-century Britain, a Rawlsian process of reflection—if such a thing can be imagined—might perhaps have yielded a devout adherence to the Catholic Church and the importance of knowing one’s place in the great chain of being. In the 21st century, it might yield principles of maximal inclusion, the primacy of identity and the avoidance of harm or offence to others. In this evolving context, the questions of what freedom is, what it should be, and what institutions are needed to sustain it are the ones that need to be addressed, the conclusions argued for with renewed intensity and energy.

But one thing remains clear: Rawls’s theory continues to provide both a compelling framework within which such basic principles can be debated, and a flexible but robust defence of liberal human values. That is a monumental achievement. **■**

Jesse Norman MP’s latest book “Adam Smith: What He Thought, and Why it Matters” came out in 2018 (Allen Lane)

Prospect

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What next for pensions? Why the 2020s are the crunch decade

12th Oct, 9.15 – 10.15am

At current contribution rates, Automatic Enrolment will not provide an adequate retirement income for many. What’s more, it doesn’t help the 4.8m self-employed people in the UK. Guidance, advertising, publicity and tax reliefs have all been deployed to make saving as attractive as possible; initiatives that are sensible in their own right, but still people aren’t saving enough for their retirement.

By the decade’s end, we will be seeing more people beginning to retire without a final salary pension scheme. Will this mean that instead of getting richer over the years as they have been, pensioners will start getting poorer again?

Speakers:

Guy Opperman MP Pensions and Financial Inclusion Minister
David Willetts Conservative peer
Pete Glancy Head of Pensions Policy, Lloyds

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The Big Pivot: The third sector post-Covid

13th Oct, 4.30pm

The Covid-19 crisis has been tough for the charity sector. One study has forecast that 10 per cent of the UK’s 166,000 charities will be forced to declare bankruptcy by the end of 2020, with a funding shortfall of £10bn opening up.

- How do we expect Covid-19 to affect philanthropy and charitable donations?
- What is the impact on the country of a shortfall of charitable funding?
 - How can charities respond?
- What innovative ways can people and technology help alleviate some of the pressures?
- What should the government do to support the sector?

Speakers:

Philip Almond Executive Director Fundraising & Marketing, Cancer Research UK (CRUK)
Marcelle Speller OBE Founder & Chairman, Brevio
Laura Chow Head of Charities, People’s Postcode Lottery
Peter Laing Chief Executive, The Renewal Programme

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Arts & books

The head delusion

A soul-searching new book argues that intellect has trumped all other measures of worth—leaving our society increasingly divided, finds *Madeleine Bunting*



Head, Hand, Heart: The Struggle for Dignity and Status in the 21st Century
by David Goodhart
(Allen Lane, £20)

Fresh from university in 1989, I became a researcher on a documentary to mark 10 years of Thatcherism. The team was led by the *Guardian* columnist Hugo Young and the former Labour MP Philip Whitehead (who went on to become an MEP). It was a crash course in the intellectual bewilderment of the centre left as it grappled with how—despite ripping up the post-war political consensus—Margaret Thatcher had been rewarded at the ballot box. Why had voters rejected a model that had served them relatively well? While the left seemed impotent to find a coherent counter-strategy—though Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques made valiant attempts—it was already evident that a bitter dogfight was taking place over how the history of the 1980s would be told: as a free-market triumph or a tattered tale of make-believe?

Thirty years on, a comparable bewildered horror at the way the world is going has set in among those in the political centre. The result is a stream of books that hazard explanations for the upsurge in populism, and the causes of the deep resentment driving politics on both sides of the Atlantic. Compared with the late eighties, this round of angst has a much larger dose of soul searching among avowed “progressives.” The hubris of the Blair-Clinton era—exemplified by the elite’s disdain for those with less education—has come home to roost with Trump and Brexit. In David Goodhart’s new book, *Head, Hand, Heart*, the founding editor of *Prospect* nails this attitude perfectly as “class narcissism”: “you too can be like us.” I wince as I remember conversations I had with New Labour ministers when I was a *Guardian* columnist, as they outlined a narrow vision of social mobility and equality of opportunity that I was too slow to question. The type of success they advocated required the brightest to abandon their communities; it started with university and moving to a big city, and then expanded into developing a lifestyle and values at odds with your upbringing.

Lynsey Hanley’s brilliant book, *Respectable*, powerfully described the discomfort inherent in such a journey, in her case from a working-class Birmingham estate to middle-class life after university. Meanwhile, in the US, George Packer’s masterful *The Unwinding* offered rich insight into the lives of those failed by the liberal consensus, and more recently Anne Applebaum has surveyed both sides of the Atlantic as well as Eastern Europe in *Twilight of Democracy*, interrogating what inspired former friends to throw in their lot with populism. In this crowded territory, Goodhart has already had one stab at an explanation in 2017’s *The Road to Somewhere*, a book that infuriated as many readers as it impressed. He argued that society was divided between “anywheres” and “somerwheres”: the educated metropolitan, happy with multiculturalism, fond of

novelty, with few attachments to place, versus those more bound to family and community, with less formal schooling and more wariness of diversity.

This time round, his categorisation is determined by your job: head (as in professional, managerial occupations), hand (technical, skilled trades) and heart (emotional labour/care work). Annoyingly, Goodhart doesn’t provide definitions for his categories: I’ve had to deduce them. But perhaps he ducked that challenge because the terms quickly blur, as he admits. One of his most telling anecdotes describes the complexity of a bus driver’s job as she calculates how to safely manage her passengers getting on and off at the same time as navigating the traffic: this job requires both hand and head. A moment’s reflection is enough to realise how many others, from shopkeepers to building site foreman, have likewise been required to combine attributes during the pandemic; but even before, it was common. A doctor needs both head and heart, as do most managerial positions, while care work involves as much hand as heart and more head than is commonly recognised. There has always been a realm of hand-based work that involves the head: in arts, crafts, and the artisanal food sector.

“A doctor needs both head and heart while care work involves as much hand as heart”

So can employment really be so neatly segmented in this way? And does the attempt to do so tell us anything interesting? I would argue no to the first—but yes to the latter.

One of Goodhart’s main arguments is that a cognitive meritocratic elite (head) has come to monopolise esteem and influence to the detriment of hand and heart jobs. His talk of meritocracy brings to mind one of Hugo Young’s testier interviewees for our 1989 documentary. Norman Tebbit is still best known for his comment in 1981 that his father found work in the 1930s by getting on his bike and looking for it. Tebbit characterised a Thatcherite agenda of individual effort, hard work and personal responsibility—a meritocratic mythology that has proved persistent for the last four decades. For the skilled working class, success entailed setting up your own business, buying your council house and then taking advantage of a booming property market. A builder friend of mine says he and his wife are the last of their respective wider families left in east London, the rest bought their council ▶

Cognitive supremacy? Oxford graduates in the late 1980s



© ODD ANDERSEN/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

houses, sold them and moved to Essex. He and his wife are regarded as losers for not moving up the financial ladder: family gatherings are dominated by the subject of houses—buying them, doing them up, selling them—and money.

“If you set up society as a competition, there will inevitably be contemptuous winners and resentful losers”

Tony Blair embraced the idea of the aspirational society and thought the best way to achieve it was a massive expansion of universities. Goodhart argues that the unfortunate effect has been to impose a stranglehold in which only the “cognitively blessed” or “cognitively able” (his terms are problematic) can rise to the top. We divert the brightest out of essential activities of hand and heart and skew society’s rewards in terms of respect and status towards just one type of ability and job. Goodhart has a bugbear about the questionable value of an expanded university sector. Given that he admits he and all four of his children have benefited from a university education, and being well aware of the benefits university brought me in navigating a metropolitan middle class (from a rural upbringing in north Yorkshire), I remain unconvinced.

Where Goodhart is right, though, is to remind us of the dangers Michael Young identified in his 1958 book *The Rise of the Meritocracy*. If you set up society as a competition, there will inevitably be

contemptuous winners and resentful losers. We have lived with this system for a long time. Declaring an end to post-war ideals of solidarity, Thatcherites missed no opportunity to celebrate the benefits of competition in every area of life. Blair followed suit, urging Britain on in a competition which had become global.

But have we ever actually been a meritocracy? Forty years of rhetoric have created a useful fiction about individual merit or the lack of it, which has been employed to bully welfare recipients, mask persistent inherited advantage and legitimise inequality. The middle classes have managed to game the system, ensuring their children maintain their social status. Private school students remain stubbornly over-represented at the best universities. Goodhart is a rigorous enough thinker to concede all these points; but if we don’t actually have a meritocracy in the first place, the subject seems a red herring, albeit one that throws up some interesting points. The really significant thing is that the routes to power, both economic and political, have come to be dominated by a particular form of academic achievement, which has less to do with individual aptitude or merit than we like to pretend.

Goodhart is absolutely right to lambast the pitiful UK record on vocational education in comparison with Germany, and right that the academic achievement of those he calls the “cognitively blessed” has become more important as a passport to the top. But he neglects the cultural dimension of power: most teenagers’ role models are musicians, actors, sportsmen and social media influencers. Fame is now potentially in reach of any teen: they don’t even need to get out of bed. He barely mentions celebrity culture—the warped value system in whose shadow we all now live.

Reading this book, I was struck by how dense it is with other thinkers’ and writers’ work, data analysis and academic research. The book demonstrates its own argument that we have unwisely

privileged supposedly objective abstract reasoning. My head was spinning so much I took a break to work on my current DIY project: Polyfilla-ing my front wall.

My point is serious. I wanted to know more about the experience of those exemplifying different forms of intelligence and work; and I wanted to hear from the people Goodhart is trying to explain. Do the self-made Essex relatives of my builder friend really feel lower in status to harassed graduate professionals? I don't think we can assume so: they might conclude that those university types are losers stuck in the public sector whose London houses are in serious need of renovation. More likely to engender resentment is their mate who has just bought a motorboat and put in a fancy new kitchen. It is those who started out from the same point who eye each other most closely and measure status accordingly.

Resentment breeds not necessarily from others' good fortune but from a sense that you played the game by the rules and discovered too late they were stacked against you. One anecdote Goodhart quotes is powerful. A plumber set up a company reconditioning old washing machines, which thrived for over 20 years until the business model failed. The machines were too flimsy to be repaired anymore and the prices of new models were so low, he couldn't compete. His work had been useful and he had taken pride in it; but his skills had been made redundant by changes in manufacturing. For his story, one could read many million more of skilled manufacturing jobs that have disappeared in the last four decades, replaced by jobs with lower skill requirements and lower pay. Millions have had their lives, identities and self-worth upended as their competence has become useless, and their children have struggled to find good apprenticeships. (Goodhart has some shocking figures on the steep decline in technical sub-degree qualifications such as Higher National Diplomas: the numbers taking them have dropped from 64,000 in 2000 to 15,000 in 2016-7. Just 4 per cent of 25 year olds in England hold such qualifications compared to 20 per cent in Germany.) These changes are resented for how unevenly their impact has fallen: the banker benefits, the welder and his son are out of a job.

Unlike Lynsey Hanley, Goodhart has no relevant personal experience to bear on the argument: he makes no mention of doing any manual work, and his only reference to "heart" work is a regret that when he was looking after his children in the park, he was often on his mobile phone. That partly explains why I found his chapter on care work unsatisfying despite appreciating his wish that it was more respected.

One of the questions posed by my own book *Labours of Love: The Crisis of Care* is why care is so little understood as an activity, let alone appreciated as one of the lasting central tasks of many lives from birth to death. The sustaining of another person's wellbeing within the intimacy of family—be they a child, an invalid, an elderly parent—is an enormous and complex task. Within the context of a job, there is an additional interplay of professional competence, allocation of attention under time pressure and awareness of risk, to name just a few elements. But historically, care has been regarded as women's work, routinely belittled as "instinctive"—as though all you needed was a good heart. Women were socialised to provide care for free, to be "caring" and thus self-sacrificial and self-effacing.

Nursing in particular has been caught in a gilded cage by this patriarchal history, struggling to find the recog-

inition for its skills and the authority to exercise them; nurses are too often praised as angels and expected to "go the extra mile" without being paid properly. On the question of nursing degrees, Goodhart squirms—here is a test case of his complaint of "academisation of vocational training"—but he has to grudgingly concede that studies have consistently shown university training has led to better health outcomes. Written into the structures of capitalism from the start was a division between the recognised paid work of the public realm and a disregard for the unpaid care work of the private realm. As women's paid employment rose, the welfare state failed to take up the care responsibility and, as a result, gaps have emerged at multiple points in our care economy: Covid-19 has exposed this tragic weakness. (See Nicholas Timmins on p40.) The UK's response in the last few decades has been to delay, ignore and botch: the result has been a fragmentary, precarious childcare sector and a cruel lottery of inadequate social care.

"The irony is as Covid-19 ripped through the UK's fragile care system, we clapped for our carers"

The irony is that as Covid-19 ripped through the UK's fragile social care system and thousands of elderly people died, we clapped for our carers. It was the familiar trap of offering carers love and idealisation, but not proper wages or job security—in short, the lot of many mothers and wives. Both Goodhart and I make a plea in our books, written before the virus, for more respect and value for the vital labour of carers. The hard part is what comes next: has Covid-19 permanently shifted the dial to ensure decent pay and enough time to do the job, or will that warm impulse quickly fade?

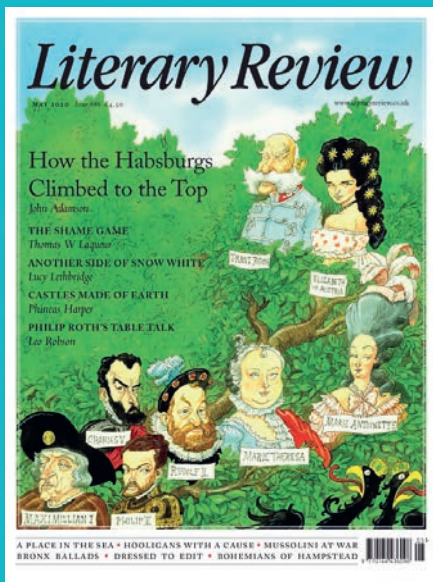
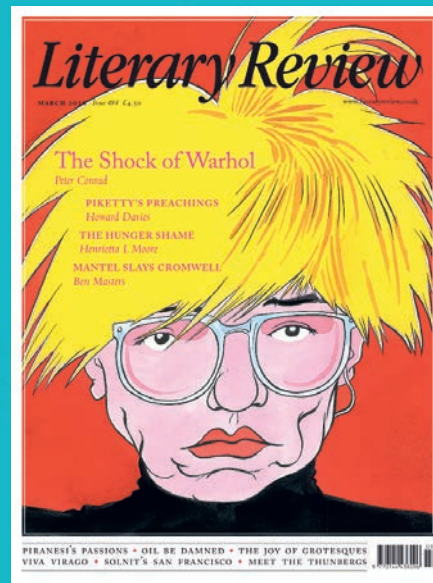
As an argument for a wider, more diverse education system, with more funding for vocational courses, Goodhart's book is spot on; as a warning of how automation and AI will erode the very white-collar work we revere even while the need for care work will continue to rocket in our ageing society, it is equally good. But as a schematic framework to explain the rise of populism, the head, hand, heart distinction fails to convince.

In recent decades, capitalism has been left to determine the value of people and their labour without any powerful countervailing institutions or value systems, thereby generating a brutal dystopia. Goodhart quotes the former chief rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, to this effect. But he is still resistant to the left's attempt to curb and challenge this dystopia. In the end, the book verges on an extended apology for his previous worldview, which he now says was too narrow, and which overvalued some forms of achievement while disregarding others. He wants workers using their hands and hearts to be more respected, but in calling for this he risks sounding platitudinous. In the last pages, he relays the familiar thought that on our deathbed the most common regret—especially of men—is not having spent more time on relationships. Writing the book has been quite a journey for Goodhart.

Madeleine Bunting's new book is *"Labours of Love: The Crisis of Care"* (Granta)

Education, education, education? Tony Blair's emphasis on academic achievement came at the expense of more vocational pursuits

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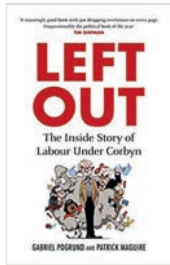


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Literary Review

Labour's love lost

A blow-by-blow account of Jeremy Corbyn's leadership throws its fatal tensions into stark relief. Nobody comes out of it well, finds *Rachel Shabi*



Left Out: the Inside Story of Labour Under Corbyn
by Gabriel Pogruend and Patrick Maguire (Vintage, £18.99)

Towards the end of Jeremy Corbyn's time as Labour leader, the former head of the civil service, Bob Kerslake, was tasked with auditing his office, troubleshooting what had become a malfunctioning and divided operation. Signing off his recommendations in the autumn of 2019, Kerslake wrote: "If you can find a political way of not having a general election for a little while, you should do so. Because you really are not ready." By this late point in *Left Out: the Inside Story of Labour under Corbyn*, the truth of his observation is grimly apparent, but the force of those words still hits like a punch to the stomach.

Authored by Gabriel Pogruend and Patrick Maguire, political correspondents for the *Sunday Times* and the *Times* respectively, *Left Out* is a detailed account of the second half of the unlikely story of Corbyn's leadership of the Labour Party, covering the period between 2017 and 2019, when the operation went "from Glastonbury to catastrophe," as they put it. We know how this story ends, and for many of us on the left it makes painful reading—no less so nine months into the re-election of a populist right-wing government that has so badly mishandled a deadly pandemic. At times the book has you reading through your fingers, dismally aware of the consequences of the mounting, unforced errors from a Labour leadership trying to realise "the project" of a socialist government, as well as damaging attempts to undermine it from within by hostile Labour MPs and parts of the party machine. It is a book to be read dolefully and in one sitting.

There is something for everyone. Those who always viewed Corbyn as calamitously incompetent will find confirmation in the portrayal of an indecisive, conflict-averse and absent character. The leader of the opposition's office (Loto) is revealed as shambolic at the critical moments. For others, there is corroboration of claims made in a leaked party document earlier this year: that officials at the Southside headquarters, mostly Labour right factionalists, were running a "parallel campaign, out of sight and knowledge of Team Corbyn"—funneling funds into the seats of MPs hostile to the leadership. Then there are almost parodic depictions of rebel MPs secretly plotting to set up the Independent Group, who would leave the party in 2019, start to splinter before rebranding as Change UK, and then splinter again before partially merging with the Lib Dems prior to the election—when they would all lose their seats. There's bleak comedy, too, in the idea of Corbyn and his wife, Laura Álvarez, refusing to relocate to No 10 should Labour win power, with his aides suggesting sweeteners—an allotment in Downing Street's rose garden, or accommodating refugees in the couple's Islington home—to persuade them. Shadow defence secretary Nia Griffith, who was committed to multi-rather than unilateral disarmament, was nicknamed "Nukin' Nia" by Loto.

Fed by interviews with insiders in the immediate aftermath of a heavy defeat in the 2019 election, the book needs to be read somewhat sceptically, with an awareness of many players' motives—to pour scorn on the Corbyn project, or

to exculpate themselves from its mistakes. Nobody comes out of this well, yet one storyline eventually dominates: the way the civil war in the Labour Party ultimately reached into the very heart of the project, in Loto. This narrative not only feeds the worst assumptions about the radical left as a self-destructively squabbling mob, it also fuels the tendencies of those who see treacherous plots as the only cause of Corbyn's failure.

Running through the book are accounts of a party undermining itself with endemic factionalism. *Left Out* depicts some Labour MPs reacting with dismay to Corbyn's leadership, while the atmosphere at Southside was "toxic, distrustful and openly mutinous." This inevitably fuelled suspicion within Loto, but it just as inevitably clouded decision-making. That much is miserably apparent in a chapter on allegations of sexual harassment by Labour MPs and officials, carrying the suggestion that measures were in some cases not properly pursued by Karie Murphy, Corbyn's chief of staff, who had, it is alleged, prioritised protecting Corbyn loyalists. The book notes Loto's view that such cases "could be more easily dealt with by being nipped in the bud by the likes of Murphy" and a reluctance to surrender to the formal disciplinary processes run by Southside, which might take the opportunity to "make their lives more difficult." (Murphy denies this.)

"Between 2017 and 2019 the operation went from Glastonbury to catastrophe"

Such grisly factionalism is also in the subtext of the party's failings over antisemitism, a problem that, although difficult, was not insurmountable, and yet was compounded by avoidable mistakes and dreadful errors of judgment. The book lists some of the lowlights of a saga that evolved from acute crisis to morally and politically wounding chronic condition. These include Corbyn initially offering support in 2012 to an artist, Mear One, whose mural featuring antisemitic tropes was unearthed in March 2018. That summer, the leadership was also mired in an epic row over its refusal to adopt all the examples appended to a definition of antisemitism produced by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance. (The party was eventually dragged into accepting them all.) What the book doesn't mention is that by the time of the Mear One mural incident, a strand of Corbyn supporters were either actively deploying antisemitism or vociferously denying it as part of their defence of the Labour leader. In other words, the toxic way this row played out only made the issue worse.

According to Andrew Murray, one of Corbyn's key advisers, the Labour leader struggled to empathise with ▶



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British Jews over antisemitism because, like many on the left, his concept of racism was of a prejudice that punches down, hitting the disadvantaged, poor and marginalised (whereas the antisemitic conspiracy of a shadowy, all-powerful group supposedly punches up). Murray’s statement is, in itself, troublesome, suggesting that British Jewry is homogenously prosperous. It also belies a misunderstanding of how bigotry works: it is a hateful response to racial groups, yes, but it is prejudice that constructs those racialised minorities in the first place. His comments confirm suspicions that blindspots around antisemitism permeated the top of the party, rendering the leadership incapable of effectively dealing with the problem, causing it to spiral.

At one point *Left Out* lists proposals suggested to heal the wounds with Britain’s Jewish community, made by Murphy, after consultation with the Labour peer Michael Levy. These included Corbyn making a trip to Auschwitz, visiting the Jewish Free School in north London and meeting with residents of a Jewish care home. Any of these, the authors note, might have been decent reconciliation measures. None was pursued. Corbyn is described as incapable of getting past the personal hurt that he felt on being accused of racism at worst and of tolerating antisemitism at best.

But the rush to condemn Corbyn as personally antisemitic on the one side and—on the other—to insist on his anti-racist credentials were both distractions. Focusing on the personal took the analysis far away from a proper understanding of racial prejudice as a deep-seated, ever-present, animating force in society—which in turn curtailed the capacity to understand what it means, or how it had shown up within the Labour Party.

In the aftermath of the 2017 election, when Labour secured a historically high share of the vote on a left-wing platform, the leadership might have reached

out to other sections of the party to consolidate support. But *Left Out* reveals it was not until 2019 that senior aides even considered (although did not act on) the idea of bringing higher-profile talent from the backbenches into the shadow cabinet: David Lammy, Ed Miliband and Anneliese Dodds were mentioned, “soft left” politicians who now sit in Keir Starmer’s top team. Similarly, in April 2018 Corbyn aides met to discuss potential staff changes at Southside and one asked whether it might be “safer to employ someone with the relevant experience but who isn’t necessarily completely aligned politically?” But the project ended up concentrating power in the hands of its own people, not a unique path for a Labour leader, but nonetheless a missed opportunity—not least because a degree of political diversity breeds strength and a capacity to stress-test strategic decisions.

By the time we get to the Brexit endgame, the book outlines a battle to control the Labour Party so pervasive that it seemed like everyone was fighting their own battles, including Corbyn’s longstanding allies—in particular John McDonnell, the shadow chancellor. A good, old-fashioned betrayal narrative certainly lends drama, but while earlier chapters make efforts at even-handedness, here it seems to be abandoned for what reads more like briefings against Team McDonnell. The shadow chancellor is cast as pursuing a separate project. (Murphy, who often enjoys the last word, is quoted as saying of McDonnell: “he moved against both of us... this should never have happened. Ultimately it fucked our project.”) There are suggestions of wounded pride and rivalry stalking the shadow chancellor and his former staffer, Andrew Fisher, who was by then Labour’s head of policy. Attempts to move the party to what is cast as a project-wrecking second EU referendum position come across here as essentially the design of anti-Corbyn plotters—and some eyebrow-raising claims are made

**Toxic row:
Protesters
congregate
outside Labour
HQ in Southside,
London, over
the party’s
handling of
antisemitism**

to support this. We are told that disgruntled ex-Labour Southside officials who went on to work for the People's Vote campaign seeded the multiple local party motions for a referendum during 2018's annual conference. But this not only underplays the significant mobilisation efforts of the Corbyn-friendly group Another Europe is Possible (slogan: "Love Corbyn, hate Brexit"), it also ignores that some local parties drafted motions under their own steam. Developing the idea of Team McDonnell splintering from the project, the book explains that Fisher kept the unions in the dark over the contents of the 2019 manifesto, for fear they would be passed to Corbyn's most trusted aide Seumas Milne (who had a tight grip on the big policy decisions, but not necessarily the nuts and bolts of the manifesto). But one trade union official involved told me this was not the case: there were months of policy engagement, which accelerated once the election was called.

While it's undeniably a skill to turn party wrangles into a dramatic page-turner, the breathless prose is at times wearily typical of the personality-obsessed tittle-tattle for which lobby journalism is known. (We read how Murphy "bore the project on her shoulders like Atlas, sustaining the effort through sheer force of will.") There are frequent references to "the project" but little explanation of what it aimed to achieve, the economic and social forces animating it, or why Loto fought so hard (if ineffectively) for it. Yet the book does contain thoughtful observations

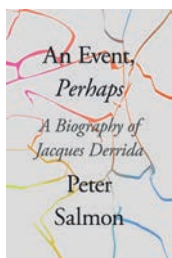
that prompt wider questions about power and leadership, friendship and loyalty, solidarity and the capacity to engage people beyond your own camp.

Corbyn, by this book's account, was compromised by personality traits unsuited to leadership that he was unable to surmount. He is portrayed as being incapable of making the necessary decisions or accommodations; and as being beaten down well before the December election defeat. But how does leadership stay true to its principles, without being so inflexible as to torpedo its own path to power? And how might loyalty be constructively defined, so that disagreements between longstanding allies aren't construed as irreconcilable betrayals? A toxic organisational culture is not unique to the Labour left. The outsized egos, naked ambition and power-play that are features of politics across the spectrum—and often show up in media organisations, too—aren't conducive to harmonious hives of efficiency. But the bunker mentality that gripped the Corbyn project, even if at times an understandable reaction to the never-ending onslaught of attacks, was a fatal flaw. This political tradition is unlikely to be a majority force inside the parliamentary Labour Party anytime soon. To achieve any influence on behalf of its transformative policies, needed now more than ever, it is going to have to figure out how to work with progressives outside its own tribe. What a pity that it couldn't do so when it was in a stronger position to persuade others to listen.

Rachel Shabi is a writer and broadcast news commentator

Vive la différence

A scintillating new biography of Jacques Derrida should make sceptics think again about the influential French philosopher, argues *Julian Baggini*



An Event, Perhaps:
A Biography of
Jacques Derrida
by Peter Salmon
(Verso, £16.99)

In May 1992, academics at the University of Cambridge reacted with outrage to a proposed honorary degree from their venerable institution to Jacques Derrida. A letter to the *Times* from 14 international philosophers followed, protesting that "M Derrida's work does not meet accepted standards of clarity and rigour."

Depending on your viewpoint, the incident marked the zenith or nadir of Anglo-American analytic philosophy's resistance to what it saw as the obfuscation and sophistry of its continental European cousin. To them Derrida was a peddler of "tricks and gimmicks," a cheap entertainer whose stock in trade was "elaborate jokes and puns."

The irony is that the protests showed a shocking lack of rigour themselves. As Peter Salmon points out in his brilliant biography *An Event, Perhaps*, Derrida had never used the puerile pun "logical phallusies" that the letter writers attributed to him. This was remarkably sloppy since "it is not as though neologisms ripe for their sort of mockery are hard to find." Salmon concludes that "none of them had taken the time to read any of Derrida's work."

It would have been understandable if some had tried but quickly given up. One of Derrida's examiners at his prestigious high school, the Lycée Louis-le-Grand, wrote of his work: "The answers are brilliant in the very same way that they are obscure." His work as an undergraduate was

no easier to decipher. Louis Althusser said that he could not grade his dissertation because "it's too difficult, too obscure." Michel Foucault could do little better, remarking: "Well, it's either an F or an A+."

The Derrida portrayed by Salmon would have shared these doubts. His "nagging fear that those who saw him as a charlatan were right never left him." Given Derrida's whole project was one of radical doubt, he could hardly have felt otherwise. Derrida was both admiring and mocking when he described analytic philosophers' "imperturbable ingenuity," but their absolute confidence in the rightness of their approach was anathema to him. He was in this respect more truly a philosopher than those who question everything except the peculiarities of their own methods of questioning.

An Event, Perhaps is called a biography but, as Derrida incessantly argued, all categorisations are to some degree arbitrary. Derrida's life story provides a frame and background for an intellectual biography of his ideas and their development. In the process it also serves as one of the clearest introductions to 20th-century continental philosophy available. The movements and minds that Derrida was responding to are finely sketched with clarity and concision. Difficult thinkers such as Husserl, Levinas, Heidegger, Cixous, Saussure, Lévi-Strauss and Gabriel Marcel become surprisingly approachable; the frequently-▶

blurred distinctions between movements such as structuralism, phenomenology, post-structuralism and existentialism suddenly clarify.

Jackie Derrida, as he was named, was born in Algiers in 1930, then a French colony, to largely secular Sephardic Jewish parents. His childhood testifies to his later claims about the inadequacies of language to capture the ambiguities and contradictions of the world, especially those of identity. He was Algerian but not a citizen of Algeria, French without ever having even seen France, Jewish without living a Jewish life, of an Arab country but not Arab, too dark to be seen as European by Europeans, too culturally European to be seen by Africans as African. Little wonder he would later write that identity “is never given, received or attained: only the interminable and indefinitely phantasmic process of identification remains.”

Life in Algeria was unsettling and unpredictable. In 1940, the collaborationist Vichy government in France took away citizenship from the 120,000 Jews in Algeria, which was only restored three years later after Allied forces retook the country. But from the time Derrida enrolled as a boarder at the Lycée Louis-le-Grand in Paris and then the even more exclusive École normale supérieure, he lived a comfortable life among the elite. However, he never lost his outsider's edge. Never one to join groups or mass movements, he would in time dislike the cultish adoration of his acolytes.

“Derrida’s whole project was one of radical doubt”

Despite the way the Anglo-Saxon academy often bundles him in with them, Derrida was never one of the postmodernists. He did, however, share the movement’s distrust of grand narratives that provide single, and often simple, explanations that erase the complexities of the real world. Everything has to be carefully “deconstructed”: analysed in its specificity, “alert to the implications, to the historical sedimentation of the language which we use.” That is perhaps why he wrote so much. Deconstruction was a method more than a theory and there was no limit to what could be deconstructed.

Still, there was a unity to Derrida’s oeuvre, captured in his talk of “adopting equivocalty”—what Salmon calls “perhaps as close as we have to a Derridean call to arms.” In much classical and contemporary analytic philosophy there is an assumption, more or less explicit, that there is a way that things are and that the task of language is to map it, to “carve nature at the joints” as Plato put it. For Derrida, it is not that nature has no joints, or that the world can simply be carved however we please. Rather, there is always more than one way to carve, and every slice divorces us from possible alternative ways of seeing and understanding. Naming is thus, says Salmon, a “founding act of violence... before there is a road taken and a road not taken.”

This idea is at the heart of Derrida’s key concept of *différance*. Every concept, every distinction, carries with it the ghost of an alternative conception or distinction not made. One task of deconstruction is to recover these lost possibilities, to show that the way we think of things is not the only way they can be thought. We may not use the word, but we all have a sense of what *différance* means. “Anyone who has formed quotation marks in the air with their fingers to identify a word where the use and meaning are not absolutely cleaved,” says Salmon, “has acknowledged the possibility of *différance* as posited by Derrida.” The ubiquity of this gesture suggests Derrida was right when he commented “once quotation marks demand to appear, they don’t know where to stop.”

Derrida’s project is diametrically opposed to that of most philosophers. One of the broadest and most accurate descriptions of philosophy as generally practised in the west is that it seeks the resolution of aporias: seemingly intractable contradictions that inevitably emerge from our understanding of the world. For instance,

A true philosopher: Derrida questioned his own peculiar methods as much as the things he was questioning



it is an aporia that we seem to have knowledge, but also have reason to believe we can be certain of nothing. Another is that we appear to have free will, but also understand ourselves to be subject to mechanical laws of nature. In such aporias, simply giving up one side of the contradiction is not possible without a major reconfiguration of our understanding.

For Derrida, however, Salmon argues “the goal was to keep an aporia in suspension.” Using Gabriel Marcel’s distinction, philosophy has seen itself as concerned with solving problems that exist independently of us, when it should be trying to understand the insoluble mysteries that we have to live with.

You can see why Derrida’s writing could never have been clear and plain. If you take as a premise “meaning cannot be fixed” then in your writing you will take pains to avoid any suggestion of false precision. As Salmon puts it, “Language that presumes itself fixed and proclaimed from the mountain is the sovereign right of God, not of humans.”

Hence Derrida’s difficult style, far from being an affectation, is an inevitable requirement of his philosophy. He adopts “obfuscation as a structural necessity, to draw attention to the undecidability of certain notions, or to foreground their complexity.” Manner and matter cannot be separated. The style of analytic philosophy, “privileging clarity as though it was a transparent deliverer of meaning,” is not philosophically neutral but professes the foundational assumptions of the school itself.

One of Derrida’s claims that analytic philosophers would have no difficulty agreeing with is: “One shouldn’t complicate things for the pleasure of complicating, but one should also never simplify or pretend to be sure of such simplicity where there is none. If things were simple, word would have gotten round.” The difference is that they take a different view of what is difficult. The complication of analytic philosophy arises from the attempt to be as precise as possible, whereas the complication for Derrida is the result of meticulously trying to avoid being more precise than is possible.

That is not to say Derrida is never guilty of linguistic extravagance. He admitted that he was “an incorrigible hyperbolite,” and that “I always exaggerate.” Early in his career he accused Heidegger of using “Noisy, pretentious and heavy dialect... [a] crowd of neologisms of which a good part are superfluous,” which leads Salmon to sardonically note that “Derrida’s prejudices against this sort of writing were, one might point out, not ongoing.”

Yet Derrida also sagely said “ordinary language is probably right,” because ordinary language never pretends to have the precision or purity of philosophical speech. Philosophy’s attempted resolutions of aporias are attempts to tidy up language. Derrida, in contrast, wants to remind us that language is even less precise, even more equivocal than common sense presumes. Philosophers’ attempts to pin down words are as futile as nailing jelly to a wall. Language is slippery since each new iteration newly recombined by each speaker brings with it the possibility of a mutation of meaning, even from the meaning the speaker intended for it.

A revealing dispute with a leading analytic philosopher, John Searle, makes the cleft between the two approaches clear. Searle’s early work was on his mentor J.L. Austin’s concept of the “speech act.” Austin’s insight was that words do not only convey meanings, they can be used to actually do things. If a priest pronounces a couple man and wife, they become married; a judge sends someone to prison merely by issuing a sentence.

If this recognition of the heterogeneity of speech was helpful to Derrida, the ways in which analytic philosophers developed the idea were not. For instance, when talking of promising as a speech act, Searle wrote: “I am ignoring marginal, fringe, and partially defective promises.” For Derrida this was inexcusable. By only focusing on abstracted, tidied-up, ideal forms of speech acts, Searle was ignoring how they actually work. Searle thought this simplification was harmless, just “a matter of research strategy.” Derrida thought it was another example of philosophy choosing a false precision over more truthful messiness.

The written dispute with Searle was bitter. The American was snide and condescending, but Derrida came to view his own reply “with a certain uneasiness,” seeing it “not devoid of aggressivity.” He at least recognised that philosophical debate involves passions and personalities, not just language and logic.

For all his 20th-century jargon, Derrida at heart belongs to a long line of sceptics that traces back to Pyrrho in Ancient Greece. “Crucial to his thinking,” says Salmon, was an opposition to the “violence of any gesture that pretends (assumes, supposes, presupposes) to know.” He was not a nihilist who denied truth, but a sceptic who thought “we cannot know whether there is truth or not.” Still, we can understand better by digging beneath the surface of concepts and language, finding what has not been said. Deconstruction is not destruction, as he was at pains to point out.

“Anyone who has formed quotation marks in the air with their fingers to identify a word has acknowledged the possibility of *différance*”

In ethics and politics Derrida’s suspension of judgment made him cautious of political action. Unlike many peers, such as the then Maoist Alain Badiou, he did not join the Paris revolts of 1968. “What we desired, in poetics terms, was the metaphysics of radical conflict, and not the patient deconstruction of opposites,” the *soixante-huitard* Badiou said, “and Derrida could not agree about that.”

In retrospect, this might seem admirable. However, his defence of the antisemitism and duplicity of his old friend Paul de Man back in the Nazi era, which emerged only after de Man’s death, cast him as just the kind of slippery relativist his critics accused him of being.

But Derrida was intensely serious about his work, writing more than 40 books and accumulating a library of over 13,000. Maybe he was profoundly mistaken. Even Salmon, clearly an admirer, says his 1966 classic *Of Grammatology* is “gloriously bonkers.” But anyone who believes he was a charlatan—especially without having made a serious attempt to read him—will surely have their minds changed by Salmon’s scintillating account of his life and thought.

Julian Baggini’s latest book is “The Godless Gospel” (Granta)

The magic of mushrooms

A love letter to mycology challenges a human-centered view of the world, finds *Philip Ball*

One of biology's enduring struggles since Darwin's time has been to throw off the hierarchy in which all living things are judged by their proximity to the supposed pinnacle of evolution: humans. If we measure evolutionary success in terms of sheer biomass, bacteria outweigh all animals on Earth by a factor of about 35, while the humble fungi exceed the world's fauna by around sixfold. Evolution, as the biologist Stephen Jay Gould unflinchingly tried to explain, has no overarching goal: it is not trying to make organisms that are more complex or smarter. It is merely the process by which every lineage of organisms adapts to thrive in its own niche—and evidently, simplicity is often the best solution.

Yet the biological sciences themselves are still trapped in human-centred thinking. There is a pecking order in which the study of humans—even if at the reductionistic level of genes and cells—has primacy, with mice and fruit flies close behind as convenient proxies for trying to unravel our own biology. At the other end of the complexity scale, bacteria are well studied, in part because they are so ubiquitous and important to our own wellbeing, but also because their simplicity and the ease with which they can be grown in the lab makes them useful for understanding the basic processes of human (and other forms of) life: how genes are replicated, how enzymes work.

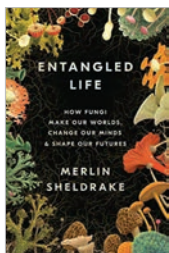
Plant biology, meanwhile, though important for agriculture, remains underappreciated. But even plants enjoy greater status than fungi, the third of the multicellular branches (along with animals and plants) on the “eukaryotic” limb of the tree of life (that is, those organisms with complex cells that partition their genes in nuclei). Part of mycologist Merlin Sheldrake's purpose in *Entangled Life* is to stick up for mushrooms—and indeed to explain why there is much more to fungi than mushrooms alone. Mycology, the study of fungi, is a “neglected megascience,” in the words of one of its practitioners—yet you don't have to delve very deep into it to be intrigued. Consider the “zombie fungus” *Ophiocordyceps unilateralis*, which infects a species of ant and in effect takes over the insect's brain. An infected ant is compelled to lose its instinctive aversion to heights, clamber up a plant, and lock its jaws into the plant tissue. What follows sounds like a nightmare out of science fiction. The fungus stitches the ant's feet to the plant surface, grows through

and digests the body, and sprouts mushroom-like from the head to spread its spores.

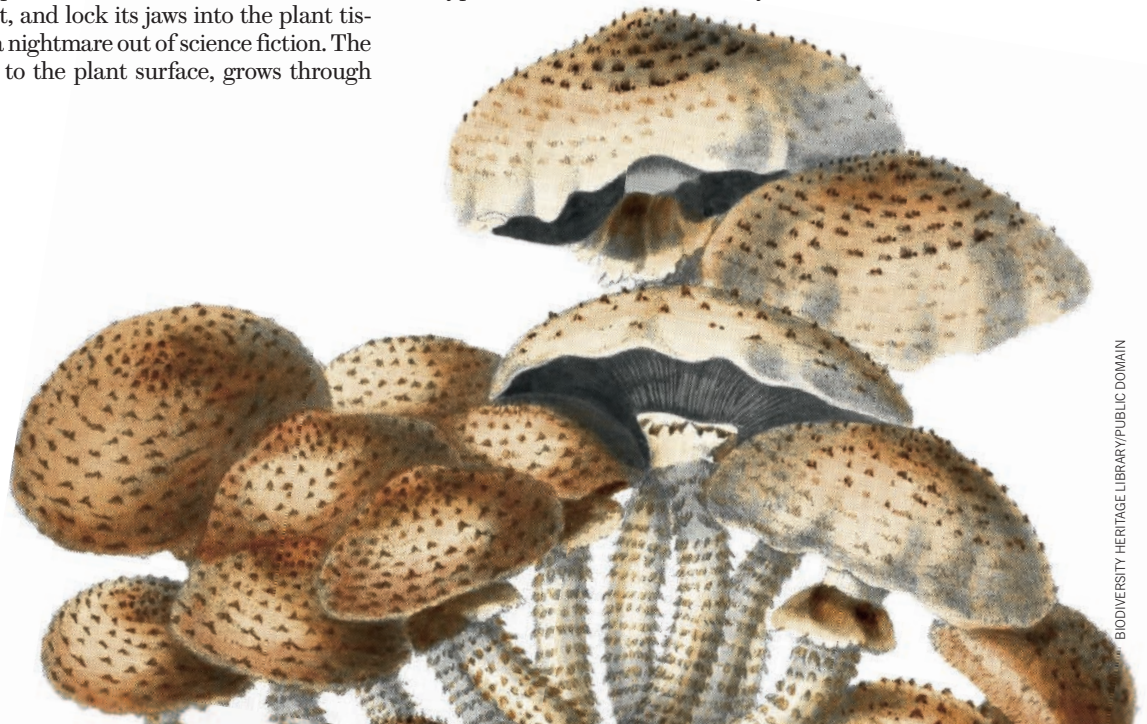
This might look like the Darwinian struggle for survival at its most ruthless. Yet Sheldrake's deeper goal here is to suggest that the neglect of fungi in biology has skewed our view of life inordinately towards that picture of “red in tooth and claw” competition. It's not wrong exactly, but incomplete. Fungi show us what an astonishing variety of ways there are to exist within the constraints of Darwinian evolution, in particular by developing intimate and yet promiscuous symbiotic relationships with other organisms: they help one another, but not exclusively. As a love letter to this undervalued form of life, Sheldrake's book is deeply engaging and constantly surprising. But its ultimate message goes further, showing that the story of life on Earth can be given many narratives.

Take lichens, such as the pale green stuff you often see on tree bark or rocks. These organisms are symbiotic combinations of algae and fungi (and are also packed with bacteria), and they exist all over the planet, covering as much as 8 per cent of its surface—more than tropical rainforests. They are perhaps the hardiest organisms known, able to survive on spacecraft bathed in ionising cosmic rays. We don't even really know how to think about such composite life-forms: they are like micro-ecosystems that “confuse our concept of identity and force us to question where one organism stops and another begins,” Sheldrake says. In fact, it might be better to think of lichens not as combinations of autonomous component parts but as “stabilised networks of relationships”: the components are the notes, but the organism is the song.

Or take mycelium: “ecological connective tissue, the living seam by which much of the world is stitched into relation.” It consists of fine fungal strands called hyphae that lace through soil like blood vessels through flesh—and also “along coral reefs, through plant and animal bodies both alive and dead, in rubbish dumps, carpets, floorboards, old books in libraries, specks of house dust and in canvases of old master paintings.” In a teaspoon of soil, there might be 10km of hyphae; mushrooms are (literally) their fruit.



Entangled Life:
How Fungi Make
Our Worlds, Change
Our Minds and
Shape Our Futures
by Merlin Sheldrake
(Bodley Head, £20)



“Mycelium is a way of life that challenges our animal imaginations,” Sheldrake writes. Some hyphae are sensitive to light, wind, temperature, moisture, surface texture and electrical fields, and can detect and navigate around nearby objects. Some networks stretch over kilometres and can be thousands of years old (whatever that can mean, exactly, for such a “distributed” organism). The Nobel laureate biologist Max Delbrück considered mycelium “the most intelligent” of simple multicellular organisms.

Fungi force us to reconsider what intelligence even means. It’s an emotive, slippery and in many ways unhelpful word—for many people it is synonymous with sentience or consciousness, while at the same time being notoriously hard to measure even within a given species, let alone to compare across the species divide. Many animal behaviourists prefer instead to speak of cognition: the neural processes that govern behaviour. But that generally assumes a brain, or at least a nervous system. Plants and fungi have neither.

What they do share in common with us and other “higher” animals is a system of branching filaments that act as conduits for signals of some kind—signals that put cells and tissues *here* in touch with those *there*. Mycelial networks may send electrical pulses along their hyphal strands, reminiscent of those that travel through nerves. Some mycologists have suggested that these filamentary fungal webs, like the entangled root systems of forests, can be regarded as analogues of the dense neural networks inside our skulls, so that both plants and fungi display a kind of cognition, even intelligence. Others regard that as absurd talk: these networks might be more akin to those of river basins, distributing matter and energy without any cognitive process.

The whole argument rather misses the point. Attributing sentience to fungal networks might indeed be a wild leap—but then perhaps sentience, including our own, is just a poorly-understood byproduct of the primary goal of systems like our neural structures, namely to convey and process sensory information from the environment in ways useful to survival and growth. And with fungal networks, this processing isn’t just a passive affair in the manner of roads acting as conduits for traffic. Fungal networks possess a capacity for solving novel problems, such as growing through a maze to locate the shortest path to the exit. Some researchers are exploring their electrical signalling to make what they call living fungal computers—not to perform calculations, but perhaps to act as environmental sensors that can report soil quality or pollution.

Whether this qualifies as intelligence is a matter of semantics. It’s more useful to recognise that what has previously been considered intelligence, often with an anthropocentric bias, is now increasingly being subsumed into a broader question: how do biological entities acquire, represent and integrate information and come to possess memory, predictive ability, agency and self-identity? Our own mental processes and the “reasoning” of fungi are two different but related answers to these general questions. The magic of mushrooms is not merely mind-expanding, then; it might expand the very concept of mind.

Symbiotic relationships of fungi and plants are in fact the norm: more than 90 per cent of all plant species rely for their viability on fungi called mycorrhizae to sequester nutrients from the soil, while returning the favour by allowing the fungi to enjoy the benefits of photosynthesis, the harvesting of energy from sunlight for metabolism and growth. Mycorrhizal filaments may also carry vital molecules from one plant to another, blurring their status as separate organisms; other micro-organisms such as bacteria ride this organic subway too. And as with lichens, it makes no sense to ask here who dominates the relationship, who is “farming” whom.

Plants and fungi can find new partners in different environments, and are altered as a result: certain mycorrhizae make strawberries sweeter, change the taste of herbs and tomatoes or the baking properties of wheat flour.

Photosynthesis is often seen as a *sine qua non* of plant life: it requires the light-harvesting chlorophyll pigments that make

plants green, and drives the production of the organic material they need for their growth and survival. But in at least one case, mycorrhizal fungi have produced a plant species—the ghost plant (*Monotropa uniflora*), native to the American northwest and Asia—that doesn’t use photosynthesis at all.

Monotropa lacks chlorophyll entirely, and is deathly white, indeed looking rather fungal, like “clay tobacco pipes balanced on their ends.” The plants depend on the carbon compounds supplied, via fungal conduits, by other plants—and, oddly, they don’t appear to reciprocate any favours. But this is only an extreme example of a common trait; all orchids, for example, lean on fungal networks for their nutrition at some stage in their development.

“Mushrooms are not just mind-expanding; they expand the very concept of mind”

Sure, we could choose to see this as a case of one organism “exploiting” others to survive—that’s the classic neo-Darwinist view. But it’s an arbitrary narrative. We could alternatively fabricate a cosy, romantic story about cooperation to counter the brutal one offered by survival of the fittest—but “cooperation” is no less anthropomorphic than “selfishness.” Mycorrhizae are simply showing life for what it really is: connection. Biology needs new ways to describe and reckon with the interconnectedness of all life—for no organism, not even fungus, is an island. Mycology can help. But the question, Sheldrake says, is whether we can talk about what he calls these “wood wide webs” without “leaning on one of our well-worn human totems.”

Sheldrake is not immune to romanticism of his own. His account of the mind-altering properties of magic mushrooms has a touch of the shaman about it: all very well, but descriptions of other people’s hallucinogenic trips tend to be tiresome. (The son of maverick biologist Rupert Sheldrake, Merlin grew up among colourful company, and the apple clearly didn’t fall far from the tree.) He breezily describes the potential of fungal hallucinogens such as psilocybin to treat disorders like depression, downplaying the possible dangers and the mixed and still rudimentary evidence of their efficacy. And in entertaining the speculations of his father’s friend, the “eccentric author, philosopher and ethnobotanist” Terence McKenna that, by altering our consciousness, psilocybin mushrooms are somehow “wearing our minds” much as “zombie fungi” do for ants, he risks stepping into the Age of Aquarius.

But these are quibbles about what is otherwise a balanced, well-informed and at times beautifully written book. Sheldrake ends with a paean to “radical mycology,” a mostly “citizen science” movement that aims to redress the professional neglect—the equivalent of the amateur astronomers who regularly contribute real advances to their field. Some of these folks just like growing edible mushrooms; some, inevitably, are drawn to the hallucinogens. Others study the potential of fungi to sequester pollutants such as heavy metals; one collaborates with scientists to look for antiviral agents in fungi. (Let’s not forget that the first antibiotic, penicillin, came from a fungal mould.) Radical mycology organises itself like its subject matter, with “decentralised mycelial logics.”

Sheldrake is a spirit in tune with this anarchic approach. He gets drunk on cider fermented from apples scrunped at night from a cutting from Isaac Newton’s famous apple tree. And he announces in the epilogue that he will grow and eat oyster mushrooms from a dampened copy of his book. But beneath the playfulness is a serious and disruptive question: how different would our societies look, Sheldrake asks, if we thought of fungi rather than animals and plants as “typical” life forms? **P**

Philip Ball’s latest book is “How To Grow a Human” (William Collins)

Books in brief



Reluctant European: Britain and the European Union from 1945 to Brexit

by Stephen Wall (OUP, £25)

Although it is marketed as a history of Britain and the European Union, *Reluctant European* really sparkles as a political memoir. Stephen Wall joined the Foreign Office in 1968, and for four decades enjoyed a ringside seat at the Anglo-European circus. He worked with Ted Heath during the entry negotiations and ran the Foreign Office's European Department under Margaret Thatcher. He was Private Secretary to John Major and Europe adviser to Tony Blair. From 1995 to 2000 he was Britain's Permanent Representative to the EU, returning to run the Cabinet Office's European Secretariat.

The result is a decidedly "high-political" account centring on prime ministers and diplomats. The sketches are deft, witty and sometimes surprising. Harold Wilson, whose critics thought him as straight as a corkscrew, is credited with a "principled and strategic" course that safeguarded membership. Thatcher "was incapable of being tough without talking tough," whereas Major "was tough on substance while being unthreatening in manner," making him a steely negotiator. Blair "was a strategist and tactician of a high order," but "was not intellectually interested in the issues." Gordon Brown was "invariably moody and uncommunicative," while David Cameron "viewed the EU entirely through a domestic prism."

Of the three grand EU projects of recent decades—the single market, enlargement and monetary union—the UK played a leading role in two. Yet successive governments failed to tell a positive story, instead presenting the EU as "a problem" to be managed. Despite his enthusiasm for membership, Wall accuses Britain's leaders of misrepresenting the EU to the public, offering an "airbrushed," intergovernmental version that "did not represent the reality" of "ever-closer union." Promises of leadership in Europe rang hollow, for "what they were leading was habitually a rearguard action."

Robert Saunders



War: How Conflict Shaped Us

by Margaret MacMillan (Profile, £20)

The historian Margaret MacMillan justifies her book on the grounds that war is one of the great forces in history and that its study is essential if we are to make sense of our past. To be sure, we are war-making animals. And all too often, as Orwell said, war is peace. During the so-called "long peace" since 1945, over 50m people have been killed in conflicts around the globe.

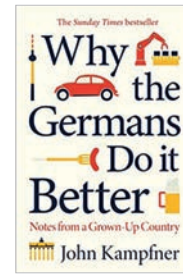
But if MacMillan is hardly original (except perhaps in describing Thomas Hobbes as an 18th-century thinker), she offers a useful survey of war in all its aspects. She analyses its causes—usually greed, fear or ideology—and its effects, which are not exclusively malign. She anatomises the experience of fighting—the horror, excitement and boredom. Atrocities, leadership, comradeship, weapons, strategy, remembrance of the dead, cyber-wars—all are grist to her mill.

Nor, in discussing the tragedy of war, does she forget the comedy. During the First World War the British eliminated the breast pocket on women's uniforms in case it drew unseemly attention. When the destroyer Antrim was hit during the Falklands War, a stoker transfixed crewmen by pointing down a passageway and shouting, "Zulus! Thousands of them!"

MacMillan also examines the familiar paradoxes of war. It brings out both the best and the bestial in humanity, inspiring glorious deeds and licensing unspeakable cruelties. It reveals that things worth living for can be worth dying for. It is creative as well as destructive, accelerating technological innovation (computers, jets, penicillin) and social advancement (work and votes for women).

Thus generalisations are almost invariably subject to qualification or contradiction. MacMillan herself explores war but cannot explain it. She concludes with the Belarusian writer Svetlana Alexievich: "War remains, as it always has been, one of the chief human mysteries."

Piers Brendon



Why the Germans Do it Better: Notes from a Grown-Up Country

by John Kampfner (Atlantic Books, £16.99)

Only a few years ago, David Cameron spoke about ID cards in a mock German accent. Back then, in the first decade of this century, Germany was still the butt of jokes. This has changed. Even Dominic Cummings—the PM's top adviser—admires Otto von Bismarck. And Michael Gove reportedly attends the Wagner *Festspiele* in Bayreuth. It's a good time to take a fresh look.

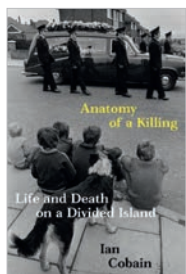
Too often studies on Germany highlight either its *Wirtschaftswunder* (economic miracle) or its high culture: classical music, the philosophy of Kant and Hegel and the poetry of Goethe. This book is different. Former *New Statesman* editor John Kampfner, who "fell in love" with the German language by listening to punk singer Nina Hagen, writes about the successful, grown-up, modern nation that has been led by Angela Merkel since 2005.

This is an account of a country that has pioneered progressive environmental policies, more women on company boards and an educational system that requires shop assistants to "undergo training that could last three years." The book portrays a Germany that is in sharp contrast to the UK, where we are faced with "the bombast of the recently-elected prime minister."

The praise for Germany is not unalloyed. Kampfner acknowledges that "the refugee influx has exacerbated the cultural divide" since 2015, and that "the economy has slowed." But overall it is a well-argued case for learning from our German cousins. As Kampfner writes, "it is not easy to demonise a country which has been led for a decade and a half by a sturdy scientist from a nondescript small town."

Why the Germans Do it Better is informed by German-language sources and an understanding of the most successful country in Europe. Though balanced, this book provides a persuasive case for a political system that has a preference for "*langsam aber sicher...* slow but sure."

Matt Qvortrup



Anatomy of a Killing: Life and Death on a Divided Island

by Ian Cobain (Granta, £18.99)

Concluding the opening chapter of *Anatomy of a Killing*, Ian Cobain recalls a conversation between a BBC reporter and a prisoner in the IRA wing of Long Kesh prison on the outskirts of Lisburn, Northern Ireland. The reporter notices that the inmate—serving life for murder—is reading Tolstoy. When pressed, the young man claims IRA men are as normal as anyone else. “When the reporter commented that normal people did not go around killing other people, the young man pointed out that normal people, elsewhere, did not live in Northern Ireland.”

In this book Cobain, an award-winning journalist, tells the story of one event—the murder of a policeman at the hands of the IRA in April 1978. But refracted through this precisely wrought narrative is an ambitious social and political history of the Troubles, drawing on court files, interviews, police notes and IRA strategy papers.

As Cobain oscillates between intimate portraits of those involved in the murder and the big political forces in Northern Ireland, he shows that there was no singular prototype for an IRA member, and limited shared psychology between those turning to violence. *Anatomy of a Killing* is a powerful reminder that the Troubles did not happen in a vacuum: the context created a logic that exerted itself on all sorts of people.

Cobain leaves no perspective un-examined: addressing the role of the Irish-American political relationship; the qualities of Jim Callaghan’s cabinet; the looming opposition of Margaret Thatcher; and cultural phenomena like punk.

Cobain mostly avoids making personal comments (though he struggles to contain his contempt for Roy Mason, Northern Ireland Secretary between 1976 and 1979). As a work of investigative journalism, the book can feel somewhat academic and demanding of its reader. But it ranks as a deftly-rendered history that refuses to simplify a messy and tragic period.

Finn McRedmond



The Light Ages: A Medieval Journey of Discovery

by Seb Falk (Allen Lane, £20)

Those who think of the medieval world—and medieval Catholicism in particular—as the antithesis of open-minded progress, might be surprised to learn that the great Benedictine abbey at St Albans had stained-glass portraits of both Muslim and Jewish scholars adorning its cloisters.

It’s true that St Albans was unusual in its devotion to learning and what we would now call science, but it stood out only by degree. As Cambridge historian Seb Falk sets out to prove in this fascinating new book, medieval Catholicism wasn’t the enemy of progress, it was its engine.

Falk’s starting point is an obscure 14th-century monk named John of Westwick, whose career he traces through his mathematical and astronomical manuscripts. His greatest claim to fame is a treatise on the equatorium, a supercomputer of its day designed to calculate the movements of the planets and the stars, rediscovered in 1951 by historian of science Derek Price.

Westwick was merely one small part of an international community of scholars that transcended cultural and religious boundaries. For monastic scholars to understand planetary and stellar motion was to come closer to an understanding of God; the complex mathematics of astronomy was a kind of prayerful act. Many of the certainties we take for granted today, from timekeeping to GPS systems, were first formulated by candlelight in the monastic libraries, scriptoria and cells that modernity likes to revile.

Price built a working model of Westwick’s equatorium in 1952, but it was quickly forgotten—one inventory had it labelled as King Arthur’s table—until Falk found it in 2012. As medieval scholars knew, but we moderns often forget, learning has to be conserved as well as expanded. Thanks to men like Westwick, the Dark Ages were anything but dark; Falk’s book is a lucid and eloquent reproof to anyone who says otherwise.

Mathew Lyons



The Haunting of Alma Fielding: A True Ghost Story

by Kate Summerscale (Bloomsbury, £18.99)

Nandor Fodor first encountered 34-year-old Alma Fielding in London in 1938. Crowds had gathered outside Alma’s Thornton Heath house, whose occupants, including husband, son and lodger, were quaking in their beds: saucers and lumps of coal flew through the air, ornaments smashed, handprints appeared on mirrors. The house “seemed to be under siege from itself.”

Alma—the apparent focus of the haunting—had written to the *Sunday Pictorial* urging them to investigate. Fodor was a Jewish-Hungarian journalist and ghost-hunter at the International Institute for Psychical Research. “This might prove a sensational case,” he thought, a means of validating his Freud-inspired theories on the connection between trauma and the occult.

As with her previous work, like the best-selling *The Suspicions of Mr Whicher*, Kate Summerscale examines her subjects with a microscopic lens before zooming out on the wider picture. Societies like the Ghost Club in London, the Spiritualist Alliance and the Faery Investigation pepper the narrative; infrared-filming sessions are interrupted, in 1936, by the sitters tuning in to Edward VIII’s abdication broadcast, and resuming “the next evening, by which time George VI was King of England.”

Summerscale couldn’t have predicted the national mood into which her fifth non-fiction title would be published, but there are striking similarities with the current atmosphere of fear. Theirs was a population gripped by dread of apparitions, a country still recovering from war and a flu pandemic. These malevolent spirits could not be seen or touched, but could cause great harm. Ghosts were “distractions from anxiety, expressions of anxiety, symptoms of a nervous age.” In its focus on the psychological, Summerscale’s unsettling story offers her most nuanced, empathetic work to date—a bright and engrossing tale of the grey space between hoax and haunting.

Zoë Apostolides

Recommends

Art

Emma Crichton-Miller

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye: Fly in League with the Night

Tate Britain, 18th November to 9th May 2021

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, a British painter of Ghanaian descent, is known for her mysterious paintings. Her imagined black subjects are summoned onto canvas, often within a single day, in an intense, moody palette of rich browns, blacks, dark greens or blues and brilliant whites. Despite their stillness, the figures have a spontaneous liveliness. This extensive survey brings together around 80 works from 2003 to the present day.



Kai Althoff goes with Bernard Leach

Whitechapel Gallery, London, 7th October to 10th January 2021

Kai Althoff creates artworks and performances that weave together influences as various as folk traditions, popular culture and German expressionism. This is his first major survey in the UK and it brings together over 130 works—from childhood drawings and photographs to sculptural installations and paintings. The artist pays homage to the British potter Bernard Leach with a curated selection of his pots.

Paloma Varga Weisz: Bumped Body

Henry Moore Institute, Leeds, until 3rd January 2021

Trained as a woodcarver before studying fine art at Dusseldorf Academy, Paloma Weisz draws on fairy tales, Renaissance painting, autobiography and surrealism for her ceramic sculptures, theatrical environments and wood carvings. Also included in this exhibition are over 40 drawings from the last 20 years, offering further insight into her poetic, tender and sometimes funny imaginary worlds.

Theatre

Michael Coveney

Betrayal/Copenhagen/Oleanna

Theatre Royal, Bath, 14th October to 12th December

Danny Moar's Theatre Royal is the first regional theatre to announce a full main house limited capacity season in the Covid era. Three modern masters, Harold Pinter, Michael Frayn and David Mamet, are represented by three plays of argumentative encounters—between adulterous literati in *Betrayal*, Nobel Prize-winning physicists in *Copenhagen*, and teacher and pupil in *Oleanna*. The last is fuelled by an allegation of sexual harassment that can (and does) elicit shout-outs in the stalls and fistfights on the streets—but not in Bath, surely?

This is Going to Hurt

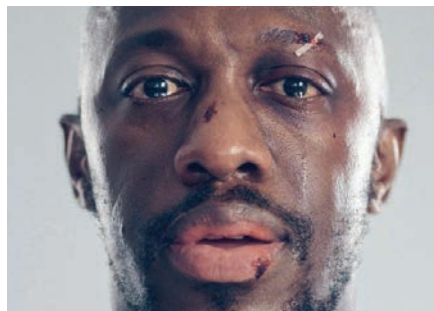
Apollo Theatre, London, 22nd October to 8th November

Adam Kay's one-man show returns to the stage as a West End curtain raiser. As it's based on his bestselling memoir about working as a junior doctor, the opening night will be a benefit for NHS staff. Theatre owners Nimax are the smallest of the four West End theatre-owning companies, so their incurred costs are lowest. Going forward, all depends on the government backing an insurance scheme for business interruption that includes Covid risk.

Death of England: Delroy

National Theatre, London, 21st October to 28th November

Yet another solo show by Clint Dyer and Roy Williams as the supine National Theatre stirs itself at last. This is a reworking of a previous anti-racist monologue featuring an angered, mouthy Rafe Spall. The same story of cultural dislocation is centred on a black friend of that protagonist, here played by the marvellous Giles Terera (below) who starred as US founding father Aaron Burr in the original London production of *Hamilton*.



Classical & opera

Alexandra Coghlan

English Touring Opera Autumn Season

October to December

English Touring Opera have conceived a socially distanced programme of staged monodramas and song-cycles. Domestic conflict and isolation are the topical themes for the first evening. Poulenc's devastating *La voix humaine* sees an unnamed woman plead and reproach her former lover in a painful telephone call that may or may not end in suicide. An English theme runs through the other two programmes, which bring Shostakovich's mercurial *Romances on Verses by English Poets* together with the inscrutable beauty of Britten's *Songs and Proverbs of William Blake*.



Psappha: 3x3

Hallé St Peter's, Manchester, 12th November

Manchester's innovative modern music ensemble (above) has also adapted swiftly. Its 3x3 series (running until December both digitally and live) presents concerts for three performers, each showcasing 20th-century and 21st-century composers. The November concert is typically wide ranging, stretching from Berio's witty folk and avant-garde collision *Naturale* to Helmut Lachenmann's virtuosic *Serynade*.

LSO & Simon Rattle, Krystian Zimerman

Barbican Hall, London, 29th November

Beethoven's 250th anniversary goes out with a bang. Simon Rattle and the LSO join forces with pianist Krystian Zimerman to present a complete cycle of the composer's piano concertos. Paired initially with works by Stravinsky that include the neoclassical ballet *Apollon musagète* and the highly ritualised *Symphonies of Wind Instruments*, they then come together in an epic final concert featuring all five concertos.

Film

Wendy Ide

Relic

In cinemas & streaming 30th October

Comparisons with *The Babadook* and *The Ring* are likely for this Australian horror with a distinctively female perspective and an inventive use of dementia as a device. Three generations of women coexist in an isolated family home—but the house seems to have taken on the malign needs of previous inhabitants. Terrific performances from Emily Mortimer, Robyn Nevin and Bella Heathcote give the picture a chilling credibility; the claustrophobic production design sucks the very air out of the cinema.

The Painter and the Thief

In cinemas & streaming 30th October

This Sundance prize-winning documentary achieves the knotty twists and perspective shifts that make for supremely satisfying non-fiction cinema. Two paintings by Czech artist Barbora Kysilkova are stolen from an exhibition in Oslo; the thieves are caught but rather than react with anger, she invites one to pose for her. This extraordinary film explores the complex friendship that grows between Kysilkova and career criminal Karl-Bertil Nordland. It reveals two characters who, in their own ways, are equally vulnerable and damaged.

Another Round

In cinemas 20th November

Director Thomas Vinterberg reunites with star Mads Mikkelsen in this pitch-black comedy. It focuses on four men, all middle-aged teachers, who decide to test the hypothesis that life improves when they maintain an elevated blood alcohol level at all times. For a while, it works. The riotous humour and crackling physical comedy almost makes a case for a booze-fuelled reality. Then things take a darker turn. With its characteristically Danish wry realism and the superb central cast, this looks set to be an arthouse crossover hit.



Television

Chris Harvey

Rebecca

Netflix, 21st October

Any attempt to adapt Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* will inevitably draw comparisons with Alfred Hitchcock's 1940 masterpiece—your Mr de Winter will be held up against Laurence Olivier's, your Rebecca to Joan Fontaine's. In Netflix's new television-only film, Armie Hammer, as the former, is quietly superb; Lily James makes an adorable ingénue. And anyone who marvelled at Kristin Scott Thomas's iciness in *Fleabag* should ready themselves for the moment she is introduced as the conniving Mrs Danvers.



Small Axe

BBC One, November

Steve McQueen, Oscar-winning director of *12 Years a Slave*, is one of the most prolific artists of his generation. He has directed and co-written all five of the hour-long dramas that make up *Small Axe*. Dramatising real-life stories of London's West Indian community, the series opens with "Mangrove," the true story of the Mangrove Nine. This group of nine men and women were tried for inciting a riot in 1970, after protesting against police targeting of a Caribbean restaurant in west London that had become a meeting place for radicals and intellectuals.

Being Frank

BBC Two, October

In June 2004, BBC security correspondent Frank Gardner and cameraman Simon Cumbers were targeted by al-Qaeda sympathisers while filming in Saudi Arabia. They were shot six times. Cumbers was killed and Gardner left for dead with spinal damage that left him partially paralysed. He has used a wheelchair ever since. In this film, Gardner reckons with a disability that he has never been able to accept.

Podcasts

Charlotte Runcie

Americast

BBC

Warm up for the US election with this podcast on American politics, delivered with the behind-the-news style that *Brexitcast* and *NewsCast* have done so well. It's presented by Emily Maitlis and Jon So-pel, so there's serious analysis in each episode, flitting between reactive responses to the latest news and in-depth specials on crucial players. There are spotlights on key concepts such as climate change and changes to voting practices that may inform the election.

Bunga Bunga

Wondery

Silvio Berlusconi (below) is the focus of a sharp eight-part series from comedian Whitney Cummings and the makers of the immensely popular podcast *Dirty John*. Berlusconi is probably Italy's most controversial politician of modern times and thus there's plenty of material to sift through in telling the story of his rise to power, including his bunga bunga parties and financial mysteries. It's told largely from an American perspective, which is fascinating for a European listener.



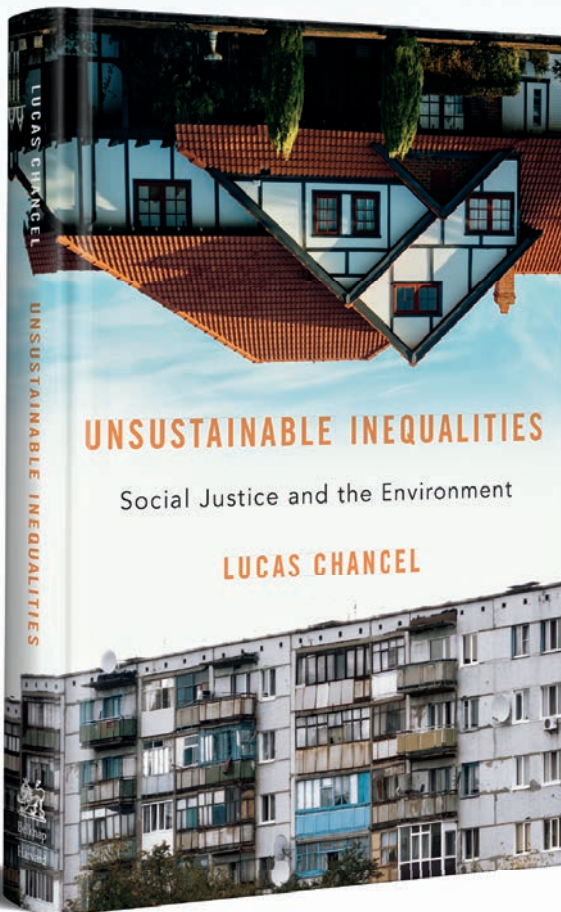
Rob Beckett and Josh Widdicombe's "Lockdown Parenting Hell"

Keep It Light Media

Is this a comedy podcast, or a confessional? Either way, if you're a parent or child-adjacent, this podcast will come as a massive relief. Comics Beckett and Widdicombe, both parents of young children, invite public figures to reflect on how their lockdown has gone without childcare, education or socialising opportunities. Guests include Peter Crouch, Jo Brand, Lorraine Kelly, Jonathan Ross and Isy Suttie, revealing the chaos, highs and lows of their parenting year.

“A must-read.”

—Thomas Piketty, author of *Capital and Ideology*



Social justice and a greener world can be compatible, but that progress requires substantial changes in public policy.



Prospect life

Illustrations by Kate Hazell



Home front

A mother's rage

Hephzibah Anderson

There is plenty in this world to feel enraged about, from the looming climate catastrophe and pernicious social inequality, to smaller things like littering and sloppy grammar. If you happen to be a mum, you can likely add to that list some very specific gripes, including the corporatisation of childhood (the empire that is Peppa Pig—don't get me started), the endless wiping, dabbing and mopping, and, of course, “momikers,” the cutesy names society generates for us: yummy mummy, wine mom, mumtrepreneur.

Fittingly, the latest addition is “rage mom.” Its Americanised spelling flags its provenance but its transatlantic resonance has seen the term embraced by everyone from *Telegraph* columnists to Patty Murray, the highest-ranking woman in the US Senate, who may, she concedes, be more of a “rage nana.”

The rage mom, we're to believe, is a political force to be reckoned with. Her fury has built over a turbulent summer stateside, just in time for the presidential election. She has had it up to here with months of shouldering homeschooling along with her customary burdens: the bulk of both the household chores and the childcare, all while trying to hang on to her paid job. Now that schools have reopened, she's spending her newfound downtime waving Pinterest-worthy placards at protests and posting about social injustice on Facebook.

Most of us could probably use the energy boost of some rallying slogans at this point. But the odd thing with this movement's members is the way they have willingly “mommified” themselves. The idea that mums might have election-turning clout is not new; but it used to be the spin doc-

tors rather than the mums themselves who embraced the labels. In New Labour's heyday, Tony Blair's strategists dreamt up “Worcester woman,” an archetypal middle England 30-something mother-of-two, while George W Bush appealed to “security moms” in his post-9/11 re-election campaign. Rage mom isn't even alone in the 2020 campaign: Joe Biden's digital director seeks to target “suburban Facebook empathy moms.” What's irksome is that, once elected, politicians have a habit of ignoring the policy areas that have left these mums incandescent with ire to start with, siloing off childcare, education and equal pay as “women's issues.”

“In politics, there's nothing quite like having a child to give you skin in the game”

Underpinning these political momiker memes is the patronising assumption that mums are not, by and large, political. In reality, maternal activism has a long and charged history. Let's not forget the mothers who joined the peace camp at Green-

ham Common. Mothers in India were also pivotal in the fight for justice following the 1984 Bhopal gas disaster, while Las Madres (Mothers) de Plaza de Mayo advocated for the “disappeared” children in Argentina during the nation's Dirty War in the late 1970s, and the Mother's Front was founded by Tamil mothers in the nineties during Sri Lanka's civil war. Today, Moms Demand Action advocates for gun control in the US.

Motherhood really is motivating for activism. Whether it's the environment or poverty, there's nothing like having a child to give you skin in the game, and as anyone who's ever given birth knows, it unleashes almighty emotions. Maternity gives women a certain moral authority that society remains troublingly reluctant to attribute to their childless sisters. Female rage is acceptable so long as it's mum rage. (Think how differently “rage feminist” strikes the ear.)

Paradoxically, so many of these mum archetypes derive their momentum from lingering taboos—mums aren't meant to sip a glass of chardonnay while still on shift (and when is a mother ever not?), or to give in to righteous fury. Maybe that's why so many mothers embrace these nicknames: ▶



they take a swing at the sentimentality and idealism that still clings to child rearing.

Or at least, some mums do. I've always viewed those exclusive mum-only cliques who'd hog the pavement, three prams abreast, with mild horror (which didn't change when I acquired a pram of my own). And as a single mother by choice, these momikers don't fit my experience. Instead, they seem to refer overwhelmingly to one type of mother—married, comfortably off, suburban. With her affinity to the Black Lives Matter movement, the rage mum may see herself as being more inclusive than her predecessors, but there's still something narrowing (not to mention grating) about so cheerfully pigeonholing your own politics on the basis of gender and procreation.

Ultimately, these matricentric monikers are bound to belittle. To appreciate the true potency of maternal wrath, we'd do better to look back to the original "rage moms": goddesses like Durga and Demeter whose power was mighty; they didn't need a "Wonder Mom" T-shirt to feel licensed to use it.



The wild frontier

Against the tide

Cal Flynn

The wonderful thing about living on an island is that there are endless opportunities to swim. In recent months, I've been overtaken by sudden urges to shed my clothes and slip into the sea, like a selkie in reverse. The waters are cold, of course—this being the wild Atlantic or the North Sea, depending on which coast I find myself on—but still so much warmer than in winter as to feel a blessed relief.

Warmer waters bring their own hazards, however. As temperatures heated up back in the summer, the jellyfish proliferated. When striking out from shore, you have to stay alert. They drift by like Chinese lanterns beneath the waves. Lion's mane jellyfish have been our most common sighting this year: clear lozenges the size of dinner plates, trailing streamers of burnt orange, plum and burgundy. Avoid them: they can give you a nasty sting. But if you do manage to keep your distance, they are fascinating creatures to watch.



Last week, when we clambered down to swim in the deep, still waters of a narrow inlet, we found ourselves sharing this sheltered pool with a single lion's mane, which pulsed gently around the perimeter, opening and closing like a set of bellows. As it approached, we would withdraw and wait for it to pass by—quite harmless, moving at a tranquil, meandering pace. Certainly unaware of our presence. Jellyfish have no eyes, no ears, no brain, no heart. Still, they seem to do alright—most of the time.

“Like jellyfish washed up on the shore, I often feel that I've been floating blindly through this crisis”

This lack of perception does leave them vulnerable, however. After a stormy night, we'll often discover dozens of them washed up on the beach, their gelatinous, almost formless, bodies melting away into the pebbles. A few years ago, near Torridon, we rounded a rocky headland to find the cove beyond filled with a thousand moon jellyfish or more—what is called a “bloom.” Each frosted disc bore four pale “eyes” (in reality sexual organs) and the whole conglomeration of creatures had been set whirling and swirling in the waves, coming together and apart, to create an iterative, almost hallucinogenic effect like that of a hall of mirrors. It was a strange and beautiful sight.

But wretched too—for most, if not all of them, were dead: dashed helplessly against the rocks.

It seemed a curio, then. A startling natural phenomenon, admittedly one that was unsettling. A textbook boom and bust cycle exhibited right in front of us. But this year, picking my way through the detritus of the storms, the plight of the jellyfish felt somehow more apt, more meaningful and perhaps a lot closer to home.

After months of mute acceptance as our autonomy and freedom have been curtailed and stripped away, our life plans redirected by greater forces, I have never felt more at the mercy of the currents. So often this year I have felt my ability to comprehend what is happening—and, more specifically, my ability to identify the best course of action—pushed beyond its limits. As overwhelming month succeeded overwhelming month, I found myself shying away from the news, with all its frightening and often contradictory reports, and craving simplicity—clear instruction, reassurance, explanations in only the very simplest terms.

Like the jellyfish, I often feel that I've been floating blindly through the crisis, and I don't think I'm alone. At the time of writing, we are bracing for the metaphorical second wave to hit. With case numbers rising, the swell could suck us all under. Scientists told us it would happen, yet still, now it's here, I feel I almost didn't see it coming. One can only keep on keeping on—beating on, against the current—and hoping not to be swept against the rocks.



Food court

The hand that feeds

Jonathan Nunn

When Ohashi Tetsuo, a southern Japanese tea and rice farmer, first used pesticides at agricultural school in the 1970s, he struggled to breathe. As he started spraying the crops, his eyes would water and he would choke from the fumes, even with protective gear around his face. He vowed that when he went back home to his house and family, he would never use pesticides again.

Since then, Ohashi-san has run a tidy, self-sufficient farm that has indeed never once used pesticides. I've drunk his tea and tasted his rice, now exported globally, and admired the toasted, nutty kernels that form the backbone of his genmaicha tea. I've recommended it to other people and told them how, 45 years later, he has kept his promise.

But often the questions that come back—is it organic, is it pesticide-free, is it healthy?—evaluate his decision through the lens of how it affects the consumer, rather than the person actually behind the product's making. While there are people with pure and virtuous pesticide-free diets who might be able to sense their absence, many of us would not notice a single thing if we ate products with a few pesticides in them, let alone feel our chests tighten and our throats narrow in the same way a farmer (or his labourers) would. Yet to say this isn't enough: there must always be something in it for us.

I thought about this recently as I read the case of Valentina Passalacqua, the Italian vintner behind the trendy Calcarius wine range, whose iconoclastic bottles—labelled like an element on the periodic table—adorn the shelves of every wine shop where customers ask “what do you have that's natural?” Passalacqua's wines are “natural”—in so far that they are made biodynamically and contain

minimal sulphites—which is why the news that her father, the landowner Settimio Passalacqua, has been arrested for alleged *caporalato* has caused an uproar in the wine world. *Caporalato* is the practice common on larger wine estates in Italy where agricultural workers, mainly migrants from poorer regions in Europe or Africa, are recruited through intermediaries often linked to organised crime and made to work through harvest season on poverty wages. Although no wrongdoing has been established in the making of Calcarius, the revelations have caused some importers to stop selling the wine, at least until there is more clarity on the issue (the UK importer, Les Caves de Pyrene, still imports Calcarius.)

The tension between a clean brand image and labour issues has been a ticking time bomb for the natural wine world. It may be that some importers, keen to ensure that Passalacqua's wine and other wines were sulphite-free, were perhaps less interested in discovering who was making it and in what conditions. And this is part of a larger problem with natural food, as well as wine: to what extent do “ethical” food makers, eager to assure us of the organic nature of their products, get close to ignoring the exploitation of their workers?

“When we question ethical products, it's usually through a consumer lens”

In recent months I've heard of smaller vigneronns who have abused their staff, or been photographed wearing swastikas; at past tastings in London, I've witnessed a winemaker repeatedly behave around women in a way that can't just be excused by him being French. And inevitably, I've also read numerous fawning profiles of the very same winemakers, which laud their ecological practices and treat them like rock stars.

People who care about the condition and quality of their food also need to start thinking about the labour conditions under which such products were produced. The use of pesticides is an issue for us all, but it is the health of those who use them and that of their families we should be worried about most. The level of sulphites in your wine measures only that; not how ethically it was made, or how much the people who didn't administer them were paid. The meat you buy may be labelled as “free range,” but that tells you nothing about the conditions of the workers stuffed inside those slaughterhouses.

Some would say that these virtuous labels are simply a middle-class invention to give us a kick of serotonin knowing we are doing right by the earth. In some sense they are right, but this doesn't mean we shouldn't care at all: it means we should care more.

The Clapham Omnibus by Hannah Berry





Classical musing

Found in translation

Charlotte Higgins

Here's a morality tale. The Fox News presenter Sean Hannity published a book this summer. The title, *Live Free Or Die: America (And The World) On The Brink*, leaves little to the imagination as to its contents. In pre-publication publicity, the book jacket featured a Latin tag, "*viva-mus vel libero perit Americae*," which Hannity translated as "live free or America dies."

But that's definitely not what it means. Spencer Alexander McDaniel, a classics undergraduate in Indiana, struggled bravely with this word soup, eventually coming up with the following translation, which he published on his blog: "Let's live or he passes away from America for the detriment of a free man." The "Latin" is utter gobbledygook. It's what you get if you stick "Live free or America dies" into Google Translate. Mocked on social media, the motto was dropped from the final cover.

The moral of the story? Don't use an ancient language you don't understand to show off. Don't use Latin to assert some assumed cultural superiority. Specifically, don't attempt to use Latin to give your shoddy polemic a gloss of gravitas. I'm guilty of having used Latin to look clever at times (OK, the word *gravitas* is itself Latin), but really it is not a good look.

Mistranslation of Latin can of course have its hilarious side. Exploring the arcane world of classically themed gifts on the internet recently—I know, I know—I saw mugs inscribed with the words "*pedicabo vos et irrumabo*." This is the immortal opening line of a poem by Catullus, the Roman writer of the 1st century BCE famed for his passionate love lyrics and bouts of filthy invective. Surprised, I looked to the description, which declared the words translated as "I love you." Hmm, not *really*. This sentence was deemed so unsuitable for teenagers that the poem was redacted from my school edition of Catullus' works. Toned down a bit, "*pedicabo vos et irrumabo*" means "I will bugger you and stuff you." That's an interesting intention to declare while drinking your morning cuppa.

Surely the sellers of the mug must have been in on the joke. At any rate, after



eyebrows were raised on Twitter, the photo of the mug was replaced by a demure image of a fig leaf, a "mature content" tag, and a vague description ("Catullus 16, Floral Classic Mug.")

Then there is the whole family of misuse of Latin in commercial contexts. Near where I live in London is a florist called Aflorum. *Florum* means flower in Latin. So far so good. But what about the "a-" prefix? No idea whatever. It doesn't mean anything in Latin. In Greek, though, an alpha prefix tends to negate the following word, as in one of the most characteristic words of the coronavirus pandemic, *asymptomatic*. That's why I can't help reading Aflorum as meaning "without any flowers," which I'm guessing wasn't the intended effect.

Another favourite is the hair salon in the west end of Glasgow called Crinis Formé. *Crinis* is definitely Latin for hair. *Formé* is the past participle of the French *former*. "Groomed hair," I suppose it means. It's strange but it always makes me laugh, particularly when said in a deliberately daft voice. The world would be a much happier place without hairdressers' terrible puns, Latin or otherwise. Which reminds me, I'm due for a trim: I must call up Julius Scissor and make an appointment.

The way we were

Extracts from memoirs and diaries
compiled by Ian Irvine

Pets

1570 Michel de Montaigne writes in his essay, *An Apology for Raymond Sebond*, about his cat: "When I play with my cat who knows if I am not a pastime to her more than she is to me? We mutually divert one another with our play. If I have my hour to begin or to refuse, she also has hers."

1791 Dr Johnson and his cat, Hodge, described by James Boswell: "I never shall forget the indulgence with which he treated Hodge, his cat: for whom he himself used to go out and buy oysters, lest the servants having that trouble should take a dislike to the poor creature... I recollect him one day scrambling up Dr Johnson's breast, apparently with much satisfaction, while my friend smiling and half-whistling, rubbed down his back, and pulled him by the tail; and when I observed he was a fine cat, saying, 'Why yes, Sir, but I have had cats whom I liked better than this;' and then as if perceiving Hodge to be out of countenance, adding, 'but he is a very fine cat, a very fine cat indeed.'"

1841 Charles Dickens had a talking raven called Grip, who appears as a character in *Barnaby Rudge*. Shortly after completing the novel, Dickens wrote to his friend, the illustrator Maclise: "You will be greatly shocked and grieved to hear that the Raven is no more. He expired to-day at a few minutes after twelve o'clock, at noon. He had been ailing for a few days. Yesterday afternoon he was taken so much worse that I sent an express for the medical gentleman, who promptly attended and administered a powerful dose of castor oil. He recovered so far as to be able, at eight o'clock, to bite Topping [the coachman]. His night was peaceful. This morning, at daybreak, he appeared better, and partook plentifully of some warm gruel. Toward eleven he was so much worse that it was found necessary to muffle the stable knocker... On the clock striking twelve he appeared slightly agitated, but he soon recovered, walked twice or thrice along the coach-house, stopped to bark, staggered, exclaimed Halloo old girl! (his favorite expression) and died. He behaved throughout with decent fortitude, equanimity and self-possession."



Popularity context

Notes from home

Caroline O'Donoghue

I have a new thing. Whenever I come back to our London flat from a night out with my boyfriend, we crack open a beer, sit at the kitchen table, and listen to Irish traditional music—otherwise known as Irish trad—for two hours. We've been doing this for about a year. The sessions get longer each time, and it's become a regular feature of spending time at our house. "I went to Gavin and Caroline's for dinner last night" will now be followed up with "...and did they make you listen to Irish trad?" A question that has been delivered in a variety of tones and levels of sarcasm.

I'm not sure where this new habit came from. A friend of ours says it's us preparing for the next phase of our lives by "ironically" performing it. Much like how the people who jokingly refer to their pets as their "fur babies" are mentally preparing for parenthood, my new hobby is gearing me up for my middle-aged self: a walking boots-owning trad-listener who knows all the Child Ballads and employs a harpist to play at major life events.

"Trad" is a vague term—and one many people are protective about—so let me specify. When I say Irish trad, I mean anything that reminds me of home. It's the kind of music that I used to hear in Cork pubs in the nineties, back when children were allowed in pubs. I mean The Dubliners; The High Kings; The Corrs before they went pop. People often talk about what they would say to their younger selves. If I had to talk to my younger self—specifically the 19-year-old who worked in the "specialty" department of

HMV and sold Irish pipe music to passing tourists in the summertime—that I was willingly listening to Luke Kelly, I would be so paralysed by her disgusted face that I'm sure it would prevent me from travelling forward in time.


So why trad? And why now? On a very simple level, I just like it. My boyfriend, who is English yet prone to drunken renditions of "Come Out Ye Black and Tans," says that it reminds him of house music. And—if you look past how insane it is—you can kind of see his point. Most house tracks are around 120 beats per minute; most trad session players play at the same tempo.

But beyond this, there's a spiritual kinship between the two, a sense that both genres are both slowly rising, steadily collecting atmosphere and sweat, towards a similar shattering crescendo. Lyrics are repeated so often, and are so dated, that they don't really make any sense: the trad song laments some long-dead market stall in Belfast; the house song commands you to dance at some defunct club in Chicago. And most importantly, both kinds of music were designed for house parties. Sure, one party might have been a wake in Ballybunion in 1926, and the other in a city apartment in the 1980s, but the theory still stands.

"Like many immigrants, I find it difficult to feel connected to the place that raised me"

I'm in danger of sounding like an over-eager English teacher here, trying to rouse her sceptical students by asserting Shakespeare was also a rapper. But like many immigrants who have been away from their mother country, I find it difficult to feel connected to the place that raised me. All the things I grew up with are part of the global western millennial identity: Coco Pops, my beloved childhood cereal, isn't Irish; neither was my teen television staple *Sister Sister*, and nor was singing "washing machines live longer with Calgon" at the top of my voice. You can support the new culture in your country—the fresh bands, books and movements—but after a few years, you develop a physical longing for something older, deeper.

But where to go? I thought about Catholicism, and decided against it. I considered being the kind of immigrant who romanticises Irish butter as a feeble way of romanticising themselves, but I found this nauseating and decided against it. I will not be the Irish person staring forlornly at a brick of Lurpak, preparing an earnest monologue about how Kerrygold is the only "real" butter around. My only option, then, is to look back, and find something so old that I can put my own spin on it: that thing is singing "The Parting Glass" until the wee hours.

For others it's different. I know two brothers who left England as teenagers for Spain, and instantly felt reviled by their nation. The "Brits abroad" legacy that washed up and down the Spanish coastline made them desperate for something in English culture that wasn't utterly embarrassing. One brother became an archaeologist of Anglo-Saxon history, and the other became an expert on the oysters of the British isles. Both of them needed something to be proud of. Something so old that it is almost baked into the country's sediment; so constant that it is almost naff, and so strangely uncontroversial that you can put your whole weight into loving it. Something so established that it is willing to make room for you and your complicated feelings about where you're from. In the words of a very old song: *Óró, sé do bheatha "bhaile. Welcome home.* 



Prospect Economics and investment



The analyst: Paul Wallace

When the dollar falls

America has lost the overwhelming economic lead it enjoyed in the aftermath of the Second World War, but it still has the world's pre-eminent currency. The dollar constitutes over 60 per cent of official foreign exchange reserves; is used extensively in global trade, notably in commodities such as oil; and is especially favoured by borrowers outside the US raising funds in a foreign currency. Any sustained move in the dollar has implications for investing strategies.

In troubled times, the dollar typically strengthens as investors seek a haven. That happened when the global financial crisis came to a head in the autumn of 2008. It occurred again this spring when markets panicked over the potential economic damage arising from the pandemic.

But that jump in the dollar in March proved as short-lived as the leap of a March hare, certainly measured against the currencies of other advanced economies such as the euro and the pound. Since that peak it has been on a downward trajectory, falling by around a tenth by early autumn. (The dollar also lost ground over the same period against the currencies of emerging economies. But with the important exception of China, it was still higher in early September than at the start of 2020, whereas it was lower against advanced trading partners.)

At first sight, a falling dollar should boost the US economy by making its exports more competitive and profitable. Conversely, countries whose exchange rates strengthen against the dollar might be expected to suffer. In practice, the general easing in financial conditions around the world that accompanies a weakening dollar tends to trump these direct economic effects. As Claudio Borio of the Bank for International Settlements (BIS), a hub for central banks, said in a lecture last year, "A weaker US dollar coincides with upswings in the global financial cycle."

Such an upswing, which is driven mainly by advanced economies, typically starts with the US central bank easing monetary policy. The Federal Reserve did that big time this spring, slashing short-term interest rates and buying bonds to bring down long-term yields. That made it less attractive for international investors to park funds in American markets, pushing down the dollar. In a further significant step this summer, the Fed modified its fixed 2 per cent inflation target, instead aiming for that as an average over time. Given what its chair Jerome Powell called "the persistent undershoot of inflation," that sent a signal that US monetary policy will now remain looser for longer.

Where the Fed leads, other central banks follow, especially as they seek to restore national competitiveness by containing the rise of their currencies against the dollar. As its decline has continued, the pressure has mounted for even more easing, especially on the part of the European Central Bank, which has tended to rely on a cheap currency to buoy the eurozone. A weaker dollar also contributes to looser conditions through what the BIS calls "the financial channel of the exchange rate," as firms outside the US find it easier to service their debt in dollars and borrow more.

If the trend of a weakening dollar is sustained, the link with an upswing in the global financial cycle bolsters the argument for acquiring riskier assets, especially equities. Although sterling has weakened again this autumn owing to renewed tensions between the UK and the EU, there is a strong case for directing such investment into international funds that focus on the main advanced economies outside Britain. Their stock markets should benefit from the general loosening in financial conditions while offering a more stable political environment for investment.



The punter: Andy Davis

Diversify differently

Diversification is the only free lunch in investing. Although some, including legendary investor Warren Buffett, denigrate this well-worn idea, for most it's a no-brainer to seek to balance risks by spreading them across a range of investments. When some prices fall, others should rise to help keep our wealth on a reasonably even keel.

This principle lies behind the classic 60/40 portfolio: 60 per cent risky shares and 40 per cent ultra-safe government bonds. For decades, this balanced portfolio has offered decent risk diversification—when share prices fell, bond prices tended to compensate by going up and vice versa.

But for how much longer? Since the 2008-9 financial crisis, yields on government bonds have edged ever closer to zero, and efforts to combat the coronavirus crisis have squashed them even further. The yield on the UK's 10-year government bond is currently below 0.2 per cent. Because bond prices rise as their yields fall, investors in the UK and other developed markets are at a crossroads—unless yields plunge materially below zero, there is little scope for bond prices to rise further.

The corollary is clear: if bond prices have little room in which to go up, the mechanism that has for so long successfully diversified risk in the classic 60/40 portfolio may be

broken. That would remove from the menu the only free lunch investing has to offer, and would leave exposed any portfolio that relies on bonds to pick up slack when shares disappoint.

Unfortunately, to borrow from the parlance of Brexit, there is no "oven-ready" solution. In the end, the answer is for bond prices to fall from today's stratospheric levels so that they regain their ability to tuck up and down in the opposite direction to shares. But given the large losses a fall in bond prices will inflict, by the time they're restored as effective portfolio diversifiers, investors will have bigger problems to worry about.

The direction of bond prices from here will depend largely on what happens to inflation. If it moves to 3-4 per cent for a sustained period, yields will rise and prices will finally fall. If the coronavirus recession intensifies deflationary pressures, yields will remain minuscule—and prices flat, if sky high.

Either way, the outlook for the classic balanced portfolio is not very reassuring, which is why suggestions are surfacing for contemporary alternatives. One interesting option, from the American commentator Jared Dillian, comprises five equal slugs of shares, bonds, gold, property and cash. To many investors this will sound weird, but these are weird times. **12**



UK ports are the key to unlocking regional growth

The critical role the UK's ports and maritime sector plays in maintaining essential trade flows for food, consumer goods and medical supplies has come to the fore during the global coronavirus pandemic. As a result, there is increasing awareness of the way ports serve as important regional engines for growth and how they can be deployed in the effort to rebuild and level up the economy.

Accelerating the economic recovery and enabling regional growth requires significant efforts to revitalise international trade. As the UK's largest port operator, ABP is investing to safeguard continued trade with Europe, while providing businesses and manufacturers with access to growing global markets. This investment includes £50 million to increase capacity at the container terminals in Hull and Immingham to provide greater trade resilience for the UK and support traders concerned about potential disruption at ports in the South East.

Continued close collaboration between industry and government on additional border infrastructure is essential. This is required to limit the risk of supply chain disruption at ports at the end of the transition period.

By facilitating trade, ports can make a significant contribution to the economic potential of communities across the country. Increasing trade through the Humber ports means creating more jobs, and not just in Hull and in Grimsby – the benefits ripple out to Sheffield, Leeds, Manchester and beyond.

Investment in road and rail links to ports is also needed to remove bottlenecks and enable trade flows to international gateways. Government investment in major transport infrastructure projects such as HS2 and Northern Powerhouse Rail is also vital to increase capacity and access on the rail network for passengers and freight.

While supporting the sustainable growth of trade and economic rebalancing, ports also have a central role in delivering shared objectives on decarbonisation. Ports are already at the forefront

of the offshore wind sector, from manufacturing and assembly to installation and O&M, helping the UK to deliver 40GW of offshore wind by 2030.

Ports are working to support the decarbonisation of freight transport across the supply chain through alternative fuels, clean energy generation and storage. Since 2011, ABP has invested £50 million in green technologies, including renewable energy projects, electric vehicles, electric port equipment and fuel-efficient pilot vessels. ABP is committed to working with partners in industry and government to further the development of ports and terminals into low-carbon hubs which can help build the sustainable supply chains of the future.

The maritime sector is calling on Government to dedicate £1 billion in the upcoming Spending Review to accelerate the development of green technologies and support the UK in becoming a global leader in maritime decarbonisation. This investment could create up to 75,000 jobs and support efforts to reach Net Zero in the wider economy.

An ambitious policy to establish freeports around the UK can further enhance the potential of ports to drive economic activity and decarbonisation by attracting new inward investment in renewable energy hubs and port-centric manufacturing. Combined with coordinated investment in infrastructure, the policy has the potential to create quality, high-skilled and long-term jobs in ports and coastal communities.

ABP's ports on the Humber, in Southampton and in South Wales, are well placed to turn this ambition into a reality, turning already busy gateways for international trade into beacons of economic resurgence.

Prospect Policy report: A sustainable recovery

Politicians have promised a new kind of economy. Can they deliver?

Tom Clark *Editor, Prospect*

Build back better?



A change, they say, is as good as a rest. But can a rest be as good as a change? After the economy was forcibly silenced in the spring and with autumnal hibernation now setting in, Westminster's more thoughtful minds are asking themselves whether we can use the unavoidable stop to precipitate an overdue rethink.

It makes sense to attempt to seize the day. From effective train nationalisation to an explosion of state-subsidised incomes, all sorts of emergency measures have been required, and a long historical view suggests that at least some initially temporary public policies tend to endure: income tax, to give one example, started out life as a wartime fix under Pitt the Younger.

Away from the pandemic, Brexit Britain will have to do things differently if it is to chart its own way in the world. Meanwhile, there is growing consensus that the UK's productivity problems and regional imbalances are becoming intolerable.

But the overriding reason to reset old business habits as we restart is shared around the world: sustainability for the climate. While minister Christopher Pincher's focus is on post-pandemic construction planning and the provision of homes—where many controversies lurk—it is heartening to see his emphasis on a (at least potentially) zero-carbon-compliant housing stock. Meanwhile, Labour's Kerry McCarthy sets out a green wishlist of the many ways she'd like to see our transport systems change before we stutter back into something approaching ordinary life.

Strikingly, although they are from different parties and writing about different policy fields, both MPs have latched on to the phrase “build back better.” It has a nice ring, although with so much rethinking to be done for new times, I'm not sure how much building “back” there can be. “Building forward better” loses the alliteration, which “rebuilding while rebooting” restores, but at the cost of mangling the metaphor. Brainwaves for a better slogan on a postcard to parliament, please!

Christopher Pincher Minister of State for Housing Housebuilding for a new era



The country's comeback from Covid-19 does not have to be a matter of building society and our economy back exactly as they were before. The last few months have made us all reflect on, and in some cases rethink entirely, how we want to live. As the PM made clear in his “Build, build, build” speech in June, “this moment also gives us a much greater chance to be radical and to do things differently: to build back better, to build back bolder.”

That means working with renewed focus not just on providing more homes, but creating greener, better designed, higher-quality neighbourhoods that people are proud to call home.

Our “Planning for the Future” White Paper sets out our intention to overhaul England's outdated planning system, including through a “fast-track” scheme for well-designed, beautiful developments. These are developments in keeping with the character and architectural identity of their area, as decided by local communities who will create their own unique “design code,” setting clear quality standards to comply with. This will go a long way towards making great design—such as the Stirling Prize winning-Goldsmith Street in Norwich, or the Rochester Riverside development in Kent—the norm.

These homes will also be among the greenest and most energy efficient in the world, with lower energy bills. Our ambition is that new “zero-carbon ready” homes will not require future retrofitting—they will be ready to play their part in our world-leading commitment to net-zero emissions by 2050.

Outside the home, we are helping builders design greener, carbon-cutting neighbourhoods. Our focus on design and sustainability means we expect developers to pay serious attention to “place-making.” This involves not only delivering homes, but the infrastructure that underpins strong communities—well-designed schools and workspaces that will become tomorrow's heritage. We're also ensuring developers provide more

green infrastructure—everything from new parks to community orchards. We are committed to ensuring new streets are tree-lined, so world-famous green designs, such as Lombard Street in San Francisco, can be replicated here too.

And our reforms are geared towards making greater use of brownfield land, ensuring our treasured green spaces are protected for generations to come. Development on green belt land will continue to be restricted as it is now.

“Our plan is to fast-track beautiful developments”

Delivering greener, more sustainable homes will be helped along by the great strides being taken in modern methods of construction. This involves parts of homes being built offsite, such as in a factory, for assembly onsite. It holds the potential to completely change the game in terms of productivity, build speed, and how green the production process can be.

Industry research suggests these homes can have up to 80 per cent fewer defects, reduce heating bills by up to 70 per cent and be assembled in days instead of months. That is why we are encouraging the widespread adoption of new techniques across the industry, so it can deliver well-designed homes at pace and in an environmentally friendly way. By embracing new and emerging technologies, developers, councils and housing associations will be able to deliver a new generation of sustainable homes.

We are still alert to the challenges of the pandemic, but this does not stop us from looking to the future with optimism and determination—seizing all the opportunities that lie ahead. Let us build back better and create greener, healthier and happier communities for this generation and the next.



Kerry McCarthy Shadow Minister for Green Transport and Labour MP for Bristol East

The road to a greener future

This year has fundamentally changed the way we live our lives. It's unlikely that we will see a return to pre-pandemic levels of commuting and business travel, nor are people likely to give up their increasingly online shopping habits. With this change comes a need to reassess what we want from our transport networks.

One of the key trends during the pandemic has been far less traffic on our roads—although car use is now returning to near-normal levels—and a massive increase in walking and cycling. It is a trend that the more forward-looking local authorities have sought to encourage and embed, with pedestrianisation, bike lanes and plans for more low-traffic neighbourhoods. Looking to the future, we will also have to consider how we designate road space for electric scooters and mopeds (the government is currently running pilots, but it's a fair assumption this is just a prelude to full acceptance), which are already common in many European cities. A few pop-up bike lanes are not going to do the job.

Where do cars fit into these plans? And, with the growth in online shopping and food deliveries, how do we avoid our streets becoming clogged up with a swarm of polluting delivery vehicles? To counter that, we need to start rethinking the design of our towns and cities. Rather than sending vans straight to our doors, we should be planning distribution hubs on urban outskirts, which allow clean electric vans and cargo bikes to perform the last leg of the delivery. As more cities introduce clean air zones, with bans or charges on polluting vehicles, this may well become a commercial necessity for businesses too.

Making far more rapid progress on electric vehicle charging infrastructure is going to be absolutely crucial, especially if the government is serious about bringing forward the ban

on new combustion engine sales from 2040—its current policy—to 2035 or even, as the Committee on Climate Change has recommended, 2032.

The UK has only 5 per cent of the electric vehicle charging points we will need by 2030. This risks undermining one of the few transport success stories of the past few months: that zero emission vehicle sales have held up well—sales of plug-in hybrids increased by a huge 221.1 per cent between August 2019 and 2020—even as petrol and diesel sales have plummeted.

“The UK has only 5 per cent of the electric vehicle charging points we need by 2030”

We must do what we can to encourage the development of new, clean technologies. Along with long-delayed rail electrification in left-behind areas, the UK is pushing ahead with modernisation of how airspace is used, to reduce emissions through greater efficiency. We are getting close to developing hybrid electric planes, producing sustainable aviation fuel from waste and deploying hydrogen- or ammonia-fuelled shipping vessels. Each of these technologies could massively contribute to decarbonisation, but will require serious investment to do so.

The key to cleaner, greener urban areas lies in our transport networks. But we will not be able to make the necessary changes unless we are willing to think bigger when it comes to planning, infrastructure and innovation. In the long term the UK must do far more on this. We cannot squander this unique opportunity to build back better. **12**

Coming up short: as bans on polluting vehicles become more widespread, so charging points for electric cars must rise in number





LIGHTS, CAMERA, ACTION!

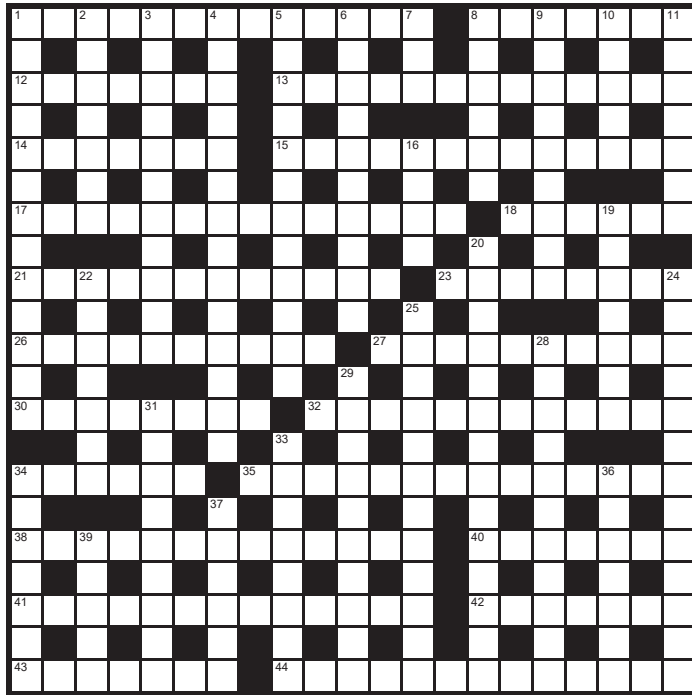
THE CHRISTMAS ISSUE: Settle back for a night at the movies! Films bring us a special kind of magic at Christmastime — in this issue of AQUILA we look back over 100 years of film history, investigating Stop motion, Sound effects and the Lumière brothers. Discover the story of Disneyland and the real science v. the fantasy of time travel. PLUS: do Black Holes hold a 'film copy' of our Galaxy's history?

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“...Advanced & Philosophical, Curious & Puzzling”

Richard Robinson, Brighton Science Festival

The generalist by Didymus



ACROSS

- 1 A French dupe on 01.04 each year (7,15)
- 8 A tortilla fried until crisp and served with a topping of beans, minced meat and vegetables (7)
- 12 BBC children's TV programme about a green dog with an overactive imagination and his neighbour's mischievous pink cat, Custard (7)
- 13 Public Christian worship (6,7)
- 14 In zoology, asymmetrical (7)
- 15 Cape Catastrophe is the southernmost point of this triangular lowland region of South Australia (4,9)
- 17 James Joyce's literary alter ego in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (7,7)
- 18 Clear, transparent (6)
- 21 One of "those two little pals of mine": Sonny Ramadhin's spin-bowling partner (3,9)
- 23 Conjectured (8)
- 26 Struggling for power (2,8)
- 27 Leguminous Asian seeds grown for forage (5,5)
- 30 French operatic composer of *La Belle Époque* whose works include *Manon and Werther* (8)
- 32 A small chitterling sausage (12)
- 34 Municipality of São Paulo State lying on the Tietê River (6)
- 35 Edward Lear asked: "Who, or why, or which or *what* is" this! (3,5,2,4)
- 38 Young Irish workers who, until the 1980s, travelled to Scotland to help with the annual potato harvest (6,7)
- 40 Common coarse weed growing in pastureland (7)
- 41 Knighted New Zealand

Last month's generalist solutions

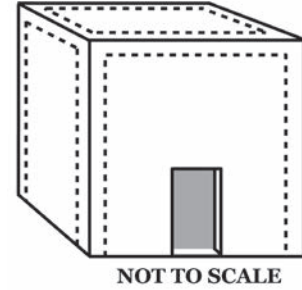
Across: 1 Autopilot, 6 Diego Garcia, 12 *Spem in alium*, 13 Mitigates, 14 Arithmetician, 15 Fischer, 16 Treille, 17 Intercity 125, 19 Alfred Dreyfus, (21 See 24 Down) 23 Clarenceux, 25 Larry Adler, 28 Exhumes, 30 Standing stone, 32 Tour de France, 35 Recette, 38 Emerson, 39 *English Dances*, 40 Maine Coon, 41 Amati violin, 42 Lighthouses, 43 Entrecote
 Down: 1 Anstatt, 2 *The Wife of Bath*, 3 Philhellene, 4 Lease-lend, 5 Tbilisi, 6 Dom Mintoff, 7 Edmond Rostand, 8 Out of kilter, 9 Argus-eyed, 10 *Catch-22*, 11 Assart, 18 Cowrie, 19 Aachen, 20 Equestriennes, 22 Sul ponticello, 24&21A Castelnovo-Tedesco, 26 Associative, 27 Nanny goats, 29 Mare's-nest, 31 North Uist, 33 Opening, 34 Emirate, 36 Essonne, 37 Dermal

- cricketing all-rounder who was the first bowler to take 400 Test wickets (7,6)
 - 42 20th-century style distinguished by its streamlined geometrical lines (3,4)
 - 43 Capital of the département of Loiret (7)
 - 44 Operetta by Johann Strauss II which includes *Adele's Laughing Song* (3,10)
- DOWN**
- 1 Literary movement headed by Leconte de Lisle in reaction to the emotional extravagances of Romanticism (13)
 - 2 Self... when Covid-19 is diagnosed (7)
 - 3 Historic name given to the NE coast of South America between the Orinoco river and Panama, and adjoining parts of the Caribbean (7,4)
 - 4 A Middle High German epic poem which tells of the saga of Siegfried (14)
 - 5 British-born Hungarian founder of a publishing house in 1951, on whom John le Carré based his character Toby Esterhase (5,7)
 - 6 Mâcon lies on these waters which rise in the Vosges and join the Rhône near Lyon (5,5)
 - 7/16D One of the 1970s pop group, the New Seekers, who has more recently starred as Mrs Johnstone in *Blood Brothers* (3,4)
 - 8 Some pastis, an effervescent infused drink (6)
 - 9 Yellow metallic element with the atomic number 38, named after a Highland village on Loch Sunart (9)
 - 10 Farewell to the French about to depart (5)
 - 11 French 12th-century thinker noted for *Sic et Non*, his 158 theological and philosophical questions (7)
 - 16 See 7 Down
 - 19 In heraldry, walking towards dexter, with the dexter forepaw raised (7)
 - 20 Scott novel about a young Scottish archer in the Guard of Louis XI of France who wins the hand of Countess Isabelle of Croye (7,7)
 - 22 Popular garden bush with pendulous red or purple flowers (7)
 - 24 Written theses, based on the author's research, often required for academic qualifications (13)
 - 25 A symbol formed of two triangles interlaced to form a six-pointed star (3,4)
 - 28 Manolete, El Cordobes or El Fandi, eg (11)
 - 29 Poe's maiden who lived "many and many a year ago, in a kingdom by the sea" (7,3)
 - 31 In Mexico, a rolled, stuffed tortilla cooked and served with a chilli-flavoured sauce (9)
 - 33 A former wooded district covering parts of Kent, Surrey and Sussex (3,5)
 - 34 The smallest and most easterly of the Great Lakes (7)
 - 36 Spear-throwing device used by Aborigines (7)
 - 37 The largest of the Dodecanese islands (6)
 - 39 An obsolete Thai silver coin replaced by the baht in 1928 (5)

Enigmas & puzzles

Gimme shelter!

Barry R Clarke



Keith Jagger wants to build a nuclear shelter in the Wood at the back of his house. This is to be made from a cubic number of cube-shaped Stones. However, if he is not to appear a right Charlie and get no satisfaction, he needs to make sure he orders the right number.

The shelter will have the external dimensions of a cube (shown above). The four walls and roof are each to be one Stone thick, but the base will have no Stones. The whole structure will be built on a concrete platform. A space will be left in one wall to accommodate a steel door. The size of the door space in number of Stones is to be the same as the length (or width) in Stones of the shelter interior. Needless to say, on completion Keith Jagger intends to Paint It Black!

If all the Stones are to be used, Watts the smallest number that could be ordered?

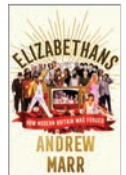
Last month's solutions

The Janus Code: The passcode is TWO61354. The five-digit number is 61354. Start with conditions (1) and (4), then (3) and (6), (5) reduces it to two possibilities, and (2) decides between them. The rest is a lateral puzzle and when the five digits are translated into their alphabetic positions we get FACED. Since this is 'The Janus code', and Janus was a Roman God with two faces, the three letters beginning the password must be TWO. After all, Neuron is 'faced' with a 'two-part' problem!

How to enter

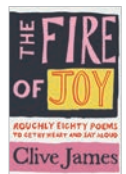
The generalist prize

The winner receives a copy of *Elizabethans: How Modern Britain was Forged* by Andrew Marr. How much has changed since Queen Elizabeth II took to the throne? Discover the history of a nation through the people who have come to define our own peculiar era.



Enigmas & puzzles prize

The winner receives a copy of *The Fire of Joy: Roughly Eighty Poems to Get by Heart and Say Aloud* by Clive James. Completed just before James's death, this compilation brings together some of the late broadcaster's favourite poems that are as easy to remember as they are impossible to forget.



Rules

Send your solution to answer@prospect-magazine.co.uk or Crossword/Enigmas, *Prospect*, 2 Queen Anne's Gate, SW1H 9AA. Include your email and postal address. Entries must be received by 2nd November. Winners announced in our December 2020 issue.

Last month's winners

The generalist: Joe Jenkinson, Bath
 Enigmas & puzzles: Stephen McEntee, Cheshire
 Download a PDF of this page at www.prospectmagazine.co.uk

Brief encounter



The Secret Barrister

Lawyer and author

ILLUSTRATION BY NICK TAYLOR

What is the first news event that you can recall?

I have a vague recollection of seeing something about Margaret Thatcher leaving Downing Street in the *FunDay Times*. It meant nothing to me at the time, but I do recall thinking what a nice car she was in.

What is the book you are most embarrassed to have not yet read?

Oh God. Too many to list. Invariably when it comes to those “100 Books You Must Read Before Your Corpse Decomposes” lists I have not read far more than I have. Picking one from many, I suppose it’s pretty bad that—given its exploration of the duality of the self and hidden alter-egos—I haven’t read *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*.

What’s one bit of advice you’d give to your younger self?

“It will be OK.”

Which historical figure or figures would you most like to have dinner with?

I find dinner parties and forced social gatherings largely excruciating, so would inevitably end up cancelling at the last minute and staying home. So I’d pick somebody unlikely to react badly to being stood up. Attila the Hun, perhaps.

What has been your most uncomfortable moment in court?

Probably the time I was prosecuting and telling the judge what the defendant was alleged to have done, while the defendant, who was appearing over a video-link from custody, heckled me throughout. “Bullshit!”, “You liar!” etc. After several warnings were ignored, the judge cut the link. It was only then that I realised—and had to tell the judge—that I had been reading out the wrong file.

If you were given £1m to spend on other people, what would you spend it on and why?

I wouldn’t trust myself with that sort of responsibility. I would give a thousand people a thousand pounds each, and ask each of them to spend it on another person. I would hope that their collective wisdom would ensure it did good over a much broader and more diverse canvas than I could think of alone.

If there were one law you could write, what would it be?

If I could write one law, it would be to make legal aid universally available for anybody charged with a criminal offence, so that nobody was forced to face the might of the state in court without legal representation.

If there were one law you could repeal, what would it be?

On a similar theme, the law I would repeal would be what I call the Innocence Tax, the brainchild of Chris Grayling. It means that you can be wrongly accused of a crime, denied legal aid and forced to pay privately for your lawyers and then, when acquitted, the state will refuse to reimburse your legal costs, meaning you could have to sell your house or face bankruptcy, all for the crime of having been wrongly accused. It is a stain on the conscience of our justice system.

What is the biggest problem of all?

Tribalism. From that increasingly popular urge for people to define themselves against a perceived other, all the other problems infesting our politics flow—bigotry, dishonesty, lack of compassion.

If you could have your time again, what career would you pursue instead?

I always wanted to be a comedy writer. I don’t think I’d have been very good at it, but I’d like to have tried. I think that bringing happiness to people is a vastly underrated virtue.

What is the last piece of music/play/novel/film that brought you to tears?

The song “White Wine in the Sun” by Tim Minchin. **📌**

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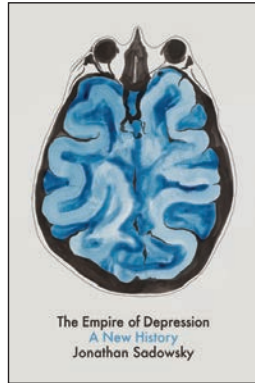
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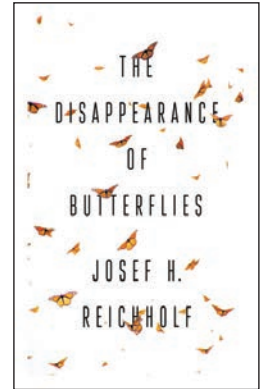
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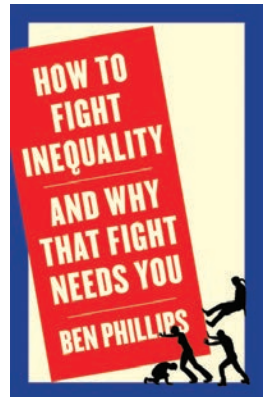
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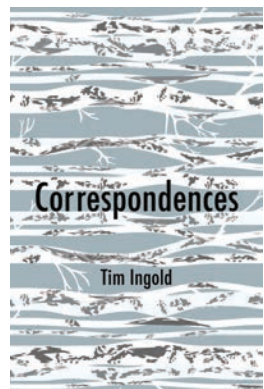
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