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The new fault-lines in national politics are set to make things even more challenging for unionists than before

Owen Polley

27 March 2023, **Belfast News Letter**

Since the Brexit referendum in 2016, Northern Ireland has been at the centre of many of Westminster's biggest set-piece dramas. That is always a perilous position to be in and it happened again on Wednesday when a vote on the 'Stormont Brake' coincided with Boris Johnson's appearance at the Privileges Committee's hearing into 'Partygate'. The 'statutory instrument' on the brake passed by a big margin, despite the opposition of the DUP and some high-profile Conservative MPs; meaning that the government will press ahead with the so-called 'Windsor Framework'.

That creates a problem for unionists, because it looks like Northern Ireland will be permanently cut off from the rest of the UK's economy, so that it can remain part of the EU's single market for goods. Like many pro-Union people, when the government announced its new Northern Ireland Protocol deal with a document full of eye-catching claims, I was sceptical, but badly wanted them to be true. Despite all the cliches about intransigence and 'never, never, never', which were repeated again this week by the media and politicians in London, it is not good for unionism to be in a state of constant crisis and opposition.

We need a way to move on from Brexit and the protocol, but while Rishi Sunak's Framework document looked like it might provide one, under scrutiny, the promises it made collapsed into dust one after another. In addition, the government was so evasive about many of the legitimate issues that were raised about its deal, that, even if you were inclined to accept its claims initially, by now you would be doubtful. […]

Against the backdrop of these manoeuvres, after some procrastination, the DUP decided that it could not claim with credibility that the deal met its 'seven tests'. On Wednesday, Sir Jeffrey Donaldson told the European Research Group (ERG) of Brexiteer Tory MPs that there was no basis for his party to resume power-sharing 'at this stage'. The DUP leader said he would continue to work with the government to "solve these issues" (with the Framework). But Downing Street made it clear that it sees its agreement as a permanent solution to the protocol and does not intend to re-open negotiations with the EU.

That leaves two possibilities. Either the DUP's complaints could be addressed through new UK legislation, which would almost certainly be greeted with hostility in Brussels. Or the government will continue to 'engage' with Donaldson, but has no intention of acting on his concerns. Undoubtedly, if the DUP had endorsed the Stormont Brake, it would have appeared like an absurd climbdown on its seven tests, even if its eight member consultation panel had provided a rationale. It could not possibly have justified returning to power-sharing immediately either, because that would inevitably have been interpreted as grudging acceptance of the framework and an acknowledgement that it was prepared to move on. There was no way that the DUP could be seen back at the assembly in two weeks time, taking the applause of Joe Biden and other expected visitors, when, by its own analysis, Northern Ireland's place in the Union remained profoundly damaged.

Equally, though, if preventing devolution no longer seems to be having an effect, then it will eventually start to lose the party support. And the government has engineered a situation whereby, in theory at least, unionists could play a role in stopping new EU regulations coming into force here, if they were back at Stormont. The government would certainly blame the DUP for allowing Northern Ireland to diverge further from the rest of the UK's market, if the party still observed a boycott while new law from Brussels came into force.

It seems, on the surface, then, like Rishi Sunak got his way and outwitted his critics in the DUP and in his own party. But he shouldn't feel too complacent just yet. The number of Conservative rebels last Wednesday was small, but it included influential MPs and ex-party leaders. Indeed, many of the 40 odd genuine abstentions might have been encouraged to vote against the prime minister, if it hadn't been for the cynical and hypocritical presence in the 'no' lobby of his predecessor, Boris Johnson. Sunak's supporters claimed that his authority was enhanced by the vote and the eurosceptic wing of his party was tamed. If, as anticipated, though, the Conservatives are defeated by Labour at the next election, expect this concession of British territory to the EU to become the focus of attempts to resist Sunak's leadership and remould the Tory party.

From our perspective in Northern Ireland, that may seem like an obscure and irrelevant aspect of the whole saga. In the shorter-term, we can even expect a Labour government under Keir Starmer to align more closely with Brussels, which may, for a time, see internal UK barriers soften. If you look carefully, though, you can see new fault-lines developing in national politics that suggest the civil war over Brexit is far from over. Northern Ireland is likely to have a central role in these debates that may continue to destabilise politics here and eat away at the Union.

Victimising asylum seekers and breaking international law is not the solution

John Downing

15 March 2023

Cambridge Independent

Stop the Boats says the Prime Minister. Perhaps he doesn't realise, but no-one wants to be in a small boat in the English Channel. They want what everyone wants – a safe, secure home. Many of us take that for granted, others are much less fortunate. Of course, it is a difficult issue, and we saw two very different approaches last week. One from a man who is a national legend, who played hundreds of games without even picking up a yellow card. The other is a woman who was sacked for breaking the rules, and dreams of sending desperate people away. Which best reflects British values? I think we know the answer.

Last week, Suella Braverman published the Illegal Migration Bill in the House of Commons. No irony in the title – it probably is illegal, although breaking international law is a badge of honour for this lot. It is billed as one of the flagship policies of Rishi Sunak's government. Some see it as an attempt to demonstrate the Conservatives have a grip on our crumbling immigration and asylum system ahead of the next election. More likely, it is used as a distraction from their failings on the economy, NHS and public services. The record of the last 13 years tells us the Conservatives have no grip whatsoever on these key issues. Instead, what we have had is a lot of dangerous rhetoric and the creation of a wholly inadequate asylum system with damaging consequences for those seeking refuge in our country and has wracked up a huge bill for the taxpayer.

Since the bill was presented to the House last week, we have seen quite a backlash to the detail. The chain reaction of events that occurred following Gary Lineker's tweet, and the foolish decision by the BBC to suspend him, have been quite extraordinary, resulting in presenter walkouts across the network and limited football programming over the weekend. The furore has drawn in a wider public interest on the bill, which is positive, but perhaps for the wrong reasons. Quite frankly, even without the storm around the future of Gary Lineker, the Illegal Migration Bill should have widespread public attention because of the damning contents throughout its 66 pages. We should all be angry about this bill. Many people in Cambridge have told me that they are angry about this bill. I am angry about this bill.

In essence, this legislation will give the Home Secretary the duty to remove anyone who arrives in the UK via an irregular route – primarily referring to those that cross the channel on small dinghies. Those individuals will either be returned to their home country or a so-called safe third country, such as Rwanda. This could include families and children but is supposed not to include unaccompanied minors. It is claimed this will act as a deterrent and break the human trafficker's business model. I would say that logic fails, when applied to people who are desperate, after experiencing unimaginable traumas, and have fled war and persecution. As the poem Home by Warsan Shire, a Somali-British writer, goes: "No one puts their children in a boat unless the water is safer than the land". The lack of compassion and understanding demonstrated by some on the government side is frankly sickening.

That is not to deny there isn't a problem. People paying huge sums of money to get into a small boat, risking their lives to get to the UK is a problem. It is dangerous and life-threatening. Last year, 45,000 people arrived on small boats and there is an expectation this will rise to 65,000 by the end of this year. International action is needed to deal with the situation. Victimising asylum seekers rather than people smugglers, breaching the European Convention of Human Rights and withholding modern slavery protections because of how a person entered the UK is not the way to go about it. The government should be establishing properly controlled and managed legal routes such as family reunion, reforming resettlement, and processing the asylum backlog that has spiralled to over 160,000.

Labor will establish a cross-border police unit to target criminal gangs. We will address the backlog of asylum applications by fast-tracking decisions and returns. Labour will end hotel use and reach a new agreement with France and other European countries on returns and family reunion. Finally, we recognise we have a role within the international community to tackle humanitarian crises at source, to support refugees in their region, because no one chooses to leave their homes, no one chooses to risk their lives seeking safety. This is a global problem, it requires global solutions – but as the Conservatives continue to threaten to violate international rules, they only risk making it worse.

Chaos under Boris? Well what's this then, asks Leo McKINSTRY

Leo Mckinstry

10 June 2023 ***Daily Express***

History will be kinder to Boris Johnson than many of his Tory colleagues have been. When the plotting poseurs and manoeuvring mediocrities have long been forgotten, he will continue to be remembered as a Titan who won back British independence and transformed the country's political landscape. The scale of his achievements is remarkable, given that he was only prime minister for three years.

In the electric charisma, volcanic dynamism and memorable rhetoric he exhibited throughout his career in public life, he towered over his contemporaries. It was his stirring performance on the campaign trail during the 2016 EU referendum that helped to secure the Yes vote, just as his compelling personality bulldozed Brexit through the Commons where other senior Conservatives had presided only over miserable stalemate.

In the General Election of 2019 he led his party to its biggest victory since the heyday of Margaret Thatcher. At the peak of his premiership, he was a truly Heineken figure, reaching the parts of the electorate no other Tory could. Moreover, he so often got the big calls right, such as his emphasis during the Covid pandemic on the development of a world-beating vaccine programme and his pioneering early support for the cause of Ukraine.

Yet it was his successes that made him a prime target for the smug metropolitan establishment. Appalled at his boldness in breaking their left-leaning stranglehold on power and their pro-Brussels consensus, they were out for revenge from the moment the British people voted for Brexit. His willingness to smash their cosy cartel fostered the quasi-judicial witch-hunt that ultimately brought him down last week, when the Committee of Privileges delivered its preliminary verdict that he had lied to Parliament in his denials about parties in Downing Street during lockdown.

Other prime ministers have been ousted because of ill health, or election defeats, or a major policy failure. But in the 300 years since the premiership was created, there has never been a departure like that of Boris. Beside global economic crisis and war, the minutiae of a historic row about lockdown pales into insignificance. That is why it was understandable for Johnson to rage in his resignation statement about a "stitch-up" by a "kangaroo court". He directed particular fury at the "egregious bias" of the Privileges Committee, chaired by Harriet Harman, a highly partisan politician who served a long spell as Labour's deputy leader.

His enemies dismiss his charges as paranoid conspiracy theories. But there is no doubt the pro-EU political class, supported by the Whitehall "Blob", is determined to regain its ascendancy. Boris is just the biggest name in a lengthening roll-call of Brexiteer politicians like Dominic Raab and Priti Patel who have been driven from office. Elected politicians should be thrown out by the verdict of the ballot box, not the actions of bureaucrats or the intrigues of second-rate back-benchers. Indeed, a commitment to democracy is one of the hallmarks of Johnson's career, shown not just in his fight for independence from the Brussels empire, but also his record in twice beating Ken Livingstone in the London Mayoral contest.

Unlike so many of his snobbish detractors he has genuine faith in the British people. It is an attitude that stems partly from his rapport with voters, building on his instinctive humour and gift for language. In an age of dreary puritan lectures and grievance-led victimhood, he brought excitement, optimism and laughs to the campaign trail. Yet other politicians and commentators were jealous of the ease with which he appeared to sail through life. So he was denounced for a careless inattention to detail, his allergy to paperwork and his chaotic Downing Street management, appearing to mirror the turbulence of his own private life. It also has to be said that after his life-threatening bout of Covid in 2020, he never quite seemed the same formidable force who had delivered Brexit. Moreover, for all his complaints about a lack of true Conservatism from Rishi Sunak, Boris was in thrall to the green agenda, weak on immigration and had a limited grasp of economics.

Tory grandees wailed about the chaos Boris created, but the party is more chaotic and riven by internal strife than ever before. As for Johnson himself, it is too early to write his political obituary. He will probably make a fortune from books and celebrity speeches. But his ambition and character, combined with the determination to settle scores, could draw him back to politics. Tellingly, he wrote at the end of his resignation statement that he was leaving "at least for now". It is unlikely we've seen the last of Boris Johnson at Westminster.

Low Expectations Lead to Low Results
Michele STEEB
21 September 2022, *Newsweek*

Thirteen years in the trenches serving homeless women with children reinforced a grand life lesson for me: "treat a person as he or she is and watch them remain so. Treat a person as he or she can be and watch them become so."

In our government's sincere attempts to help the homeless, we have prevented many homeless people from achieving their potential. Because we do not help them get better, we condemn them to "remaining so."

Absolving the homeless from societal requirements—allowing them to behave without the rules to which we all must adhere to thrive—prevents the government from effectively addressing the nation's homelessness crisis, and from helping the homeless achieve their innate potential.

Imagine suffering from mental illness and addiction—as 78 percent of the homeless do, according to the UCLA Policy Lab.

Imagine sharing your challenges with a doctor. Imagine your shock as she responds, "I am writing you a life-long prescription for subsidized housing. You can continue to use all the drugs you'd like in this housing, and you can choose whether you'd like therapy to address your mental health issues. Oh, and you need not work to fund your rent, ever. This should fix you right up."

Welcome to the government's current response to homelessness: a counterintuitive, low-barrier, low-expectation, high-cost homeless policy called Housing First.

The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) rolled it out in 2013. At the same time, it wholly defunded services such as substance abuse and mental health therapy. The department promised this one-size-fits-all approach would eliminate homelessness within a decade.

With the program's 10-year anniversary nearly upon us, HUD's Annual Homeless Assessment Report data paints a dire picture.

Under Housing First, the nation's unsheltered homeless population—largely those living on the streets—rose by 20.5 percent, despite a 200 percent increase in federal homelessness assistance spending from 2009 to 2019, and a 42.7 percent increase in the number of permanent housing units dedicated to the homeless from 2014 to 2019.

In California, the only state to have fully adopted Housing First in 2016, unsheltered homelessness grew by 47.1 percent. During that time, the state saw a 101 percent increase in spending and a 33 percent increase in the number of housing units dedicated to the homeless.

These pre-COVID-19 surges occurred during a period of historically high economic growth and rapidly rising real wages.

HUD's policy didn't just permeate "progressive" states like California. Most of its funding is distributed through counties and Continuum of Care Boards where the financial heft of the HUD contribution often drives local policy as well.

Nonprofits that rely heavily on government funding—that is, the vast majority—were also forced to adapt to the Housing First approach to survive, including many shelter and transitional housing programs that historically imposed participation requirements and length-of-stay limits. The handful of nonprofits that stood their ground either perished or were "blacklisted" by policymakers and media who asserted Housing First was "the only way."

What is left is a system devoid of choice, innovation, and accountability (or individual participation). Its failure is hardly surprising.

Still, under the shroud of three myths, "advocates" continue to assert the superiority of the Housing First approach.

The first myth is that more affordable housing will solve homelessness. HUD's own data disproves this idea. If housing alone were the answer to homelessness, the nation's unsheltered population would have declined, given the 42 percent increase in housing units dedicated to the homeless. That includes California, where housing units increased by 33 percent.

The second myth is that the homeless need permanent housing in order to be able to access services. Throughout the country, there are shelters and transitional housing providers that provide services in an efficient and cost-effective manner, albeit fewer than there were prior to the institutionalization of Housing First.

The third myth is that services are always available for housed individuals who want them. Never mind that people mired in mental illness and addiction are highly unlikely to request such services; by wholly defunding therapy services, HUD forced nonprofits to find alternative, nearly nonexistent funding sources. Furthermore, it defunded the nonprofits that require service engagement.

To address the nation's homeless crisis, we must support the homeless in healing from their illnesses, including by requiring that they participate in this healing. We must reconfigure the system to fund their growth and productivity to propel them to achieving their full potential.

PRIDE Industries—the country's largest employer of people with disabilities—is a great example of this approach. PRIDE demonstrates that everyone can work, no matter what his or her disability.

As CEO of one of the largest programs for homeless women and children in Northern California, I worked with more than 10,000 women and children during my tenure. Of the approximately 6,500 women with whom I worked, I cannot think of one who is not capable of contributing to her own well-being, to her family, and to society in some way—which in most cases, can also translate to self-sufficiency. Of the approximately 3,500 children, I have not met one who doesn't deserve this example in his or her life.

We need to raise expectations and set the bar accordingly, not just for the homeless but for the nonprofits supporting them and for the policymakers who must ensure that policy uplifts, not condemns, the homeless.

Tucker's Successor Will Be Worse
David GRAHAM
24 April 2023, *The Atlantic*

Tucker Carlson's rise to become the defining conservative-media personality of the Donald Trump period was a surprise. His abrupt departure from Fox News, announced this morning, is even more shocking.

"FOX News Media and Tucker Carlson have agreed to part ways," the company said in a terse statement. "We thank him for his service to the network as a host and prior to that as a contributor."

Carlson transformed himself from a bow-tie-clad smart aleck playing the role of liberals' favorite conservative into a MAGA hero, able to channel the grievances of the Trump coalition despite his patrician upbringing and reputation—or perhaps, like Trump, because of it. In the process he became Fox's biggest star, talked about as a potential presidential candidate. Carlson was a font of dangerous rhetoric and preposterous lies, and Fox's viewers absolutely loved it.

The reasons for Carlson's departure are still emerging, and the steps he might take next are still unclear. But Fox will probably be fine without Carlson, and anyone who hopes that his disappearance from the air will improve the political discourse in this country is too optimistic. When prior bogeymen for the left—people such as Bill O'Reilly and Glenn Beck—have been pushed out of Fox, the network has always found a new figure to replace them, while the hosts themselves have struggled to match their past success. There will be a new Tucker Carlson, and it's a good bet he or she will be even worse.

The exit comes at a time of flux for Fox. Its founder, Rupert Murdoch, is 92 and has faced recent health struggles. Fox just settled a lawsuit with Dominion Voting Systems over election-related lies for almost $800 million, and faces several more. The discovery process that led up to the settlement was embarrassing for Fox and for Carlson. Internal messages showed that Carlson and his colleagues knew that many of the claims they made about election fraud after the 2020 election were nonsense. They also showed Carlson furious over Fox journalists accurately reporting facts, which he worried would hurt ratings, and saying that he hated Trump. (This revelation didn't prevent him from conducting an obsequious interview with the former president earlier this month.)

When the settlement was announced last week, I argued that no matter the hefty bill, it was just the cost of doing business for Fox. The network settled the suit, but airing the lies achieved its goal of vanquishing smaller, upstart conservative rivals. Fox is and remains larger than even its most important figures.

Carlson will not go away, but recent history suggests that he'll have a hard time maintaining his current profile. Before Carlson, there was Bill O'Reilly, who was the leading conservative figure of his era and equally reviled by progressives. When O'Reilly was finally forced out of Fox in 2017 over sexual-misconduct claims, many critics hoped it would improve the state of the country and the press. Instead, it cleared the way for Carlson. O'Reilly has kept writing best-selling books but has become a more marginal figure in politics.

This pattern has repeated itself over the years. After O'Reilly, the longtime star Sean Hannity became Fox's marquee name. His influence was such that he was sometimes referred to as Trump's real chief of staff. But Hannity was unable to sustain his success, and though he remains at Fox, he was eventually eclipsed by Carlson.

A second-tier Fox star of the Obama years was Glenn Beck, a shouty and excitable host whose rise seemed to threaten O'Reilly's seat on the throne. He was pushed out in 2011, and though Beck's career has continued since, his plan to challenge Fox's supremacy with *The Blaze* came up short, and he's never matched the relevance he had on Fox.

The original mastermind of Fox News was Roger Ailes, the veteran TV executive and former Richard Nixon aide who recognized the market for an avowedly right-wing channel. When Ailes was forced out in 2016 (also related to sexual misconduct), many liberals hoped that it would doom the channel. But Fox is still Fox—the leader in ratings and the center of conservatism.

More details about why Carlson is leaving will surely emerge soon. Though he was connected to the Dominion lawsuit, as well as to other defamation cases against the company, a more serious offender was Maria Bartiromo, who remains at Fox (at least for now). Carlson is also implicated in a lawsuit by Abby Grossberg, a former Fox producer who has claimed that she experienced an appalling work environment while working on Carlson's show. *The Washington Post* reported that Carlson's messages criticizing Fox's top leadership "played a role in his departure," and his political ambitions and his penchant for dishing to reporters could easily have created tensions with bosses.

Any rising conservative TV star would love to grab for the crown Carlson has doffed, or that's been taken from him. The audience, influence, and money involved make it irresistible, but his career arc illustrates the hazards. To remain on top at Fox, hosts have to be ready to continually ratchet up their rhetoric, because the network's business model depends on continual audience outrage. But audiences eventually become inured and require new and more extreme input. Providing that is a challenging and soul-leaching job—and someone will be delighted to have it.

Trying to close the gender pay gap — 60 years after the Equal Pay Act
Dr. Heather FURNAS, an adjunct clinical associate professor of surgery at Stanford University
2 June 2023, *The Boston Globe*

On June 10, 1963, President John F. Kennedy probably considered the gender pay gap closed after he signed the Equal Pay Act prohibiting wage discrimination on the basis of sex. Yet his own state of Massachusetts saw the need to pass the 2016 equal pay law, and even now, women still earn 14 percent less than men. Today hope hangs on two state Senate bills that would require salary transparency within companies (S.1191) and by industry (S.1181). Both have been referred to the Joint Committee on Labor and Workforce Development.

If research on Danish companies holds true in the United States, these bills, if passed, should help bridge the gap. In 2006, the Danish government mandated companies with 35 or more employees to report gender wage gaps. Not only did the pay gap narrow, but companies under mandate hired and promoted more women. That's great news, but not everyone works for a company. If we as a society don't address other factors that depress women's wages, the gap won't disappear.

A major wage-suppressor is children, at least for the women who have them. Before becoming parents, men and women earn about the same, according to a study of business school graduates by Princeton University economist Henrik Kleven, but after becoming parents, men earn 60 percent more than women. Mothers often grab jobs offering flexibility, which also often pay less, an average drop of 4 percent with each child, while fathers' wages *increase* 6 percent with each child. Mothers seeking full-time employment can be hit with a "motherhood penalty," a term Stanford University sociologist Shelley Correll coined after she found that hiring managers would offer an interview twice as often to childless female candidates as to equally qualified mothers.

Childbearing isn't the only barrier women face. Even accounting for mothers' shorter work hours and fathers' greater overtime, the wage gap persists.

In my own field of medicine, we would expect an equal average hourly rate for male and female physicians in the same specialty — and yet female doctors earn 25 percent to 36 percent less than their male colleagues. The pay gap is widest in the surgical subspecialties, including in my own specialty of plastic surgery. The male surgeons bill 19 percent more than the female surgeons, so they earn more. The difference could be that female plastic surgeons work fewer hours or they turn down high-value cases, but a 2021 JAMA Surgery study points to a more troubling explanation. Most referring doctors — especially men — refer patients to male surgeons. With one exception: They refer patients with lower-valued, nonoperative needs to the female surgeons. The study's authors could identify only one significant factor determining referrals — the surgeon's sex.

The preference for men starts in training. Male and female medical faculty members tend to rate male residents higher in almost every category. But here's the kicker: Studies show that on average, patients with diabetes, heart attacks, and other diagnoses resulting in hospital admission have better outcomes when they are under the care of female physicians. US and Canadian surgical patients also fared better with female surgeons. Female doctors are more likely to explore patients' social circumstances, collaborate with colleagues, and follow guidelines — great for patients but no help in gaining raises, promotions, or high-value referrals.

Everyone, including medical faculty, is blind to their own unconscious bias, so merit-based compensation systems that include performance reviews often result in lower pay for women in the same job as higher-paid men. Despite available objective performance metrics, women who substantially outperform men often get no better recognition and few promotions. Astronomers at the Hubble Space Telescope figured out a way to work around decision makers' biases: For telescope access, applicants filled out anonymized forms — no names or pronouns — and female astronomers saw a dramatic rise in their reviewers' ratings.

Even if companies paid men and women equally for the same job, they often work in different industries. The manufacturing and construction jobs that attract men pay more than the caregiving and service jobs that attract women. Men's higher pay is often justified because they are 10 times more likely to be killed at work, but caretakers carry the responsibility for the lives of the vulnerable — babies, children, and the elderly. The issue is bias more than risk — when a field attracts more women, pay falls.

It will take time to equalize wages for genderized jobs, but there is plenty to do now. If we get these things right, Kennedy's Equal Pay Act might finally result in equal pay for equal work.

Apocalypse then

13 October 2022, *The Economist*

The sound of the apocalypse would be soothing. Whereas prophets and novelists tend to imagine Armageddon as noisy—earthquakes, looting and whatnot—for the BBC, it would sound like Peter Donaldson. As documents declassified a few years ago revealed, he was the newsreader chosen to usher in the end of the world. [...]

The organisation, which turns 100 this month, had announced the start of the second world war and its end. It had covered the liberation of Belsen and the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II, the Suez crisis and the Falklands war. For 100 years, the BBC has parcelled up disaster and defeat, then distributed them, after the pips and before the weather forecast, to the British. If Armageddon was to come, it felt right the BBC would announce it, probably after "The Archers", certainly in an RP accent.

It was not, in the beginning, obvious that this would be so. The BBC was founded a century ago from pragmatism rather than idealism, the result of a lacklustre compromise to satisfy new radio companies (which thought they would flog more sets if people had programmes to listen to on them) and the General Post Office (which wanted to stop anyone from gaining a monopoly over the airwaves, but couldn't be bothered to oversee programmes itself). So it was that on October 18th 1922, to the interest of almost no one, the British Broadcasting Company was born. "Company" became "Corporation" in 1927.

Today the BBC tends to offer news as its main mission, spending £314m ($346m) a year on it. But as David Hendy, a historian, explains in a new book, it was at first far less interested. As one early BBC boss put it: "I didn't really care what was happening in Abyssinia." By agreement with the newspapers, the BBC broadcast no bulletins before 7pm, to avoid competition. But the BBC—which in its early days employed no journalists—hardly tried anyway. "There is no news," ran one crisply conclusive bulletin in 1930, before returning to a broadcast of Wagner's "Parsifal".

Wagner wasn't mere filler. Cultural betterment, not bulletins, was seen as the BBC's main mission. William Haley, an early BBC chief, envisaged radio as a pyramid with popular programmes at its base and high culture at its apex. The common man would be drawn in low and then, in a sort of audio purgatory, be purified by BBC programming until he achieved the blessed state of voluntarily enjoying Buxtehude. Presenters in dinner jackets, their speech a lesson in itself, carefully followed strict pronunciation guides: "quad-*rille*" was to be pronounced with the accent on its last syllable; "*phil*-istine" on its first.

To justify the imposition of an annual licence fee, BBC programming has always had to offer a combination of popularity and piety. Television, which currently takes 55% of the £159 fee, has always tended to provide the popularity. In the 1970s the comic double act of Eric Morecambe and Ernie Wise won audiences of over 20m. Today, "Strictly Come Dancing", a game show, gets ratings of 7m.

Radio tends to do the piety. The World Service broadcasts in 42 languages to 492m people. Radio 3 offers programmes with such titles as "Discovering Music: Monteverdi Madrigals". Radio 4 offers the implausibly wholesome "In Our Time". Recent episodes have included "Hegel's Philosophy of History", "The Hittites" and "Tang Era Poetry". "Parasitism" (typical quote: "You can get parasites that effectively castrate their host") was considered such fun it was offered as a summer repeat.

The common man has not always been grateful for the BBC's efforts. A 1950s sketch show described the BBC as a "part of the English heritage. Like suet pudding and catarrh". But the BBC mattered. Its news (despite grumbles about lefty bias) was trusted, its radio all but loved. For Britons of a certain age not only the outspread century but humdrum daily life itself was, like a bourgeois Book of Hours, measured out by its tread: breakfast with "Today", supper after "The Archers" and insomnia with the shipping forecast, whose litany of names—"North Utsire, South Utsire, Forties, Cromarty…"—was as unintelligible as a religious chant and, to many, as comforting.

Now that bond is breaking. Smartphones and streaming have switched off communal TVs and radios. Programmes are consumed individually, and at will. The particular blend of serendipity and boredom that led people to watch "Antiques Roadshow", or to listen to the wind forecast for the Faroe Islands, has gone.

Mr Hendy observes that the BBC was born with an "umbilical link" to radio. The technology, it turns out, wasn't there to serve the BBC; the BBC served the technology: the medium was the message. In its triumphant first century, the BBC forgot this. It is now being painfully reminded of it. The message from the era of smartphones is brutal. Viewing figures among the young have collapsed; in a typical week, a fifth of 16- to 34-year-olds consume no BBC content at all.

There is a sense that the BBC doesn't do enough to justify itself: it can cover a state funeral beautifully but it is increasingly irrelevant to many. Too few shows are "Strictly" style hits; too many are tosh. At a time when it needs to prove its worth, it has cut World Service jobs. Catastrophe is unlikely, but decline of some sort probable. The end of the BBC's first century has a less than celebratory feel.

Harry: the prince who wanted out but could not really leave

Hadley Freeman

19 September 2022, ***The Guardian***

Stripped of his uniform and distanced from his brother, the Duke of Sussex trod an uneasy path at the funeral of Queen Elizabeth II. The actual service was, to be honest, a bit underwhelming, verging on generic. OK, the archbishop of Canterbury […] probably didn't attend your aunt's funeral. But with a bit of Psalm 23, a splash of Elgar and a sprinkling of Corinthians, it was at times hard to tell the difference between this and any aged relative's remembrance service. Absolutely none of which could be said about the procession to and especially from the Westminster Abbey, which pummelled even the most sceptical of republicans into a state of respectful awe.

The swaying march of the rainbow-like array of military uniforms, the tiny, totemic body in a casket draped with pageantry, followed by her solemn children and selected grandchildren: this is what history will remember about the Queen's funeral. Just as the first image that comes to most people's minds about Diana's funeral is the young princes walking the silent streets of London, flanked by their father, grandfather and uncle. Many of those same key characters were here on Monday, once again forced to make their private grief public, born into a job which offers no bereavement leave.

Indeed, as princes William and Harry know better than most, there is no busier and more public-facing time for a royal than a major death in the family. Harry recently recalled that during his mother's funeral, his chief feeling was exasperation with the weeping public: "This was my mum, you never even met her." This time, his frustration was clearly more directed at his family. "That was my military uniform," he surely seethed, now relegated to a mere morning suit, unlike his brother and father. "You never went on two tours of Afghanistan."

Back in 1997, Harry and William, then only 12 and 15, were too young to offer each other much comfort, or even share a "God, this is sad and INCREDIBLY WEIRD" glance, as they walked behind their mother's casket. Now, alas, they are too embroiled in royal tradition and personal bitterness. The first march during the Queen's funeral, from the Palace of Westminster to Westminster Abbey, set the scene, with the non-working royals – Prince Andrew and Harry – glaringly stripped of their military uniforms.

Harry has given many reasons for his decision to leave Britain and move his family to California. One he hasn't said, but would be more than understandable, is he looked at his uncle Andrew, who was apparently so bored in his life as a spare that hanging around with a convicted sex criminal seemed like a good idea, and he thought: "Nah – not for me." But like the mafia, you can never really leave the royals. As he walked behind his dreaded uncle, the two of them in matching morning suits, Harry must have thought: "All I did was move to Montecito. Do I really need to be grouped with this guy?"

Only the most deranged monarchist would not feel some sympathy for Harry and Meghan and the coldness they endured from his family. No one ever confused the Windsors with the Waltons. But one can also feel that Harry has been – how to put this – a little deluded about the situation. It was reported over the weekend that he told a friend: "People need to stop talking about this stuff and focus on my grandmother." This Harry must be absolutely livid with the Harry who has given multiple interviews about his grievances with his family, including a wildly high-profile one with Oprah Winfrey, written a soon-to-be published memoir which presumably retreads that ground, and is working on a documentary for Netflix about his life since leaving the royal family.

Who could blame a man once made to march behind his mother's coffin for wanting to opt out of the royal business? So it's been a little bewildering to watch Harry and Meghan in California act like, well, royals, with their photocalls on Remembrance Sunday (from, er, Los Angeles) and their various speeches at the United Nations. Harry has looked like the human embodiment of Britain mid-Brexit, leaving the organisation and then expressing outrage that he can't enjoy the privileges of belonging to it. It is true Meghan was abominably treated by some elements of the British media. It is also true she probably shouldn't repeat dubious comparisons of herself to Nelson Mandela, as she did in a recent interview. Being the victim in one situation does not make you a saint. You can still be a bit of a numpty.

Does Harry ever wonder if he successfully made the point he was trying to make to his family? Towards the end of the Queen's funeral, it looked as if he might. As he got up from his seat and moved to the aisle, he looked towards his brother and seemed to be seeking eye contact. He didn't get it. A stern-faced William walked right in front of him, and Harry took a further step back to make room for William's children. Because that's what he was born to do, and he can never escape it, even if he moves halfway across the world. And then the brothers marched forth, behind another dead woman they loved, next to one another, and ignoring each other.

Those who tore down Colston's statue helped lead us to the truth about slavery and the monarchy

Kojo Koram, 7 April, 2023,

The Guardian

In the summer of 2020, there was perhaps no moment that divided the nation more sharply than when Black Lives Matter protesters tore a statue of 17th-century slave trader Edward Colston from its plinth in the centre of Bristol and rolled it into the harbour.

While few critics went so far as to defend Colston and his legacy, they argued that this type of direct action was "erasing history". Britain's prime minister at the time, Boris Johnson, claimed that to remove statues of figures like Colston from the public square was "to lie about our history". Sir Trevor Phillips complained that Britain's public history was being "erased entirely" and Nigel Farage went a step further, describing the protesters who removed the statue as "a new form of the Taliban", desecrating Britain's cultural memory for their own amusement and dragging the country into Year Zero-like ignorance.

Yet rather than lead us into an era of collective forgetting, the tearing down of Colston's statue transported his name – and deeds – into the public consciousness. This week, the renewed attention towards Colston bore fruit when the Guardian revealed that a historian, Brooke Newman, had unearthed a document showing that in 1689, Colston transferred £1,000 of shares in the Royal African Company (RAC) to none other than King William III. The exposure of the extent to which the monarch was financially intertwined with the slave trading company of which Colston was a director does not teach us less about history, it teaches us more.

The activities of colonial companies like the RAC, which enjoyed a monopoly over the English trade in slaves from the west African coast, are often presented as distinct from the internal history of the British Isles. Yes, there may have been the odd massacre performed in the service of British imperialism, but these were the actions of rogue merchants in distant tropical lands, operating far from the watchful eye of Westminster and the living embodiment of British sovereignty, the monarch. This makes it easy to delete the actions of the RAC from the national record: the 84,500 men, women and children who, during Colston's time with the company, were taken by its ships from their homes in west Africa to suffer a life of slavery in the New World. A quarter of them would not even survive the journey, so horrific were the conditions aboard Colston's ships.

Yet this separation between internal royal histories and external colonial histories has always been a blind spot in our understanding of the past. Companies like the RAC needed to be granted a royal charter just to exist: they couldn't be just registered and incorporated like companies today. And furthermore, as the Guardian's research has illustrated, there was often a cosy personal connection between the ruling kings and queens of this island and its slave-trading and colonial companies. This extended from James II acting as a governor of the Royal African Company to George II being a shareholder of the South Sea Company, which held the contract to supply enslaved Africans to the Spanish colonies in South America.

This greater understanding of the connection between colonialism and the monarchy carries implications not only for our image of the past, but for ideas about the contemporary role of the monarchy, both at home and abroad. The new revelations arrive at a difficult time for the monarchy, with the coronation of a new king seeking to shore up the disruption caused by the passing of the long-reigning Elizabeth II. A number of Commonwealth countries have made moves towards removing the monarch as the head of state in their ostensibly independent countries. Leading politicians in Australia and Jamaica, countries where the British monarchy traditionally enjoyed a great deal of public support, are now campaigning to follow in the footsteps of Barbados, which transitioned to a parliamentary republic in 2021, with the island's prime minister, Mia Mottley, heralding the moment as a step towards the Caribbean island "leaving our colonial past behind".

The rising unpopularity of the British monarchy in the once-reliable British West Indies was made evident by the protests that greeted the then Duke and Duchess of Cambridge, William and Kate, during their tour of the region last year. Our understanding of the anger that underwrites these protests is only enriched by the type of research that has been highlighted this week.

The relationship between the British royal family and the former colonies isn't just a question of symbolism or constitutional law. It is an entry point into a deep and bloody history that is essential to understanding our relationship with the rest of the world. It is a history that the lid has only just started to be lifted on. And for that, we should thank the protesters in Bristol, who decided to tear through the veil of secrecy that enshrouds much of this country's past, despite the charges of criminality and vandalism that they knew they would have to face afterwards.

The Coronation Offered a Chance to Reform and Modernise the Monarchy. It has been squandered

Martin Kettle, 5 May, 2023, ***The Guardian***

At the heart of the coronation of Charles III on Saturday is a very deliberate national deception about religion. In some ways, the deception hides in plain sight, not attracting attention. Pre-coronation speculation has focused instead on more trivial things – Camilla, Harry, Meghan – or on monarchy's general popularity in the post-Elizabeth era. But when you watch and listen to the coronation itself, the religious deception will be hard to miss – and harder to believe.

Many will instinctively want to be generous about the coronation and will not want to spoil the party. In that spirit, they might call this weekend's ritual a historical pretence that pleases many and does no particular harm. If they were being stronger-minded, as they ought to be about an event that inevitably says so much about this country to itself and the world, they could instead call the ritual what it is: a lie at the heart of the British state.

The lie is that Britain is a practising Christian nation, and that it is defined and held together by the established Protestant religion, of which the monarch is the embodiment. That claim may have been accurate in the 18th century. It is simply untrue in the Britain of 2023. But the Protestant claim remains inseparable from the modern coronation. Fear of change probably explains why Saturday's proceedings are taking place at all. Charles III has been king for months now and no coronation is legally required in order to confirm that fact. […]

There will be much said on Saturday about the more pluralistic aspects of the 2023 coronation service, as well as other changes that are more personal to Charles. Jewish, Muslim and other faith leaders will have walk-on roles. The nations of the UK will have moments in the spotlight. There will be singing in Welsh and Greek. Non-Christians will have roles in presenting the king's regalia. Our first British-Asian prime minister will read a lesson. All this sends a welcome message of national inclusivity.

Most of it, though, is well-intentioned window-dressing. In fact, at the two central moments of the coronation, make-believe will take over. The inclusivity of the minor changes may be seriously meant. But it cannot compete with the institutional exclusivity that dominates the rest of the service, including its climactic rituals. In one, the inclusivity hits an Anglican wall. In the second, it disappears into a feudal farrago.

The Anglican wall is the swearing of the coronation oath. In post-civil war coronations, this was the key moment. The oath's contents were laid down in statute in 1688. There is no ambiguity about what the oath says. Charles must declare himself a faithful Protestant, commit himself to maintain the Protestant succession and swear to uphold the Church of England's position as the established religion of England.

This made life-and-death sense in 1688. Today it is absurd. Charles's swearing of his coronation oath flies in the face of the realities of modern Britain. Most Britons are not Christians. Few of those who are Christians are practising Anglicans. We are a more secular and pluralised nation and likely to remain one. In the blunt language of University College London's Constitution Unit, the coronation oath "reflects a period of history that is now over."

A similar sense of anachronism applies to the feudal farrago part of the coronation. This comes later, after the oath, with the anointing of Charles with holy oil by the archbishop of Canterbury, behind a screen, while the choir sings Handel's Zadok the Priest. This sacral part of the coronation has deep historical roots, but then so does witch burning. Today, the anointing of the king sets the British monarch completely apart, not just from the citizenry of Britain, but also from every other crowned head of state in Europe.

The language comes from another era. In a newly written prayer before the anointing, the archbishop will ask that the people should be blessed by "a royal priesthood" and become "a holy nation". Then, speaking quietly (according to the liturgy), the archbishop addresses Charles III in words that Charles I himself would have appreciated. He is to be "anointed, blessed, and consecrated King over the peoples, whom the Lord your God has given you to rule and govern".

This is constitutional monarchy at its least modern and its most obdurately feudal. It will be reinforced on Saturday by the proposed homage of the people. Here the archbishop will invite the congregation and those watching at home "to make their homage" to the king.

The liturgy document presents this as a progressive reform, since in previous coronations homage was paid by peers alone. In fact, because it asks the public to assert their subordinate status as subjects rather than equal citizens, it is the reverse.

The decision typifies the failure of the British state, under Charles as under his mother, to find ways of building consent for reform of the monarchy. The upshot is that this coronation does not mark the start of a new era. It is merely the continuation of the old one. A chance to do things more sensibly has been squandered, not just by the king and the archbishop, but by the rest of us too.

The arts in Britain are teetering on the brink. Here is my plan to save them

Nicholas Hytner

17 May 2023, ***The Guardian***

The great conductor Simon Rattle hit a nerve when he talked about the recent cuts to the "flesh of our culture". Three years after the pandemic started, audiences might be back, but confidence that the arts can withstand waning government support isn't, and classical music isn't alone in feeling beleaguered.

When I became director of the National Theatre in 2003, things could not have been more different. Government investment was flowing into the arts and the Arts Council had the resources to fund a renaissance in regional theatre. Between 1997 and 2007 arts spending doubled: dance, opera and classical music all flourished. The optimism and financial security that made the first years of my stint at the National so fruitful now seem like a distant memory. Today, I don't know a single subsidised arts organisation in the country that feels financially secure. Many freelance artists have given up, battered by the pandemic and the disastrous removal of their right to work freely in the EU.

During the pandemic, the unexpected generosity of the government's £1.6bn Culture Recovery Fund prevented a collapse of the entire sector. But I despair at the bizarre decision to invest heavily in a fund to help the arts outlive Covid, only to starve them of the support they need to return to health. An admirable commitment to boost spending outside of London as part of the levelling-up agenda turned out to be a textbook example of levelling down. In February 2022, the then culture secretary, Nadine Dorries, instructed the Arts Council to take £24m from London and distribute it elsewhere in England: nowhere near enough to transform the picture in the rest of the country, but enough to devastate English National Opera, and many others.

The Arts Council was established to distribute state funding at arm's length without government interference, so you might have expected it to resist the government's assault on its independence. Maybe it tried, but the suspicion is that the Dorries agenda dovetailed neatly with its own. In its latest strategy document, the Arts Council laid out plans for England to be a country "in which the creativity of each of us is valued and given the chance to flourish. A country where every one of us has access to a remarkable range of high-quality cultural experiences."

Nobody could argue with either of these ambitions. The problem is that "the creativity of each of us" must these days be nurtured without the help of schools from which the arts have been ruthlessly stripped. Even more of the Arts Council's reduced resources must be ploughed into papering over the cracks of an education system that has turned its back on music, drama and the visual arts. And that's even before it addresses the goal of unlimited adult creativity. This vast remit is in addition to what used to be the Arts Council's sole purpose, but now comes second: the support of what it coyly calls "high-quality cultural experiences". In other words: funding and giving access to the work of writers, composers, actors, musicians and dancers who have trained and devoted their professional lives to making art.

There isn't enough money to do any of it, so it's no surprise that my colleagues have given up on trying to make their case with the current government and are looking to what will presumably be the next one. […]

The total Arts Council England grant is £458.5m: less than 0.05% of all government spending. Even doubling it would make barely a dent in the national finances. But a significant increase would be transformational out of proportion to the relatively modest sums involved: on the confidence and productivity of artists, the size and enthusiasm of audiences, the wellbeing of communities, our town and city centres and our international reputation.

But funding is only part of the problem for an Arts Council that is being pulled in several different directions. Maybe the way forward is for the arts to use sport as a model. There are two distinct funding bodies for sport. UK Sport has, in its own words, "a very clear remit at the 'top end' of Britain's sporting pathway, with no direct involvement in community or school sport". And it wins us medals. The other, Sport England (which has equivalents in the other home nations) invests in sport and physical activity to make it a normal part of life for everyone and gets us out on the track at the weekend. Both functions are vital.

My proposal, then, for a Labour government, is to fund, in addition to the Arts Council, a new body as expert in its field as Sport England. In doing so, recognise the importance of participation in the arts with its own funding stream, to which new community-based initiatives as well as established education and outreach programmes can apply. And re-establish the arts in schools. Meanwhile, focus the Arts Council's existing grant on making the best possible art by professional artists for the most diverse possible audience. There is more than enough talent and more than enough enthusiasm to rebuild the creative powerhouse that has been so battered by the last 13 years.

Nicholas Hytner is a theatre director, film director, and film producer. He was previously artistic director of London's National Theatre

It is time for the Church and the state to be separated

Stephen Evans

24 September 2022

The Independent

In his first address to the nation as monarch, King Charles said he would endeavour to serve all his subjects, whatever their "background or beliefs", with loyalty, respect and love. But it would be easier to fulfil this ambition if our head of state didn't also occupy the role of head of the Church of England. Upon the death of Queen Elizabeth, King Charles immediately became the Church's supreme governor and "defender of the faith" – the "one true Protestant faith". His coronation in Westminster Abbey will be a deeply religious affair. He will be anointed with holy oil, blessed, and consecrated by the Archbishop of Canterbury. Holy Communion will be celebrated.

Ours is the only monarch in Europe still crowned in a religious ceremony. It's a peculiar way to inaugurate a head of state in one of the least religious countries on Earth. The UK's religious landscape has changed beyond all recognition since the last coronation in 1953. We now have a non-religious majority, and a significant proportion of citizens who follow other religions and denominations. Many of them will feel alienated by a ceremony purporting to legitimise a new head of state who must pledge to protect the privileges and doctrine of a church they don't belong to. And let's not forget, the doctrine King Charles will swear an oath to preserve asserts that gay sex is a sin, and that same-sex marriage is illegitimate. It is also a church that represents just one UK country, and whose weekly attendance is only 1 per cent of the UK population.

We expect our monarchs to remain strictly neutral in respect of political matters. So why the double standard when it comes to religion? Is it really appropriate for the UK prime minister to have a weekly meeting with the supreme governor of the Church of England to discuss government matters? With Anglicanism so deeply entrenched in our constitution, it's hardly surprising that religious privilege runs through Britain like the letters in a stick of Blackpool rock.

King Charles has made clear his intention to be a defender of faiths generally, not only "the faith". This fits with the role the Church of England has assumed for itself, as a means by which other denominations and faith communities can be elevated in public life. It's unclear to what extent members of other faiths are content to ride on the coattails of the Anglican establishment. But many faith leaders enjoy the enhanced status granted by the Church of England holding the door open for them. Humanists may on occasion be invited along, but ultimately the favouritism shown to the Church of England – with "crumbs from the table" for other religious groups – demeans minority faiths, and almost entirely neglects and disenfranchises the non-religious and religiously unconcerned majority.

Along with the late Queen Elizabeth, King Charles has been an advocate of religious freedom. But how is this consistent with the role of head of state being reserved exclusively for practising Christians? The monarchy's religious role is underpinned by an assumption that all future monarchs will be believing Anglicans. The constitution prevents Catholics from becoming monarch. This runs contrary to concepts of fairness or freedom of religion or belief.

The accession of a new King inevitably raises questions about the relevance of a monarchy in a modern democracy. After all, inherited power and privilege by virtue of birth is an affront to everything modern Britain claims to stand for. Turning a blind eye to a morally unjustifiable institution at the heart of our constitution – one that claims a "divine right" to rule over the rest of us – can't be good for our national psyche. Nor can cleaving to our past in the absence of any confidence in our ability to carve out a democratic future. It will therefore be interesting to see the extent to which support for the monarchy has been tied up with admiration for Queen Elizabeth. But for as long as the monarchy remains, it is right to initiate reforms to ensure that our head of state has no constitutional entanglement with religion. Only a third of the UK public thinks the monarchy's ties to the Church should remain intact.

Concepts of nationhood and citizenship are too important to be centred around an anachronism. If we want those living within these isles – irrespective of their personal religious beliefs – to buy into Britishness and feel part of a cohesive collective, our national identity needs to be meaningful and inclusive. A constitutional settlement based on Anglican supremacism is a non-starter for a country that claims to be a beacon of freedom and equality. It's time we had a serious debate about the kind of country we want to be.

Stephen Evans is chief executive of the National Secular Society

Starmer won't be scrapping the Lords if he becomes PM

John Rentoul, Chief Political Commentator

1 April 2023, ***The Independent***

The leader of the House of Lords is a government minister with a seat in the cabinet, but Margaret Jay resigned from the job in 2001 because Tony Blair had lost interest in further changes to the upper house of parliament. She told our students at King's College London this week that Blair, having expelled most of the hereditary peers, decided against a second stage of reform: "It was the main reason why I resigned. Not because I was in a temper about it, but because I thought if we're not going to do Lords reform, I certainly don't want to be leader of the Lords, which is just like being the headmistress and saying, 'Please remember to bring your gym kit on Tuesday'."

At the last of this year's "Blair Years" class, which I teach with Dr Michelle Clement and Professor Jon Davis, she said: "If there wasn't a major area of constitutional reform, which I thought there should be, then I thought that I can do some more interesting things." She said there was a lesson from this recent history for Keir Starmer, which is that a Labour government should not get "bogged down" in the kind of "root and branch" reform proposed by Gordon Brown, who in December published a plan to abolish the House of Lords and replace it with an elected Assembly of the Nations and Regions.

She suggested that Starmer should instead pick up where she left off, with her plan to cut the numbers in the Lords by imposing a term limit of 15 years. She thought that would be "fairer" than an age limit of, say, 70, "because people vary so much" and because "a lot of very good people don't come in to the Lords until they're in their later sixties simply because they've been doing high-level jobs in important professions before – they still offer a very good contribution". She said that simple change "would make a huge difference; it would get rid of a large number of people – I don't mean because they're bad, but it would just clear out the numbers, and I think would be a useful incentive for the way the place worked".

I suspect that Starmer already knows that limited reform such as this, possibly combined with getting rid of the remaining 92 hereditary peers, would be prudent. He "welcomed" Brown's plan with all the enthusiasm of someone opening the door to a party of unexpected house guests. The plan is now subject to "consultation", and I understand that Starmer has been warned by many Labour peers – including David Blunkett, who also expressed his scepticism at King's recently – of the danger of a Labour government having its entire legislative programme blocked in the Lords for years. This is likely to be a particular problem if Starmer leads a minority government in a hung parliament. The voters simply would not understand a new government devoting time and energy to trench warfare with the Lords when there are pressing issues of the cost of living, the NHS and crime to attend to. What Starmer should have said to Brown was: "If it was so important, why didn't you do it when you were prime minister?"

Starmer's reluctance to engage with fashionable constitutional reform generally seems to suggest that he is more likely to complete Baroness Jay's unfinished business than Brown's. He has so far avoided any commitment to proportional representation – not even a promise of a referendum on the subject of the kind that Blair made but didn't keep. However much Labour activists care about voting reform and constitutional meddling now, these things are never a priority in government.

Baroness Jay's thoughts about Lords reform were only a small part of her contribution to our class, which covered her role as a health minister and as women's minister as well, and her views of Blair's "amiable" style of leadership with a "very steely centre". She said: "My general point, and I do want to make this very firmly, is that the Blair government was a serious government. People were serious. They took it seriously. It was something which mattered. "One of the things which has been most damaging to this country, I don't just mean to this government, but to this country, has been the last few years, when the whole world has begun to laugh at our systems of government. I really do believe that **Boris Johnson** in particular has undermined the whole concept of seriousness as an approach by a prime minister, which was absolutely not true of Tony Blair at his most relaxed, at his most casual, or of any of the people who worked for him."

But she told our students that in some ways it was a good thing that she left Blair's government when she did, because she was "completely opposed to the Iraq war". She said: "I'm not sure I'd have had the balls to resign. I was glad that I was on the sidelines." Even so, she said it made her "sad" that so many of the students felt that the war subtracted from the achievements of the Blair government: "I really am an unabashed Blairite, and I do think that Tony Blair was a very good prime minister and a good leader."

Editorial: Nashville and a nation of mass shooting trauma
28 March 2023, *The Los Angeles Times*

Another 200 children became survivors of gun violence Monday, this time in Nashville, when a 28-year-old armed with high-powered weapons broke into their school and opened fire, killing three 9-year-old classmates and three adult staff members.

The kids, along with employees of the private elementary school, join the growing number of Americans who have been touched by gun violence, who have had to shelter in place or run for their lives or confront the possibility that their lives will soon end by a bullet. And they also join the ranks of mourners for family, friends and colleagues who could not be protected or escape.

Just how common is it to be a survivor? Outside the Nashville school, Joylyn Bukovac, a local television reporter covering the killing rampage, shared that she, too, had survived a shooting at her middle school in 2010.

At another point, a woman crashed a television news conference, asking, "Aren't you guys tired of covering this?" That was Ashbey Beasley, who had been at the July 4 parade in Highland Park, Ill., last year when a gunman opened fire on the crowd, killing seven people. Beasley was in Nashville visiting family and was going to have lunch with Shaundelle Brooks, whose older son was killed in a 2018 mass shooting at a Waffle House. The women bonded over their gun control advocacy. But Brooks got word that her younger son's high school was on lockdown because of the gunfire nearby.

"I couldn't even fully process it," Beasley told the Washington Post. "What do you say? Because only in America can you survive a mass shooting and go and make a friend who is the victim of a mass shooting and then go to meet that friend for lunch … and end up in the middle of another mass shooting event."

When we look beyond horrific headline-grabbing mass shootings, the tally of loss and sorrow compounds. Just in the last week, two administrators were shot at a high school in Denver and a student was shot in the parking lot at a high school in Dallas. Each day, children and adults are killed or maimed in shootings in neighborhoods, homes, houses of worship, grocery stores and movie theaters. Even some of the most powerful people in the nation — members of Congress — are not immune. There is no safe place.

How much longer before most Americans can count themselves as survivors of gun violence? What does that do to the national psyche? For parents to say goodbye to their children each morning with the lingering fear it will be the last time they see them. For young people who are trained by the culture to constantly scope out exit routes in case there is a shooter.

We're a country that purports to care about human life, yet we tolerate frequent mass casualties from guns. While conservative legislators in Tennessee and other states spend their time trying to ban books or drag queens, curtail gender-affirming care for transgender youth, or whitewash public school curriculum in the name of protecting children, they refuse to take meaningful steps to reduce the leading cause of their death in America: gun violence.

President Biden on Monday again called on Congress to ban assault weapons and close gun background check loopholes. A majority of Americans support stronger rules on the sale of guns and feel increasingly dissatisfied with the nation's failure to more strictly regulate firearms. But too many state and federal lawmakers, mostly Republican, won't buck the gun lobby and its extreme ideology that even common-sense restrictions amount to government oppression.

So, instead, Americans live with another kind of oppression — the crushing fear that they might be the next victim or survivor of gun violence.

By protecting private schools, Rishi Sunak is chasing voters who don't exist

John Oxley, 1 December 2022, ***The New Statesman***

There are some political battles that are more about symbolism than the practicalities. The proposed Labour policy to put VAT on private school fees is one of them. In fiscal terms, the money involved is relatively small, raising an estimated £1.7bn at best. But it is a row that plays to both parties' optics. For Keir Starmer, it is an obvious way to differentiate his party from the Conservatives and to attack entrenched, generational privilege. Rishi Sunak's riposte is to defend personal choice and the "hard-working aspirations of millions" – and to ultimately protect his voters from a tax hit. He should, however, be careful that the constituency he courts genuinely exists.

As an Old Wykehamist, Sunak may think he knows the sorts of parents whose children go to private schools well – but things have changed since his day. The elite schools were always expensive, but since the Prime Minister left in the late Nineties, fees have more than doubled in real terms. The same period has seen house prices rise at an even greater rate while wages have stalled for around a decade. For the Tories, this means a worrying squeeze on upper middle-class comforts and leaves the party out of touch with its potential voters.

Through the Eighties and Nineties, the top private schools were still within the aspirational reach of the professional classes. Doctors, accountants or even back-bench MPs could meet the fees out of their income, even if it did mean a bit of cutting back on other luxuries. Now, that is no longer the case. The comfortably off have been priced out of schools in favour of the internationally wealthy. At the leading London day school St Paul's, the cut-off for financial assistance is a household income of £120,000. Private schools are increasingly moving from the preserve of the top 5 per cent to the top 0.5 per cent.

The reasons for this change are complex, but in a large part it has been driven by increased overseas demand. Successive waves have seen the wealthy of Russia, the Middle East, China and Africa want prestigious English educations for their children, while schools have been reluctant to expand provision (though some now operate overseas outposts). Attracting the world's wealthy has a cyclical effect: boarding schools especially have become more luxurious, where once cold showers and hard beds sufficed for the English upper classes, and therefore expensive.

At the same time, the alternative has become more tempting for better-off parents. State schools have undergone a significant improvement, especially in major cities. The rise of academies and free schools has also offered more choice to parents. Outside of the most famous institutions, many private schools are academically pretty middling, and so good state schools in affluent areas can compete with them.

Over the past decade or so, numerous private schools have chosen to become state-funded academies as their pupil numbers declined. One exception to this trend is perhaps the growing number of small, relatively inexpensive, non-Christian religious private schools – but this is unlikely to be what Sunak has in mind when he defends the lack of VAT on fees.

The result is that the politics of private schools are very different from a generation ago. There's a reason the former education secretary Michael Gove proposed putting VAT on school fees from the backbenches in 2017. The sort of affluent parents who once stretched to afford private schools are now worried about housing costs and stagnating wages. The 20 per cent increase of adding VAT to the costs doesn't bother them, because such schools have already moved out of reach, and the alternatives are just as attractive. The group of people who think they might have the money to privately educate their children is just smaller than it was, and fewer feel the need to defend them. Indeed, only 10 per cent of voters think the schools should keep their charitable status (a different policy to the VAT one, but often intertwined in reporting).

David Cameron's education reforms grasped that there was a more important group of voters for the Tories than private school parents. Those who could no longer afford the rising fees wanted an element of school choice and for those options to be good. They liked the idea of academies outside of local authority control that offered some of the variety of the private sector and hit similar results, but without the price tag. Sunak and the Tory press that has been hammering Labour over its policy in recent days seem to miss this.

To stand a chance in the next election, the Prime Minister must convince moderate and casual Tories that they should fear a Labour government. This means persuading those that earn more than average but don't have vast wealth built up that they will bear the brunt of Labour economic policies. This only works if you understand what really matters to them. It may come as a shock to those educated in the Nineties and before, but this is more likely to be state school quality than private school affordability. To win an election, you need to know which gallery you are playing to, especially if the subject matter is more widely unpopular. In backing private school parents, Sunak is missing this.

Are the Conservatives "defunding" the NHS in order to privatise it?

Anoosh Chakelian

5 January 2023, ***The New Statesman***

There's a dirty trick in the property development world. A landlord will neglect a pub or housing block on purpose – it becomes an eyesore, and even unsafe. The idea is to make locals, residents or councils sympathetic to the building being sold off or repurposed, and demolition more excusable. In England's National Planning Policy Framework, this is referred to as "deliberate neglect". Some people suspect something like this is happening to the NHS, with the Tory government as the landlord. Run the health service down, frustrate patients with its failings, and eventually you have the excuse – and public buy-in – to sell it off (goes the theory). […]

It is worth remembering two key things. First, the NHS crisis is not just one of Tory England. Health is a devolved policy matter, and we are seeing similar chaos in Labour-run Wales, SNP-run Scotland and an executive-less Northern Ireland. Central economic policy limits the power of the devolved nations, of course – the effects of austerity in particular have ripped through the UK. But they can raise taxes to fund the NHS (as the Scottish government recently decided to do). Second, private companies have always played a part in NHS provision, especially when trying to bring down waiting times – a New Labour approach the former health secretary Andy Burnham defended when I interviewed him in 2014. "I see a supporting role but not a replacement role" for private money in the NHS, is how he put it. This is not an uncommon view in moderate Labour circles.

There is no denying that more than a decade of political choices by Tory-led governments form the backdrop to the current NHS mess. That said, the proportion of money spent by NHS commissioners on services delivered by the private sector has remained pretty level according to the King's Fund (an influential health think tank, which robustly scrutinises government policy), since the former health secretary Andrew Lansley introduced more competition into the NHS in 2012, with the infamous Health and Social Care Act. "I get where people are coming from and I don't want to be dismissive" of the so-called deliberate neglect theory, said Siva Anandaciva, chief analyst at the King's Fund. "But when I talk to people in government, this is not their intention; their intention is, 'How on Earth do you get a grip on what's going on and try to stabilise things before improving them?'" Recent policy and legislation runs counter to the theory too, he noted. For example, the Health and Care Act of 2022 actually makes it easier for the NHS not to re-tender contracts, relaxing competition within the service.

There is also public opinion to consider. While satisfaction with the health service has plummeted, support for the model – and core principles – of the NHS is overwhelmingly strong. The British public believes more money should be spent on the NHS, and wants it kept universal and free at the point of use. Conservatives know this, which is why Boris Johnson as prime minister was willing to risk the wrath of backbenchers to raise taxes to their highest point since the Fifties to fund it. George Osborne, the axe-wielding chancellor, never cut the health budget (though it grew at a slower rate than before). Even Margaret Thatcher, who sold off so many public assets, didn't dare touch the NHS. "If you are going to run it down, you probably wouldn't do what the government has been doing, which is repeatedly giving the current model money," said Anandaciva. "It may not feel like it, but the NHS budget has grown substantially compared to other government departments."

It is also unlikely, fewer than two years away from an election, that Rishi Sunak wants his legacy to be the desecration of Britain's "national religion". There aren't votes in it, and creating an entire new health industry model would take years – time he doesn't have. There is no agreement on what an alternative model would be, anyway. When UK politicians talk about NHS "reform", it's usually a way to say they want to improve the service without extra funding commitments – not a concrete plan for a new system. "Even if you did have a clear idea of what your end state was, and it was a different model to the NHS," said Anandaciva, "I don't think anyone in power or government would follow this process to get there: breaking something, and then providing something else."

Even private healthcare providers do not want a fully privatised healthcare system, at least not at the moment. In the UK, private health is not a standalone, hermetically-sealed industry. It shares staff and resources with the NHS, and there is a limit to what it can do on its own. It is more set up for hips, teeth, eyes and ears than ambulances and emergency departments. "When I talk to private providers, none of them are saying 'give us critical care, give us A&E services, we'll do emergency patient transport at the same time'," according to Anandaciva. "That's not the game they're interested in."

The reality, then, is perhaps scarier than the "deliberate neglect" strategy: an abandoned building, which even its wannabe renovators have fled. Having failed to fix the NHS, they have no clue what happens next.

Affirmative Action Has Become a Strange Monster
Ross DOUTHAT
29 October 2022, *The New York Times*

When the Supreme Court first ruled that universities could consider race in their admissions process, in 1978's Regents of the University of California v. Bakke, the nine justices wrote six opinions between them. The court's divisions were suggestive of an enduring uncertainty in the debate about affirmative action, which will return to the Supreme Court in oral arguments next week: Even among its supporters there isn't always a consensus over what affirmation action is *for*.

First, affirmative action might be a form of reparations, redress for African Americans after the centuries in which they were enslaved and then denied the equal protection of the law. This is the implication of Lyndon Johnson's famous Howard University address, in which he described the unfairness of freeing a person "hobbled by chains" for years and telling them "you are free to compete with all the others" without providing redress. It's the clearest moral case for affirmative action — that the multigenerational consequences of slavery and Jim Crow require an exception, for some period of time, to official principles of nondiscrimination.

But this simple case has difficulties. It conflicts with the most straightforward reading of the Civil Rights Act. It makes affirmative action a policy with a relatively narrow constituency. It suggests to young, ambitious African Americans that they need liberal paternalism to succeed. And it implies an eventual sunset date, since with every succeeding generation of beneficiaries Johnson's logic becomes less compelling.

To answer these difficulties, a different theory enters: Instead of a case for reparations, tied explicitly to slavery and segregation, it depicts a generalized racial diversity as an educational necessity, essential to a mind-opening campus experience, and therefore something admissions offices must be able to consider.

This is the theory put forward by the author of the Bakke ruling, Lewis Powell. It was upheld by Sandra Day O'Connor in 2003's Grutter v. Bollinger. It has been embraced by universities as an organizing concept, a mantra, a vision of the highest academic good.

And for understandable reasons. The diversity argument reduced affirmative action's tension with the letter of the law. It created a larger constituency for the policy, since any underrepresented minority could theoretically benefit. It blurred the policy's impact, so that African American students wouldn't feel singled out for condescension. And it didn't necessarily imply a sunset, despite O'Connor's stated hope that one would arrive by 2028: So long as racial disparities persist and diversity remains essential, the policy could still hold up.

Meanwhile, from the perspective of the university's self-interest, racial diversity promised to be a legitimizing force for meritocracy. By ensuring adequate representation from every major ethnic group, elite schools were relieved of the fear that if their graduating classes didn't look like a changing America, at some point America might look elsewhere for a ruling class.

But that emphasis on how graduates *look* points to what became a key problem with this approach, which is that after decades of diversity talk, everyone can see that elite student bodies are as stratified and set-apart as ever — conspicuously lacking in diversity of class, ideology and thought. And with the reparations argument set aside, the general quest for racial diversity doesn't obviously answer the problem that Lyndon Johnson identified, since a scion of the Nigerian upper class might be its beneficiary instead of a descendant of American slaves.

All this helps explain why so much cynicism attaches to academic diversity rhetoric; it's one reason why affirmative action is consistently politically unpopular.

But it's taken the claim that universities have ended up discriminating *against* some minority applicants, against Asian Americans specifically, to push the system into crisis.

The Asian American case has split affirmative action's pan-ethnic constituency — at a certain point all minorities don't benefit from engineered diversity, it turns out. It has publicized the specific numbers, the stark advantages and disadvantages for different racial or ethnic groups, behind the euphemistic language of "considering" race. And by bringing up the memory of the Ivy League's Jewish quotas, it's emphasized academia's habit of self-interested discrimination, its recurring fear that having *too many* of a certain group will ruin the brand, the optics, the image.

Over time, I've become more sympathetic to the initial argument in this column, the idea that slavery's impact runs deep enough to justify some continued reparation, whether or not affirmative action is the best means.

But the question before us is not just whether an admissions preference for African Americans should continue. The system the Supreme Court will pass judgment on has become a strange monster of elite self-interest and self-regard, stained by seeming anti-Asian bigotry and shot through with unsustainable tensions. Whatever comes next, it probably deserves to fall.

Ron DeSantis Likes His Culture Wars for a Reason
Jamelle BOUIE
24 January 2023, *The New York Times*

Here's a question: What does Gov. Ron DeSantis of Florida think about Medicare? Medicaid? Social Security? The Affordable Care Act?

DeSantis has built his national political image on well-timed and strategically chosen battles. First it was opposition to Covid mitigation strategies and vaccine mandates. Then it was open hostility toward L.G.B. (and especially) T. Floridians and anything and anyone deemed woke. Now it is an escalation of both moves, aimed at seizing the right flank in the Republican presidential contest, which has already begun to move away from behind-the-scenes jockeying to open competition between rivals.

DeSantis says he wants to ban vaccine mandates and restrict mask rules and make Florida a safe haven from what he calls a "biomedical security state." He also wants state universities to provide the number and ages of students who have sought or received treatment for gender dysphoria, which critics argue is the governor's first step toward banning those services. And his Department of Education has already rejected an Advanced Placement pilot course covering African American studies on the grounds that it is a tool for political indoctrination. "As submitted, the course is a vehicle for a political agenda and leaves large, ambiguous gaps that can be filled with additional ideological material, which we will not allow," Bryan Griffin, DeSantis's press secretary, said.

By no means is any of this trivial or unimportant. Florida is the third-most-populous state. To launch a war on vaccines or use state power to harass transgender students is to make life difficult, even dangerous, for thousands of people.

And yet there is a reason DeSantis has made these issues, and virtually nothing else, the platform from which he hopes to build national power. By leaning into high-profile battles as a culture warrior par excellence for the most reactionary segment of the American public — last year, to give another example, he picked a fight with the Disney corporation — DeSantis has made himself the hero of conservative elites and the bête noire of liberals and Democrats without so much as mentioning his radical and unpopular views on social insurance and the welfare state.

As a congressman, serving three terms from 2013 to 2018 (when he ran for governor), DeSantis was one of the founders of the House Freedom Caucus, the most hard-line and conservative faction in the House Republican conference, now in the spotlight because of its leadership battle with Speaker Kevin McCarthy and its driving role in using the debt ceiling to force spending cuts on an unsuspecting public.

DeSantis was an especially fierce opponent of so-called entitlements and other forms of federal aid. He helped lead the effort to shut down the government over funding for the Affordable Care Act in 2013 and the same year voted to pass a budget resolution that would have cut more than $250 billion from Social Security and Medicare over a decade. In 2017, like most other Republicans, he voted to repeal the Affordable Care Act and to cut taxes on corporations, high earners and wealthy heirs.

DeSantis believes, according to his 2011 book, "Dreams from Our Founding Fathers: First Principles in the Age of Obama," that the framers of the Constitution "strived to construct a system of government that prevented government-mandated wealth redistribution." Turning his attention to the Affordable Care Act and the federal bureaucracy, DeSantis condemns both as "administrative despotism" that have exerted "stifling constraints on the whole of society." And while he doesn't take direct aim at the New Deal and its offspring — the whole book is framed as an attack on the Obama administration — his arguments against redistributive policy should apply as much to Social Security as they do to Obamacare. It is not for nothing that Florida is one of 11 states that has not adopted the Medicaid expansion.

Yes, as governor of Florida, DeSantis has eagerly used a windfall of Covid relief funds to strengthen his political position in the state, with bonuses for emergency medical workers and new money for environmental protection. But that does not mean he has changed his thinking on these larger questions of federal spending.

The upshot of all this is that DeSantis's opponents should, as much as possible, refuse to play his game. You don't have to confront him on his terrain. You could instead force him to acknowledge or account for his other, more unpopular political commitments. Interestingly, this is the approach that Donald Trump might take to rebuff DeSantis in a Republican primary contest. "One area in which Trump and his allies smell that kind of weakness in DeSantis is on Social Security," Rolling Stone reports. Trump, it should be said, used this strategy to great success against his Republican opponents in 2016.

It might be too much to ask liberals and Democrats to take a lesson from the former president, but here they should. The best way to neutralize DeSantis as a political force might be to spend less time on cultural conflict and more time making the clear case that if given the chance, he would slash what's left of the safety net and use the proceeds to help the rich stay rich.

Our New Promethean Moment
Thomas FRIEDMAN
21 March 2023, *The New York Times*

I had a most remarkable but unsettling experience last week. Craig Mundie, the former chief research and strategy officer for Microsoft, was giving me a demonstration of GPT-4, the most advanced version of the artificial intelligence chatbot ChatGPT, developed by OpenAI and launched in November. Craig was preparing to brief the board of my wife's museum, Planet Word, of which he is a member, about the effect ChatGPT will have on words, language and innovation.

"You need to understand," Craig warned me before he started his demo, "this is going to change *everything* about how we do *everything*. I think that it represents mankind's greatest invention to date. It is qualitatively different — and it will be transformational."

Large language modules like ChatGPT will steadily increase in their capabilities, Craig added, and take us "toward a form of artificial general intelligence," delivering efficiencies in operations, ideas, discoveries and insights "that have never been attainable before across every domain."

Then he did a demonstration. And I realized Craig's words were an understatement.

First, he asked GPT-4 — for which Craig was a selected advanced tester and which was just released to the public — to summarize Planet Word and its mission in 400 words. It did so perfectly — in a few seconds.

Then he asked it to do the same in 200 words. Another few seconds.

Then he asked it to do the same in Arabic. Just as quickly. Then in Mandarin. Two more seconds. Then in English again — but in the form of a Shakespearean sonnet. A few more seconds.

Then Craig asked GPT-4 to write the same description in an abecedarian verse — where the first line begins with the letter A, the second with B and so on through the alphabet. It did it with stunning creativity, beginning:

Alluring in Washington, is a museum so grand,
Built to teach, inspire, and help us understand.
Curious minds Planet flock to Word's embrace,
Delving into language and its intricate grace
Every exhibit here has a story to tell,
From the origins of speech to the art of the quill.
And so on, through Z.

I could barely sleep that night. To observe an A.I. system — its software, microchips and connectivity — produce that level of originality in multiple languages in just seconds each time, well, the first thing that came to mind was the observation by the science fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke that "any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic."

The second thing that came to mind was a moment at the start of "The Wizard of Oz" — the tornado scene where everything and everyone are lifted into a swirling gyre, including Dorothy and Toto, and then swept away from mundane, black and white Kansas to the gleaming futuristic Land of Oz, where everything is in color.

We are about to be hit by such a tornado. This is a Promethean moment we've entered — one of those moments in history when certain new tools, ways of thinking or energy sources are introduced that are such a departure and advance on what existed before that you can't just change one thing, you have to change everything. That is, how you create, how you compete, how you collaborate, how you work, how you learn, how you govern and, yes, how you cheat, commit crimes and fight wars.

We know the key Promethean eras of the last 600 years: the invention of the printing press, the scientific revolution, the agricultural revolution combined with the industrial revolution, the nuclear power revolution, personal computing and the internet and … now this moment.

Only this Promethean moment is not driven by a single invention, like a printing press or a steam engine, but rather by a technology super-cycle. It is our ability to sense, digitize, process, learn, share and act, all increasingly with the help of A.I. That loop is being put into everything — from your car to your fridge to your smartphone to fighter jets — and it's driving more and more processes every day.

It's why I call our Promethean era "The Age of Acceleration, Amplification and Democratization." Never have more humans had access to more cheap tools that amplify their power at a steadily accelerating rate — while being diffused into the personal and working lives of more and more people all at once. And it's happening faster than most anyone anticipated.

The potential to use these tools to solve seemingly impossible problems — from human biology to fusion energy to climate change — is awe-inspiring. [...]

From Apollo to Artemis: 50 years on, is it time to go back to the moon?
Robin McKie
20 November 2022, *The Observer*

In a few weeks, Nasa will celebrate a remarkable anniversary. Fifty years ago the last astronauts to visit the moon returned to Earth, leaving behind the final tell-tale signs that our species had once visited another world. For three days in December 1972, Apollo 17 crewmen Gene Cernan and Harrison "Jack" Schmitt explored the moon's Taurus-Littrow valley, travelling over 30 kilometres in their lunar rover while collecting more than 100kg of rocks for return to Earth.

Then, on 14 December, geologist Schmitt returned to the mission's lunar lander while Cernan gave a brief speech that was broadcast to Earth. "We shall return, with peace and hope for all mankind," he pledged. Then Cernan closed the spaceship's hatch and after adjusting the controls, placed his hand on the ship's yellow ignition button and uttered the last words that a human would speak on the moon for the rest of the 20th century: "Okay, Jack, let's get this mutha outta here."

Their lander, Challenger, soared into lunar orbit and docked with the mission's command ship, America. As Apollo 17 began its journey home, the astronauts held a televised press conference. It was not a global success. "Apparently we were already yesterday's news because the networks didn't find time to put us on the air," recalled Cernan. Thus humanity turned its back on the last moonwalkers before they had even made it back to their home planet.

The world had been transfixed by Apollo 11 three years earlier. But after a series of further manned moon missions, boredom set in. Apollo 18, 19 and 20 were cancelled and Apollo 17 was decreed to be the last mission – although it seems this detail had slipped the US public's attention by the time launch date arrived. When CBS cut its drama series *Medical Center* to show Apollo 17's launch on 7 December, 1972, the network was bombarded with complaints while NBC – instead of showing Cernan's final moon steps seven days later – chose to broadcast a repeat of the Johnny Carson show.

It was a humiliating end for the Apollo programme. For his part, Cernan – who died in 2017 – was bitter at this rejection by the public and fierce in expressing his disappointment that he had become the last person to walk on the moon. "It is a very dubious honour," he told the *Observer* in 2002. "It tells us how much we have not done, rather than how much we have done."

So it is ironic that the anniversary of the Apollo 17 landing will coincide with a mission that is intended to herald the return of human beings to the moon – albeit half a century later. Launched last week, Artemis 1 blasted an un-crewed Orion capsule on a 25-day mission beyond the orbit of the moon. It is scheduled to return to the Earth on 11 December, the exact date, 50 years earlier, when the Apollo 17 astronauts landed on Taurus-Littrow. If all goes well, and Orion's systems perform as expected, a follow-up mission, Artemis 2, will put a crewed Orion capsule on course for a lunar fly-by in 2024 with Artemis 3 carrying out a crewed lunar landing the next year. According to this timetable humans will return to the moon after a gap of 53 years – though given the Artemis programme's already troubled history of delays, the interval could be even longer.

After these flights, further missions will be launched with the aim of establishing Lunar Gateway, a crewed space station that will orbit the moon, as well as a permanent scientific outpost on the surface. Work will also begin on sending humans to Mars from the Moon. In addition, Nasa – in collaboration with space agencies in Europe, Japan and Canada – will initiate a host of robotic flights launched by a patchwork of nations and private companies. Missions will include landers and orbiters that will survey the moon for signs of water, mineral deposits and other features that will help prepare for future long duration missions.

These will include the Lunar Polar Exploration Mission, a robot spacecraft – designed jointly by the Indian and Japanese space agencies – which will drop a lunar rover that will explore the south pole region of the moon next year. In addition, Russia is planning a lunar return after a gap of 46 years with its Luna 25 mission which will investigate the composition of lunar soil.

Suddenly, everyone is going to the moon – though this grand return is not without controversy. Should we be placing heavy emphasis on putting humans on the moon? If so, how can we justify the heavy costs of lunar colonisation? Should we instead rely on robots to exploit its resources? And what role should private enterprise have in sending humans into space? These questions reveal major divides among scientists. [...]

Diana, Meghan and the tabloid press: Harry finally gets his day in court

Andrew Anthony

The Observer, 4 June, 2023

The Duke of Sussex is due to give evidence at the high court in London on Tuesday in a joint case he, and many other alleged victims of historic phone hacking, have brought against Mirror Group Newspapers. It is believed to be the first appearance in the witness box of a senior royal since the 19th century, although in 2002 the Princess Royal pleaded guilty to a charge under the Dangerous Dogs Act, after two children were bitten in Windsor Great Park – by her dog, it should be made clear.

One of the problems is that the British legal system is run in the name of the crown, which is potentially awkward, at least in terms of maintaining the appearance of neutrality. For instance, the MGN trial is being held in the King's Bench division of the high court, which to Prince Harry is a bit like saying "Pa's bench", and features a number of king's counsels on both sides of the dispute. So Harry will be making history as well as waves when he gives evidence. While there is much speculation about what exactly he might say, it's a reasonably safe bet that the man who has described the British tabloid press as "the mothership of online trolling" won't be celebrating the high journalistic standards of red-top editors and reporters.

One media personality who has been tipped to receive an unflattering mention is Piers Morgan, editor of the Daily Mirror from 1995 to 2004, already named by Harry's lawyers as one of the senior executives who authorised obtaining private information unlawfully. Last month Morgan responded to the suggestion that he should apologise to Harry rather like an arsonist who, when asked to put out a blaze at firework factory, reaches for his flamethrower. He wasn't going to take lectures on privacy invasion, he explained, from "somebody who has spent the last three years ruthlessly and cynically invading the royal family's privacy for vast commercial gain".

The question was raised because MGN had opened the high court trial by apologising "unreservedly" to the duke for one instance of unlawful information gathering. Alas, it's in regard to all the other alleged incidences of unlawful information gathering that Harry seeks justice. His team cited 148 articles as evidence, but only 33 are included in the trial. The Mirror Group's barrister, Andrew Green KC, says the publisher denies 28 of them, and has "not admitted" to the other five – that distinction may seem obscure to the layperson, but it's on these subtly arcane points that front-rank lawyers earn their handsome remuneration. Similarly MGN's legal team maintains that there is "no evidence, or no sufficient evidence, of voicemail interception" in any of the cases in the trial.

Harry is one of four representative claimants who have been selected from a large group of mostly celebrities with claims against MGN – the other three claimants in court are Coronation Street actors Nikki Sanderson and Michael Turner (known professionally as Michael Le Vell), and comedian Paul Whitehouse's ex-wife, Fiona Wightman, none of whom have been the subject of an Oprah television special. […]

The rogue prince is not only taking on MGN, but also has lawsuits against Associated Newspapers, publishers of the Daily Mail and Mail on Sunday, and against News Group Newspapers (NGN), publishers of the Sun and the News of the World, the latter of which was closed in 2011 as a result of the phone-hacking scandal. Royals, celebrities and indeed just about everyone else who has been offered a settlement tend to avoid trials. Court is expensive and unpredictable, and it's estimated that NGN's phone-hacking costs up until last year were running at more than £1.2bn, of which a significant chunk has gone on paying off claimants (and thus keeping them out of the witness box). That's NGN, not MGN – just distinguishing between the various different, but very similar, sets of publishing initials is enough to sap your NRG.

With all due respect to Michael Turner and Fiona Wightman, their courtroom testaments are unlikely to travel around the globe. But Tuesday's arrival of the prince-on-a-mission has all the makings of a gripping scene that could perhaps form the centrepiece of any future film dramatisation of this shadowy and rather sordid story. For the sake of acronymic consistency, such a film ought to be produced by MGM.

How will Harry perform under forensic cross-examination? Mr Green will certainly make for a much more challenging inquisitor than Oprah Winfrey or Tom Bradby. Yet in a sense, this is the moment that Harry, who says it's his "life's work to change the British media landscape", has been waiting for – his day in court, his reckoning with the industry that he blames for the death of his mother and demonising of his wife. One senses that his memoir, Netflix series and various TV interviews have not fully exorcised the demons from the duke's tormented psyche. An excess of emotion, however, isn't necessarily an advantage in a courtroom setting. But he also possesses vital information.

Depending on how he performs and what he says, he could do a good deal of damage to the press, the royal family or himself – or, conceivably, all three.

Verdict? Hold the front page.

SNP leadership: Does Nicola Sturgeon deserve credit for eight years of SNP election wins? Don't be silly
Euan McColm
12 March 2023, ***The Scotsman***

While the candidates to succeed her as First Minister trash the record of her Government, Nicola Sturgeon has been keen to remind us of her great achievements. The departing SNP leader can't open her mouth, these days, without telling us about the eight elections she's won. Sturgeon trotted out this statistic during her resignation speech and she did so again, during First Minister's Question Time on Thursday. After Scottish Tory leader Douglas Ross quoted Finance Secretary Kate Forbes's brutal attack - made during a televised leadership debate on STV - on the record of Health Secretary Humza Yousaf, Sturgeon declared the only verdict on her government that really mattered was the verdict of the people it served - the people of Scotland. That verdict has been pretty clear, she added, with eight election victories under her leadership.

And it's impossible to argue with the facts. Sturgeon has led her party through a series of victories in elections to Westminster, Holyrood, and Scotland's local councils. However, has she achieved this record because of her gifts as a wise head of government? Don't be silly. Nicola Sturgeon led her party to a string of victories despite her lack of delivery. She is not a proven winner because she made Scotland a better place but because she told her followers that any shortcomings were the fault of others. This is how nationalism works.

Almost half of Scottish voters, having been seduced by the story of a Scotland held back by Westminster, have spent the past eight years giving Sturgeon a by on the inadequacies of her administration. How else are we to explain, for example, the remarkable case of Joe Fitzpatrick, the former public health minister sacked for his inability to get a grip on Scotland's shocking record-breaking drug deaths who was re-elected in Dundee with the largest majority in Holyrood? How else are we to make sense of the fact that - after being Scotland worst Transport Minister, Justice Secretary, and Health Secretary - Humza Yousaf is now a serious candidate to become First Minister? How else are we to square Sturgeon's electoral success with her demand that voters judge her on her stewardship of Scotland's education system, which remains in crisis?

Nationalism, like any faith, requires adherents to make certain sacrifices. Thus, failing schools and an NHS in crisis may be endured because what really matters is breaking the Union. Anyone who dares suggest that, actually, the Scottish Government could be doing a lot more with the extensive powers at its disposal, is impure. God help the apostate who dares raise a note of doubt. Sturgeon may comfort herself with the bedtime story that she has spent eight years enjoying the support of "the people of Scotland" but, really, she has used that time to further divide those people and secure her position thanks to the blind faith of a minority.

The SNP leadership contest throws up questions for some of those who have backed Sturgeon over recent years. Of course, for the unashamed blood-and-soil nationalist, it makes no difference who leads the SNP. To them, England will always be the great enemy and they imagine themselves freedom fighters, driven to liberate their nation. But there are others - the "I'm not a nationalist" nationalists, seduced by romantic talk of a fairer, more compassionate Scotland - who have bought into the idea that Sturgeon is a progressive social democrat rather than a cynical populist. These voters are blind to the similarities between their political logic and that displayed by Brexiteers. The Eurosceptic's talk of taking back control is malign and reckless while their identical rhetoric is wise and kind. But both offer simplistic solutions to complex problems; just press this big red button and the future will be bright. […]

Believing there is no alternative to the SNP requires one to ignore the disaster of almost 16 years of nationalist government. Since 2007, the SNP has prioritised constitutional division before everything else. The party has failed to take on essential reform in education and health, presided over catastrophic projects (unfinished ferries, new hospitals riddled with problems), and - under Sturgeon - displayed a reckless lack of interest in supporting business.

Is there really no credible alternative? I hold no brief for any party (I've always been in the business of kicking the shins of whoever holds power) but can anyone really argue that Humza Yousaf is a smarter politician than Labour's shadow health secretary Jackie Baillie? Can anyone who watches the business of Holyrood truly believe Education Secretary Shirley-Anne Somerville is a more impressive individual than her Labour shadow Michael Marra? And there are - whisper it - Tory MSPs, too, who make members of the SNP cabinet look every inch the mediocrities they are. Take Murdo Fraser, for example, or the recently elected Russell Findlay. These are serious, credible thinkers whose presence at Holyrood makes laughable the idea that the SNP has all the talent. As she tours the country for a valedictory round of selfies with voters, Nicola Sturgeon is bound to repeat the story of her electoral successes. Whether she deserved a single one of them is not at all clear.

Suella Braverman says 'enough is enough' as she unveils crack down on illegal migration

Charles Hymas, Home Affairs Editor, Dan Martin

7 March 2023

The Telegraph

Suella Braverman has vowed tough new laws to combat illegal immigration will send a message to Channel migrants: “Do not get into that flimsy dinghy.” In a Commons statement, the Home Secretary said the new Illegal Immigration Bill would place a duty on her to remove migrants who arrived illegally and “radically narrow” the number of human rights, asylum or modern slavery challenges and appeals that could suspend their deportation. She told MPs that deterrence was the key theme running through the measures. “We want to send the message loudly and clearly to those people smugglers, to those people thinking about crossing the channel: Do not do it,” she said. “Do not hand over your life savings, do not get into that flimsy dinghy, do not risk your life, because you will not be entitled to a life in the UK."

Mrs Braverman denied that it was “bigoted” or “racist” to take a tough approach to illegal migration abusing the UK’s asylum system, adding that it would be a “betrayal” not to tackle the “waves of illegal migrants breaching our border”. She said Britain had been “taken for a ride” by asylum seekers and that existing asylum laws were not “fit for purpose” to deal with “flagrant” breaches of the law by those crossing the English Channel.

The Bill will enable any illegal arrivals to be detained without bail or judicial review for at least 28 days until they can be removed either to their home country or to a third safe country such as Rwanda where they can claim asylum. Only unaccompanied children or migrants who were unfit to fly, or who would be at risk of serious and irreversible harm, will be able to delay their removal. Once migrants are removed they will have no right to return to the UK ever again, or to claim citizenship or settlement. The Government will take powers to disapply the Human Rights Act to prevent courts blocking removals of illegal migrants and will draw up proposals that could allow it to ignore injunctions by the European Court of Human Rights which blocked the first deportation flight to Rwanda.

Mrs Braverman said the Bill would also disqualify illegal entrants from using modern slavery rules to prevent their removal, amid claims the law was being abused to block deportations. She acknowledged that these tough measures meant the Bill might not be compatible with the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), raising the prospect of legal challenges. But the Home Secretary said the UK would always seek to uphold international law. “I am confident that this Bill is compatible with international obligations," she said.

She also said that there would be a cap on the number of refugees that Britain would take each year and new safe and legal routes. "The British people are famously a fair and patient people, but their sense of fair play has been tested beyond its limits and they see the country taken for a ride,” she told MPs. "Their patience has run out. The law-abiding, patriotic majority have said enough is enough, this cannot and will not continue. Their Government, this Government, must act decisively, must act with determination, must act with compassion, must act with proportion. "So, make no mistake, this Conservative Government, this Conservative Prime Minister, will act now to stop the boats.”

Yvette Cooper, Labour's shadow home secretary, branded the Bill a "con" and described the plans as "Groundhog Day" as campaigners said the proposed policy would be unworkable. 'Labour would prefer to write letters' But Mrs Braverman accused Sir Keir Starmer, the Labour leader, of wrongly thinking “it's bigoted to say that we've got too much illegal migration abusing our system. “It's because Labour MPs would prefer to write letters stopping the removal of foreign national offenders, it's because the Labour Party would prefer to vote against our measures to penalise foreign national offenders, to streamline our asylum system. “Labour are against deterring people who would come here illegally. They are against detaining people who do come here illegally. And they are against deporting people who are here illegally. "That means they are for this situation getting worse and worse. Perhaps that's fine for the Leader of the Opposition and most of the Labour frontbench, but it's not their schools, it's not their GPs, it's not their public services, housing and hotels filling up with illegal migrants.”

In response to Labour MP Khalid Mahmood saying she was trying to hold on to Red Wall seats by deploying "xenophobia and racism", Mrs Braverman said: "It is irresponsible to suggest that someone who wants to control our borders, someone who wants to say that the numbers are out of control and we need a firm line – a compassionate line, but a firm line on migration – is racist. That is irresponsible, it is wrong and it shouldn’t be put forward.” Rishi Sunak has made stopping the boats one of his five key priorities for 2023. He will join President Emmanuel Macron at a bilateral summit in Paris on Friday in an effort to secure a “substantial” increase in officers and surveillance equipment to prevent migrants leaving the French beaches.

Tories must stop tearing themselves apart

10 June 2023, ***The Telegraph***

Whatever lies ahead for Mr Johnson now that he is leaving Parliament, his place in history is secure. He is the Prime Minister who made Brexit happen. He put Britain at the forefront of support for Ukraine in its moment of crisis. Crucially, he has been a trailblazing – if often controversial – Conservative leader. His career in elected office proved Toryism could still offer a uniting, aspirational message, and reach parts of the country written off by less gifted politicians.

Among the many good things he achieved, seeing off the threat of Jeremy Corbyn as Prime Minister will always deserve the nation's gratitude. For all the economic threats and geopolitical challenges the United Kingdom now faces, things would have been immeasurably worse, at home and abroad, under the socialist impulses of a Corbynite administration. He also spoke up for the City when he was Mayor of London at a time when other Tories had resorted to anti-capitalist demagogy.

Brexit, however, will always define Johnson's legacy, and rightly so. His decision to spearhead the campaign to leave the EU helped secure its narrow victory margin. As Prime Minister, he then pushed an exit deal over the line where Theresa May had failed three times, despite an astonishing Remain alliance determined to cancel the results of the referendum. Many people contributed to achieving Brexit, but it is fair to say that without Mr Johnson's help, it might never have become a political reality.

It is a shame, therefore, that his career is ending, "at least for now", in such a sorry way. Irreconcilable Remainers aside, those in his party who celebrate his demise are being tragically short-sighted. Despite his many flaws, when it comes to the ballot box, Johnson was a man with the Midas touch. Winning two terms as Mayor of London, in a city seen by many as a no-go area for Tory hopefuls, was a remarkable achievement. He then wooed a very different audience in 2019, leading the Conservatives to a startling victory, one that left them with the biggest majority since Margaret Thatcher. Too many of those rejoicing on his premature departure from frontline politics have forgotten this crucial point.

Yet in office, and with Brexit secure, Johnson's touch seemed almost immediately to desert him. Taking the vital next step and making a success of Brexit, by seizing its opportunities, proved a challenge too far. He signed up to HS2 and massive spending increases. Waylaid by the global catastrophe of Covid, he was overly influenced by pro-lockdown forecasters and the example of other, more authoritarian countries, and ended up ruining the economy. His huge majority was squandered, the disastrous Whitehall bureaucracy left unreformed, and he spent too much time chasing Net Zero and a form of environmentalism at odds with his pro-progress, pro-growth positions. Delivering for the new coalition of voters he had pioneered remains a work in progress.

No doubt part of the problem was Mr Johnson's own personality, more suited to the poetry of the campaign trail than the dull prose of daily government. Yet there can be no doubt that he also suffered from the burning resentment of the Remain establishment. The technocrats who saw Brexit as a populist uprising against all good sense blamed Johnson as its mastermind. The idea lingered that by purging one man from the body politic they could somehow return to the status quo ante.

Now he is leaving Parliament, many question marks remain over the process that led to Johnson's ousting. The behaviour by some in Number 10 during the Covid pandemic was shocking. It has rightly infuriated many of those who followed the rules themselves, often at tremendous personal cost. It was therefore essential that the investigation into his conduct by the Privileges Committee was not only impartial, but seen to be impartial. In that latter point, it seems to have failed.

As Jeremy Brier KC points out in these pages, in a quasi-judicial setting, there should not be any reasonable suspicion by a fair-minded and informed person that the judges were not impartial. Yet while the committee had a Tory majority, it was one made up of MPs sharply critical of Boris. The former chairman Chris Bryant recused himself for having made public comments pre-judging the case. But he was then replaced by Harriet Harman, who reports suggest had also tweeted about Partygate.

Nevertheless, as things stand the Conservative party appears to be heading for an electoral nightmare. Recent polls suggest a Labour landslide could be on the cards. Some Conservatives believe a spell in opposition would be good for them. Yet that attitude is a dereliction of duty to the country. There is a great ideological battle raging for the heart of the nation. At stake are not just the usual, vital questions of economic responsibility but also those of national identity – including the ability to name our history and heroes without apology – and even of biological reality. […] The party must stop tearing itself apart and focus on what matters.

Rewilding queen: 'There's been a huge pushback against nature — it's lunacy'

Adam Vaughan, Environment Editor

15 October 2022, ***The Times***

Lady Burrell fears that a decade's progress is being lost. […] Isabella Tree, as she is better known to readers of *Wilding*, her award-winning account of how she transformed the Knepp estate in West Sussex into the poster child of UK rewilding projects, says that the country's nature is broken. "Here, you see what the country can and should hold, and the amazing life that pulls back in given half a chance. Then you go outside the Knepp bubble and there's nothing there," she says, drinking a cup of tea at her country estate. "We're losing our soils, our rivers are more polluted than they've been for years. We're still the dirty man of Europe, as we were when we entered the EU. There's tiny little success stories, tiny little glimmers of hope. But it's still heartbreaking, how broken our land is."

Her account of a denuded natural world is not merely anecdotal. Research shows that 41 per cent of species have endured a decline in numbers since 1970, while 15 per cent have become extinct. Once-common species such as hedgehogs are increasingly rare. Had she been speaking a year ago, Tree says that she would have been more optimistic. However, decisions by the government under Liz Truss, from a review of green farming subsidies to the scrapping of retained EU laws such as habitats regulations, cause deep concern. "There is a huge pushback against the environment and nature," she says. "It's absolute madness. I don't understand it. We've had clever, experienced, knowledgeable people working on this for a decade, and just to tear it all up overnight seems lunacy." These moments of despair are the exception to the author, journalist and conservationist's typically sunny demeanour. Despite short-term setbacks she says that there has been huge progress on the issue of handing over more land to nature, as she and her husband, Sir Charles Burrell, did when they stopped farming at Knepp two decades ago.

"When we first started this project, the R word was such a dirty word that we decided not to call the book Rewilding. There was confusion over what it meant." She says that the initial backlash to letting hedges grow wild at Knepp and transforming a "traditional" patchwork landscape of fields was difficult. The couple received "a lot of Yours sincerely, Disgusted" letters and had people lobbying MPs and the government to stop them. "It's difficult when you're standing your ground. But we've found that, in the end, the evidence speaks for itself," she says. One letter writer recently wrote again to apologise, acknowledging that the new Knepp had a different type of beauty.

Today, the estate is home to turtle doves for the first time, providing a refuge for a species whose numbers have declined 93 per cent since 1970. Nightingales have been recorded since Knepp's transformation and this year a species of butterfly considered to have been lost in Britain — the large tortoiseshell — was found breeding there. The revival has attracted research studies including into the number of dung beetles and the live-streaming of a soundscape of wildlife. Rewilding has turned around the finances of the Burrells, who were in debt when farming the unproductive clay land here. The estate is now profitable due to income from wildlife "safaris" and camping, government countryside stewardship payments for environmental improvements and small businesses paying to use farm buildings. "It is about money," says Tree. "You can't do it altruistically. There's no point being romantic about it. We couldn't do it unless it was financially viable."

At a national level, she claims that rewilding has "gone mainstream", citing Boris Johnson's last conference speech in which he promised to "rewild parts of the countryside" and his quip to "build back beaver", along with Michael Gove releasing beavers in the Forest of Dean. Bison released in Kent this year are already engineering the landscape. Books such as her own and George Monbiot's *Feral* in 2013, plus the creation of the Rewilding Britain charity in 2015, have shifted attitudes. "It is astonishing. I'd like to think that the direction of travel is there," says Tree, 58.

She believes that the next step is to move from islands of nature such as Knepp to linked-up "corridors" that would allow species to safely navigate roads and other human-made barriers. A government-commissioned review recommended exactly that 12 years ago, but there has been little progress. Tree's answer is to back a scheme to create a local wildlife corridor stretching from Ashdown Forest to the English Channel, encompassing her estate along the route.

The other task consuming her now is meeting deadlines for a 500-page book due to be released next year, a response to people asking how they can emulate her rewilding success. "I'm trying to tame a monster that seems bent on rewilding itself," she says of the *Book of Wilding* – a practical guide to rewilding big and small. She insists that it applies to urbanites too, giving the example of a friend in Bristol who has worked with neighbours to change fences to allow hedgehogs to pass between gardens. Tree is self-effacing but admits to sometimes being impatient and demanding. "I just feel as if there's so little time, and things have got to get done. I'm a total insomniac because of it," she says.

An Assault on the Right to Protest
Catherine Baksi, 17 November 2022, ***The Times***

Measures to crack down on disruptive protests by environmental campaigners are likely to backfire and encourage those opposing government policies, critics warn. Thousands have been arrested and prosecuted for taking part in the activities of Extinction Rebellion, Insulate Britain and Just Stop Oil, who have blocked roads, climbed bridges and disrupted facilities such as fuel distribution networks and the press where newspapers including *The Times* are printed.

The Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act, which became law in April, gave police greater powers to restrict demonstrations and introduced the offence of "intentionally or recklessly causing public nuisance". Other proposed changes that were dropped after a massive government defeat in the House of Lords have been revived in the Public Order Bill, which is going through parliament now. Civil liberties lawyers say the proposals would have a chilling effect on freedom of speech and allow the government to become involved in shutting down protests. Tom Wainwright, a barrister at Garden Court Chambers, says the act and the bill "represent the most egregious legislative attack on the right to protest in modern times". Jules Carey, a partner at the law firm Bindmans, brands the government's "shameless attempt" to "mute dissent" a "full-frontal assault on hard-won rights to freedom of expression and right to protest".

One of the most controversial parts of the bill introduces the serious disruption prevention order, which if passed will allow the police to apply to a court to prevent people from attending a demonstration, even if they have never been convicted of protest-related offences. This can be monitored by an electronic tag. "Tagging people to ensure they don't attend demos is a sign of an authoritarian regime, not a mature democracy," says Raj Chada, a partner at Hodge Jones & Allen. These "protest banning orders", warns Tyrone Steele, a criminal lawyer at the law reform organisation Justice, could be imposed on people "with the most tangential connection to a protest, including journalists".

The bill creates offences of "locking on" when people attach themselves to one another or an immovable object and "being equipped for locking on", when people are found in possession of bike locks or superglue. Protesters face up to six months in jail for the former and an unlimited fine for the latter. It introduces the offence of "interference with key national infrastructure" such as airports, railways, printing presses and oil refineries, which carries a maximum penalty of 12 months' imprisonment. Tunnelling under infrastructure to cause damage will become a criminal offence, with a maximum penalty of three years in prison.

Police will be given powers to stop and search when they suspect that a person is carrying an object for use in a protest-related offence. And they will have the power to stop and search "without suspicion", authorised for a blanket area over a specified period. If passed, Carey says, the provisions will "inevitably lead to arbitrary and likely discriminatory deployment". The powers, Steel warns, could be used to target journalists and seize their reporting devices, stifling press freedom. Although officers will be expected to act proportionately and with respect for human rights, Wainwright says the "heavy-handed" tactics used at the vigil for Sarah Everard and recent anti-monarchy demonstrations show that does not always happen.

Secretaries of state will be able to apply for injunctions to prevent protests "likely to cause serious disruption to key national infrastructure or access to essential goods or services" or that could have "a serious adverse effect on public safety". The proposal would give police the power to arrest anyone they suspect of breaching the injunction. "Politicians should play no part in policing individual protests, picking and choosing for the purpose of political posturing," Wainwright says.

Lawyers argue that there is already legislation providing far-reaching powers for the policing of protests and to prevent violence, criminal damage and public disorder. Carey notes that in the case brought on behalf of the Green Party politician Baroness Jones of Moulsecoomb and others against the commissioner of the Metropolitan Police in relation to the 2019 Extinction Rebellion protests, London's most senior officer acknowledged that the police had sufficient powers.

Last week the sight of the journalist Charlotte Lynch, the documentarymaker Rich Felgate and the photographer Tom Bowles being arrested while observing the Just Stop Oil protests on the M25 caused widespread concern. The arrests prompted the civil rights groups Liberty and Big Brother Watch, and the National Union of Journalists to call on the government to rethink the bill. Carey, who is representing a journalist charged in relation to documenting a Just Stop Oi**l** protest, says the arrests show provisions in the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act are "already being misused". He argues that further "encroachment on protesters' behaviour is not lawful", as has been made clear by domestic courts and the European Court of Human Rights.

Chada claims that since the legislation came into force there has been a huge increase in charges. The courts, he says, will be dealing with cases from recent protests for the next six months. A Home Office spokeswoman says ministers wanted "to protect press freedoms and that's what our Public Order Bill and Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act do. Previously protesters have tried shutting down printing presses, which is completely unacceptable." 'Electronic tags are a sign of an authoritarian regime, not a democracy.'

Why George Santos's Lies Matter
Peggy NOONAN
31 December 2022, *The Wall Street Journal*

What do we learn from the George Santos story? Samuel Johnson observed that men more frequently need to be reminded than informed. The Santos story reminds us that the integrity with which we conduct our lives matters.

At first the lies of the newly elected congressman from Long Island, revealed in the New York Times, seemed comic. He sounded like Jon Lovitz's "Saturday Night Live" character Tommy Flanagan, a member of Pathological Liars Anonymous. "Then my cousin died—Joe Louis. And I took it hard, maybe too hard. I tried to kill myself. Yeah, I did kill myself. I was medically dead for a week and a half. And then it was a woman that brought me out of it—Indira Gandhi."

But as the story played out I realized Mr. Santos is Sam Bankman-Fried. He is Elizabeth Holmes. He is a 21st-century state-of-the-art fraudster—a stone cold liar who effectively committed election fraud, a calculating political actor who took advantage of voters' trust. He wasn't driven by inadequacy but entitlement. He's less Tommy Flanagan than Patricia Highsmith's Talented Mr. Ripley.

You can Google "Santos lies," though you're likely already familiar with them. He didn't attend the schools he claimed or work at the prestigious firms he said employed him, didn't own what he said he owned, do what he said he'd done. He said he was Jewish when he wasn't. He tweeted in July 2021 that "9/11 claimed my mother's life" and five months later that she died in December 2016.

The only good thing about what appears to be his reliably compulsive lying, the one good thing that would come of his being seated in the House, is this: When a vote is close and the conference ends and the congressmen spill out into the hall, the press gaggle will surround him and say, "Congressman Santos, who will you vote for?" And he'll say, "I'm a yes—I'll stand with Kevin," and reporters will know immediately that they can run through the halls screaming, "Santos is a no, McCarthy's margin is shrinking!" I admit this will contribute to the joy of nations.

It is interesting that most of his lies were tied up with money and status. He didn't go to just any high school, he went to the tony Horace Mann. The real estate he owned wasn't in Lodi, N.J., but Nantucket. He didn't work in some dreary insurance brokerage in Hempstead, N.Y., but at Goldman Sachs. This is all Tom Ripley territory, and it tells you what he values.

Mr. Santos's main answer to the accusations is what he told the New York Post: "My sins here are embellishing my résumé."

They appear to go beyond that. Where did he get the $700,000 he loaned his campaign? When he ran unsuccessfully in 2020, he disclosed no assets and claimed a salary of $55,000 from a development firm. In the years leading up to 2020 he hadn't been rising at Goldman; he'd reportedly been working at a call center in Queens. His 2022 filings, however, showed sudden wealth. He claimed he made between $3.5 million and $11.5 million at a company he founded in 2021. He told reporter Kadia Goba of Semafor that he did "deal building," with "high-net-worth individuals." If a client wanted to sell a plane or boat, Mr. Santos would go to his extensive Rolodex "and be like, 'Hey, are you looking for a plane?' " He claimed a network of about 15,000 people and "institutions." He quickly "landed a couple of million-dollar contracts." He didn't respond to Semafor's request for names of clients.

It is to the credit of Tulsi Gabbard, sitting in for Tucker Carlson on his show Tuesday night, that she didn't cover the Santos story as another act in the freak show of American politics. Grilling him in his first television interview since the accusations surfaced, she drilled straight down into meaning.

She asked what the word "integrity" means to him. Mr. Santos replied it was "very important" but suggested his lies were mere "embellishments." Ms. Gabbard pressed: The meaning of the word integrity "actually matters in practice." Mr. Santos said integrity "means to carry yourself in an honorable way," then said, "I made a mistake. . . . We all make mistakes." [...]

George Santos should step down, cooperate with all investigations and come clean about his past. Assuming that won't happen, his local party should disavow him and call for a special election. Republicans in the House should end their silence, formally oppose his entry and close their conference to him.

They have a close margin in the House and believe they can't afford to lose even one. But Mr. Santos will be the focus of investigations from day one and will be used to pummel the GOP each day for looking past his fraud. They can't afford to keep him. He is a bridge too far. He is an embarrassment.

The Climate Crusaders Are Coming for Electric Cars Too
Allysia FINLEY
13 February 2023, *The Wall Street Journal*

Replacing all gasoline-powered cars with electric vehicles won't be enough to prevent the world from overheating. So people will have to give up their cars. That's the alarming conclusion of a new report from the University of California, Davis and "a network of academics and policy experts" called the Climate and Community Project.

The report offers an honest look at the vast personal, environmental and economic sacrifices needed to meet the left's net-zero climate goals. Progressives' dirty little secret is that everyone will have to make do with much less—fewer cars, smaller houses and yards, and a significantly lower standard of living.

Problem No. 1: Electric-vehicle batteries require loads of minerals such as lithium, cobalt and nickel, which must be extracted from the ground like fossil fuels. "If today's demand for EVs is projected to 2050, the lithium requirements of the US EV market alone would require triple the amount of lithium currently produced for the entire global market," the report notes.

Unlike fossil fuels, these minerals are mostly found in undeveloped areas that have abundant natural fauna and are often inhabited by indigenous people. "Large-scale mining entails social and environmental harm, in many cases irreversibly damaging landscapes without the consent of affected communities," the report says. Mining can be done safely, but in poor countries it often isn't.

Problem No. 2: Mining requires huge amounts of energy and water, and the process of refining minerals requires even more. According to the report, mining accounts for 4% to 7% of global greenhouse-gas emissions. Auto makers have made a priority of manufacturing electric pick-up trucks and SUVs because drivers like them, but they require much bigger batteries and more minerals.

More mining to make more EVs will increase CO2 emissions. It will also destroy tropical forests and deserts that currently suck CO2 out of the atmosphere, the report says.

Problem No. 3: "Producing EVs and building and maintaining roads, highways, and parking lots are energy- and emissions-intensive processes with high levels of embodied carbon," the report says. "Electrification of the US transportation system will massively increase the demand for electricity while the transition to a decarbonized electricity grid is still underway."

The report concludes that the auto sector's "current dominant strategy," which involves replacing gasoline-powered vehicles with EVs without decreasing car ownership and use, "is likely incompatible" with climate activists' goal to keep the planet from warming by more than 1.5 degrees Celsius compared with preindustrial times. Instead, the report recommends government policies that promote walking, cycling and mass transit.

Governments, the report says, could reduce "financial subsidies for private vehicles," such as on-street and free parking. They could also impose charges on pickup trucks and SUVs (including electric ones) and build more bike lanes. Urbanites who suspect the expansion of bike lanes in their cities is intended to force people to stop driving aren't wrong.

But what about suburbanites who need cars to get around? Reducing "car dependency" will require "densifying low-density suburbs while allowing more people to live in existing high-density urban spaces," the report says. Translation: Force more people to live in shoe-box apartments in cities by making suburbs denser and less appealing.

All this may sound crazy, but it isn't a fringe view on the left. A Natural Resources Defense Council report last year on lithium mining also concluded that the government needs "to reduce long-term dependency on single-passenger vehicles." The Inflation Reduction Act included billions of dollars to promote bicycling and so-called livable neighborhoods.

California's Democratic Legislature last year even passed a bill creating a $1,000 tax credit (originally proposed at $7,500) for households that don't own cars. "We can invest in the future by providing financial incentives for Californians to transition from vehicles to more sustainable options," state Sen. Anthony Portantino said.

Gov. Gavin Newsom vetoed the bill, citing its budget cost, but he said he supported "approaches to incentivize a transition from vehicles to more sustainable transportation." Eliminating cars—not only gasoline-powered ones—is the left's ultimate goal. This is why progressives have mobilized against nearly every mineral mining project in the U.S.

The looming shortage of minerals will cause prices for EVs—the only cars Americans will be allowed to buy if Mr. Newsom and his green friends have their way—to rise inexorably. Soon Americans may not be able to afford to buy a car even with a government subsidy. Then they will have no choice but to use mass transit or dust off their old 10-speed bike.

Note, too, that there won't be nearly enough minerals to make the massive batteries necessary to back up an electric grid powered by unreliable wind and solar. So Americans will have to consume less energy—for instance, by setting their thermostats to 80 in summer and 65 in winter—and pay more for it.

Progressives' ultimate goal is to reduce consumption—and living standards—because they believe humans are a menace to the Earth.

The Supreme Court has lost its ethical compass. Can it find one fast?
Ruth MARCUS
22 November 2022, *The Washington Post*

The Supreme Court must get its ethics act together, and Chief Justice John G. Roberts Jr. needs to take the lead. After a string of embarrassments, the justices should finally subject themselves to the kind of rules that govern other federal judges and establish a standard for when to step aside from cases — one that is more stringent than simply leaving it up to the individual justice to decide.

Recent episodes are alarming and underscore the need for quick action to help restore confidence in the institution.

Last week, the Supreme Court wisely rebuffed an effort by Arizona GOP chair Kelli Ward to prevent the House Jan. 6 committee — the party in this case — from obtaining her phone records. The court's brief order noted that Justice Clarence Thomas, along with Justice Samuel A. Alito Jr., would have sided with Ward.

Thomas's involvement, though it didn't affect the outcome of the dispute, is nothing short of outrageous. Federal law already requires judges, including Supreme Court justices, to step aside from involvement in any case in which their impartiality "might reasonably be questioned."

Perhaps back in January, when he was the only justice to disagree when the court refused to grant former president Donald Trump's bid to stop his records from being turned over to the Jan. 6 committee, Thomas didn't realize the extent of his wife's involvement with disputing the election results. (I'm being kind here: Ginni Thomas had signed a letter the previous month calling on House Republicans to expel Reps. Liz Cheney of Wyoming and Adam Kinzinger of Illinois from the House Republican Conference for participating in an "overtly partisan political persecution.")

But here's what we know now, and Justice Thomas does, too: The Jan 6. committee has subpoenaed and interviewed his wife. We — and he — know that she contacted 29 Arizona lawmakers, urging them to "fight back against fraud" and choose a "clean slate of electors" after the 2020 election.

Some recusal questions are close. Not this one. Did the chief justice urge Thomas to recuse? He should have. This will sound unthinkable, but if Roberts asked and Thomas refused, maybe it's time the chief, or other justices, to publicly note their disagreement.

More than a decade ago, in his 2011 year-end report on the state of the judiciary, Roberts declared his "complete confidence in the capability of my colleagues to determine when recusal is warranted." If he still thinks that, he is deluding himself.

Thomas's poor ethical antennae are not the chief justice's only headache. Roberts was still dealing with the aftermath of the unprecedented leak of a draft opinion in last term's abortion ruling when the New York Times reported on Saturday that the former head of a conservative lobbying group warned Roberts in a July letter that he had obtained advance information about the outcome of the court's 2014 ruling in *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby,* about religious employers and contraceptive coverage.

The letter writer, Rev. Rob Schenck, who headed a D.C.-based nonprofit called Faith and Action, described having been informed weeks in advance that Hobby Lobby would win the case and that Alito was writing the opinion. He said he had been tipped off by an Ohio woman he had recruited to the cause, Gayle Wright, who had dinner with the justice and his wife, Martha-Ann, at their Virginia home.

Alito said any suggestion that he or his wife had leaked the information was "completely false," and Wright denied the account as well. But contemporaneous evidence, including an email from Wright, lent credence to Schenck's account. "Rob, if you want some interesting news please call. No emails," she wrote Schenck the day after the dinner.

Politico and Rolling Stone had previously reported on Schenck's "Operation Higher Court." The Times added smarmy details about the operatives' astonishing level of access to the justices, while making six-figure donations to the Supreme Court Historical Society, were chilling. [...]

This episode can't be ignored; Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse (D-R.I.) and Rep. Hank Johnson (D-Ga.) are right to press for answers, not just about the leak, but to how the nominally independent historical society may have been used in a pay-to-schmooze influence scheme.

Justices get to have social lives but justices also need to be mindful about their behavior — on and off the bench — and the signals that, especially when they accept travel and entertainment from those with an interest in the court's work. Some disclosure is already required, but it's spotty.

One obvious step is to follow the ethics rules that apply to other federal judges, perhaps adapting them to the particular needs of the high court. That would send an important — and overdue — message that the justices are not a law unto themselves. It's symbolic, but symbolism matters.

The longer the court delays acting, the more likely it is that Congress will impose rules on them.

Three years ago, Justice Elena Kagan testified before the House that the justices were "studying the question of whether to have a code of judicial conduct that's applicable only to the United States Supreme Court," calling it, "something that's being thought very seriously about." That's the last we've heard from the court on this topic.

Roberts has had a rough 2022. Tackling his court's ethics problem would be a smart way to finish a bad year on a good note.

How long till people stop falling for 'founder' hype?
David VON DREHLE
16 December 2022, *The Washington Post*

Americans have been hyping entrepreneurs since the dawn of the nation. Credit — or blame — probably belongs to Benjamin Franklin.

Between 1771 and 1790, while war and the founding occupied much of his time, Franklin perfected the ultimate press packet for a businessman he greatly admired: himself. "The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin," published in French in 1791 and English in 1793, is the original text from which all self-made-hero stories, all stories of quirky innovators and all do-well-to-do-good stories derive.

I don't know if children still get a heaping dose of Franklin. My classmates and I loved him: the plucky pauper surviving on loaves of bread who catches the eye of a passing maiden; the printer's apprentice who builds a publishing empire on the back of an advice column written in the voice of a fictional woman; the self-taught scientist trying to catch lightning with a kite and a key. As a philanthropist, Franklin invents fire departments and public libraries and other vital organs of happy communities — all while speaking in deathless witticisms and bracing adages.

The story became a template for generations of hagiographies: Andrew Carnegie, Thomas Edison, Henry Ford, Milton S. Hershey. The list goes on: America's appetite for self-reliant up-and-comers is bottomless. Some age better than others. Franklin's story has held up fairly well; Ford turned out to be a deranged antisemite. But all of them upheld the basic requirements of getting rich and giving lots away. Which can't be said of some newer models.

Enter Sam Bankman-Fried. As recently as Halloween, this boy plutocrat with the shaggy bro-'fro was a freshly minted paragon of greed in the service of good. He had supposedly built a better mousetrap, and the world had indeed beaten a path to his door. His net worth had reached that exalted state where it was hard to pin down to the nearest billion. But SBF, as he was widely known, had scarcely rolled off the mythmaking assembly line before the wheels came off. As I write this, his fortune has gone poof and he's living in a Bahamian jail cell.

Tumbling down the well-worn staircase from brilliant to colorful to embattled to disgraced, Bankman-Fried landed in a pile of battered demigods. Remember Elizabeth Holmes, the turtlenecked 20-something who pretended to disrupt the blood-testing industry? Prison sentence. Remember Adam Neumann, the WeWork founder who claimed real estate was a tech play? Bounced from his company (though under a gargantuan golden parachute). Remember Elon Musk? Oh, right: He won't let us forget him, as he very publicly sheds his crazy-like-a-fox persona to reveal his true crazy-like-a-crazy-person self.

Journalists would be wise to write profiles of modern moguls in disappearing ink — there's less of a record to correct when the story falls apart. But that advice invites the question: Why are the mythmakers getting so much wrong? It's one thing to realize that IBM's president Thomas Watson erred in selling data-processing services to the Nazis; at least IBM was real. Today's recurring theme is overhyped creators of overhyped companies.

The problem boils down to two facts, both having to do with the tech revolution. First is the not entirely unfounded belief that new technology is for young people. Any parent who asks a kid to Photoshop the family holiday card can relate to this — and so can the relative oldsters who run venture capital firms (and the desperate pension funds that play in their casinos). They are suckers for the spiels of the young because they believe only the young can perceive the next new thing.

The second fact flows from the first. The more mysterious the product, the more credible the business. The credulity of investors and business writers in the face of this reasoning is astonishing. They'll believe a kid in a T-shirt (Bankman-Fried) can run a major financial exchange between video games. They'll believe losing millions of dollars per day in real estate equals a high-growth tech company (Neumann). They'll believe in a tunnel across Missouri filled with super-fast hover cars (Musk).

Portraits of rich people have always been distorted, their best features exaggerated, their flaws retouched. But in earlier times, the shrines were built on something real: Carnegie's steel. Hershey's chocolate. The soda pop, razor blades and insurance policies of Warren Buffett. No longer. Today, all it takes to be celebrated as an entrepreneur is a gullible investor who draws others into a FOMO frenzy.

Fear of missing out, that is. Ben Franklin, who taught us to earn and save a penny at a time, would not approve.

The slow chokehold on the nation's homeless
Theresa VARGAS
6 May 2023, *The Washington Post*

Watching a person be killed on video differs in a crucial way from hearing about it. That view forces us to look simultaneously outward and inward. It forces us to bear witness with our eyes and consider with our minds what action we would have taken in that moment if we had been standing there, able to do more than just watch.

By now, you have probably seen the video that shows the final moments of Jordan Neely's life in a New York City subway, and if you haven't, then you have no doubt heard about it.

What that video doesn't show: Neely was a Michael Jackson impersonator who entertained people with his impressive dance moves, until he couldn't. He was someone who was able to tuck away a horrific childhood trauma and make strangers smile, until he couldn't. The 30-year-old was experiencing homelessness and mental illness, and on Monday, in the moments before he was killed, he reportedly shouted on the train that he was hungry, thirsty and tired of having nothing. He then reportedly threw his coat on the floor and talked about not caring if he went to jail.

What that video does show: Another passenger, who has since been identified as a 24-year-old Marine veteran named Daniel Penny, placed Neely in a chokehold and held him on the floor of the train. He kept him in that position, with the assistance of two other men at one point, even after Neely grew still. Too still.

Authorities pronounced Neely dead that day, and on Wednesday, the city medical examiner ruled the death a homicide.

The killing has since ignited justifiable anger, grief and outrage. As of Friday much still remained uncertain, including whether the men who restrained him would face charges, but this much was clear: Neely should be alive. He needed help in that moment, and long before that moment, and he didn't get it.

"I would have been SCREAMING at that man to let him go!" reads a comment under a Facebook post of the video, which was taken by Juan Alberto Vazquez. "Why are those people just standing there? Why did no one check a pulse? No CPR? Nothing! This is sickening."

It's easy, of course, to feel that way when we are removed from the situation. It's easy to watch what happened through a screen and believe that if we had been a bystander we would have stood up and done something instead of stood there and done nothing.

But here's the thing: We are bystanders. We are bystanders every day, watching people who are unhoused succumb to a slow chokehold. Jordan Neely was a unique individual with unique skills and unique struggles. But in D.C. and other major cities across the country, there are many people like him, and we know they are dying in preventable and premature ways.

The numbers tell us that. The stories that occurred before that video of Neely went viral tell us that. And what we see in front of us every day as we make our way through our cities tells us that.

In D.C. last year, more than 70 people died while homeless. Some of the causes: intoxication, hypothermia and homicide. The youngest person who died was 30. Others who died were 31, 32, 36, 41 and 45. The average age was 55.

Those ages appeared on a list shared by advocates who hold a vigil every year for the people who die in the city "without the dignity of a home." When those advocates took a deep look at the lives behind those numbers, they found that most of those people died while waiting to use housing vouchers and that the losses didn't fall evenly across racial lines. Nearly 85 percent of the people who died in the city last year without housing were Black.

None of those individuals were held in a chokehold on a train. But make no mistake, they died because they were homeless. They died because officials have shown time and again that they are more interested in trying to push people who are unhoused out of sight than pull them out of homelessness and the dangers that come with it.

D.C. Mayor Muriel E. Bowser vowed to end homelessness and has made some notable strides toward that goal, including closing the D.C. General family shelter after the disappearance of 8-year-old Relisha Rudd.

But under her leadership, tent encampments have also been cleared before housing has been secured for all of the people in them, leaving unhoused individuals displaced and disconnected. [...]

After the video of Neely emerged, Jesse Rabinowitz tweeted that he was "heartbroken." Rabinowitz, the senior manager for policy and advocacy at Miriam's Kitchen and manager of The Way Home Campaign, which aims to end chronic homelessness in D.C., also noted the other ways unhoused people die.

"And also, not funding housing kills," he wrote. "Evicting encampments kills. Policy choices that allow homelessness to exist kill. May their memories compel us to do better."

May their memories compel us to do better. Most of us weren't there on the train that day with Neely. We couldn't step up or speak up then. But we are bystanders, every day.

7 Years After the Pulse Nightclub Shooting, Florida Must Reject Hate
Brandon WOLF, a survivor of the 2016 terror attack at Pulse nightclub in Orlando
10 June 2023, *Time magazine*

Growing up in rural Oregon, I often dreamt of a world where I could be all of myself. A world where I didn't feel the nagging societal pressure to be "Black enough" for some spaces and "white enough" for others. A world that saw my queerness not as a dealbreaker, but as a superpower.

Pulse Nightclub embodied that for me. After packing two suitcases and running away to the refuge of Orlando, I uncovered what I had been looking for. The spinning disco balls and strobe beams ricocheting across the bar dared all of us to dance like no one was watching. The beats radiating from the floorboards unearthed our authenticity, nudging us into rhythmic protest against a world that had always told us to uncross our legs, stiffen our wrists, and deepen the gravel in our voices. There was safety there. Inside those walls, we were normal.

When I close my eyes at night, I can remember the moments when that normal shattered into a million shards on June 12, 2016. I can feel it, hear it, see it. The vibrant poster above the urinal. The cup teetering on the edge of the sink, perched precariously as if it might tumble to the tiles below. The first cracks of gunfire from an assault rifle. The stench of blood and smoke wafting into the room.

Hours later, the world woke to our horror: 49 dead; 53 injured. LGBTQ communities across the globe reeled with the jarring reminder that no space is a safe space when your very humanity is perpetually up for debate. The celebrations over marriage equality and surging social acceptance were suddenly cleaved by violence. Overnight, ours was a community under siege, picking up the broken pieces of the nation's deadliest attack on LGBTQ people in history.

This community remains under siege today.

Florida, just years removed from that horrifying tragedy, has become synonymous with the breathtaking assaults on LGBTQ civil rights sweeping the nation. From book censorship to health care prohibitions on trans youth to bathroom bans, Gov. Ron DeSantis and his right wing allies have ushered in a raft of dehumanizing policies designed to build political careers at the expense of our civil liberties. These laws are all animated by the same dangerous ideology that has long been used to rationalize discrimination and violence against LGBTQ people: That we are a "contagion" whose "spread" can only be stopped by wielding the power of government to censor us out of society. This utterly absurd argument is peddled alongside promises to "protect the children" from us in an effort to force us back into that makeshift closet.

The demonization of LGBTQ people isn't new. Whether it was the police raids that led to the Stonewall Riots or the HIV/AIDS crisis that fueled the ACT UP movement, this community has had its back against the wall countless times before. And at each pivotal point in history, we blazed a new path forward. We willed a better, more inclusive future into existence by sharing our stories unapologetically and choosing radical love over the ferocious hate threatening to consume us.

In the wake of the tragedy at Pulse seven years ago, Orlando faced a similar critical choice. We could succumb to the TV pundits. We could beat the drums of war. Or we could choose love. We could embody the spirit of Pulse itself, unapologetically becoming a city that dares everyone to dance as if no one is watching. We chose the latter. We chose love over hate.

When I left home in search of a place to belong, I didn't expect to fall in love with a new community. I never thought I'd watch that community traverse the flames of militarized hatred. And I couldn't have imagined that our struggle to put the pieces back together might demonstrate to a weary nation that when hate tries to demonize our neighbors, terrorize them into submission, and tear us apart at the seams, there is another path. We simply must choose to walk it together.