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Annexe sujets

Anglais

**Série Langues
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**Épreuve d'admission : Analyse en langue étrangère d'un
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Why are we stuck with Clarence Thomas, the Supreme Court justice who doesn't follow the law?

Jackie Calmes, *Los Angeles Times*, April 20, 2023

No sooner had Donald Trump finally been fingerprinted and booked than we Americans were reminded of that other V.I.P. scofflaw who, by his repeat offenses, has long mocked our national conceit that no person is above the law. Don't, however, expect [Supreme Court Justice] Clarence Thomas to similarly face indictment or impeachment after the latest revelations of his nose-thumbing at ethics and the law. The nonprofit news organization ProPublica reported in separate exposes this month how Thomas has for years enjoyed luxe vacations at the expense of Texas billionaire and Republican mega-donor Harlan Crow, and how money actually changed hands in 2014 when a Crow company bought and refurbished Thomas family properties in rural Georgia where the justice's mother still lives rent-free. Crow told ProPublica that he has never tried to influence Thomas about legal or political issues, but he has contributed to conservative groups with a stake in such cases before the Supreme Court. For Thomas to accept his largess is at least unethical. What is possibly illegal is that Thomas repeatedly has failed to report such gifts and transactions in the annual financial disclosure reports required of federal officials by a 1978 law.

Perversely, it is because Thomas sits on the highest court that he's all but unaccountable. Trump, once the most powerful person on the planet, lost the protection of a controversial Justice Department policy against indicting a sitting president when he left office. But the nine justices have their jobs for life. They judge, but are virtually unjudged. Thomas won't even suffer shame, because he's shown he has none. Which is why he won't do what he should, and what one ethics-challenged justice did a half-century ago: resign. That Thomas won't follow the precedent of former Justice Abe Fortas is a reflection not only of his own flawed, chip-on-the-shoulder character, but also of the radically polarized politics today compared to Fortas' time. Fortas, an appointee and friend of President Lyndon B. Johnson, resigned in 1969 amid a scandal over disclosures of his financial ties to a convicted stock swindler. He maintained his innocence but said he was stepping down because the court's reputation and effectiveness "are factors paramount to all others." Fortas also sought to avoid likely impeachment in a Congress controlled by Johnson's fellow Democrats; Thomas need not worry that Republicans who now run the House would ever impeach him, no matter how serious his infractions.

Today, public trust in the Supreme Court is the lowest since polling on the question began, yet Thomas isn't nearly selfless enough to help restore it by resigning. For 31 years, he has seemed to nurse resentment over his contentious Senate confirmation, when he was credibly accused of sexual harassment. He's not about to give up his seat in humiliation now — especially when the president who would fill it is a Democrat. What's more, President Biden isn't just any Democrat, but one whose election Thomas' wife Ginni, a longtime right-wing activist, worked zealously to overturn. Despite her efforts, Thomas has ignored widespread calls to recuse himself — as a federal law arguably requires — from cases related to Trump and the Jan. 6, 2021, insurrection. He has three times voted in the Trump side's favor in related cases. [...]

As Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell told reporters Tuesday, "I have total confidence in the chief justice of the United States to deal with these court internal issues." Just as Chief Justice John G. Roberts Jr. has done before. Not. Consider the value of what's known of Crow's direct and indirect generosity to Thomas over the years: millions of dollars for the Pin Point Heritage Museum in Thomas' hometown of Pin Point, Ga.; \$175,000 for a Pin Point library dedicated to Thomas and financing for another in Savannah; \$500,000 for [Clarence Thomas' wife] Ginni Thomas to start a far-right advocacy group; a \$19,000 Bible that belonged to Frederick Douglass; private jet flights, an island-hopping yacht vacation worth hundreds of thousands of dollars and hospitality at California's Bohemian Grove and at Crow properties in Texas and the Adirondacks.

Thomas also has had to amend his disclosure reports in years past to reflect unreported income for himself and his wife, but only after controversy. He once said he'd omitted nearly \$700,000 that Ginni Thomas received from 2003 to 2007 from the conservative Heritage Foundation because of "a misunderstanding" of the 1978 disclosure law. A justice who's the final word on the law doesn't understand a law? He was unchastened: Last year the *New Yorker* revealed that his wife's company had received \$200,000 from a right-wing, dark-money group for her consulting services at a time when the group was backing a Muslim ban case before the Supreme Court. Thomas did not disclose that payment either. Thomas is certain to remain unchastened. He's not only being defended but also hailed as a victim by a Republican Party that's been called a cult of victimhood. It's a broken political system, and a broken court, that countenances such behavior and ethical blindness.

The writers' strike is partly about AI. They're right to worry.

Daron Acemoglu and Simon Johnson, *Los Angeles Times*, May 5, 2023

Daron Acemoglu and Simon Johnson are professors at MIT and co-authors of the forthcoming book "Power and Progress: Our 1,000-Year Struggle Over Technology & Prosperity."

The Writers Guild of America and the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers agree on one thing: Artificial intelligence is coming. At the same time, they disagree fundamentally on an issue that we will all soon struggle with. Can the owners of capital assets (the studios) use AI to substantially replace workers (the writers) and tilt the balance of power in their favor? Or is there a way to address the entirely reasonable demand from writers that this increasingly capable software remain a tool under the control of workers?

Silicon Valley has long been infatuated with "machine intelligence," the goal of creating software that can mimic what humans do. The technology arms race to create human-like abilities has recently become a dangerous obsession, threatening to destroy millions of good jobs. But attempting to stop the development of these algorithms is not the right solution.

We need, instead, a pivot on the part of inventors, entrepreneurs and policymakers toward a focus on "machine usefulness," the idea that computers should primarily enhance human capabilities. But this needs to be combined with an explicit recognition that any resulting productivity gains must be shared with workers, in terms of higher incomes and better working conditions. More educated and better resourced workers — think of many on Wall Street — will probably figure some of this out for themselves. The really pressing problem is among low-wage workers whom new technology — for example, at Amazon — already puts under greater surveillance and squeezes to work harder, in more difficult conditions.

We have been grappling with the consequences of machines replacing people for nearly 1,000 years. The idea that automation necessarily creates shared prosperity is an illusion — that's not what happened in medieval Europe, or in the first century of the Industrial Revolution, or in the digital transformation we have experienced since 1980. In our lifetimes, the increasing use of computers has contributed significantly to the loss of well-paid blue- and white-collar jobs, a hollowing out of the middle class in many parts of the U.S., and the widening of income inequality.

The digital transformation boosted productivity, but not by as much as expected and the benefits were not widely shared. The internet was supposed to let information run free but resulted in the creation of some very powerful companies that are now using our data — without proper permissions — to train their algorithms. And if you want a glimpse of how much damage can be wrought by reckless innovation, look at social media. AI could be bigger than the sum of these elements — precisely because it is the culmination of more than four decades of innovation. Think about the impact of electricity, which runs continually in the background of our lives. From the late 19th century, electricity transformed industrial production and every aspect of people's lives. However, this change took several decades to take effect, allowing plenty of time for new jobs to be created and for labor unions to demand higher pay in return for greater productivity.

We now face a mad on-rush of generative AI. Can we avoid further widening the wealth gap with the advent of AI, which could replace lower-skilled jobs — and even high-skilled jobs — as it becomes better trained? We need to create incentives for innovators to apply AI-related technology to address real human problems — and to shift away from developing the tools of social oppression. [...] First, the U.S. government should immediately allocate research funding to projects focused on creating human complementary technologies throughout the economy. In sectors such as education, healthcare and other public priorities, the government should commit to purchase and help deploy appropriate technology, subject to existing standards. This is how we led the world in developing antibiotics, jet aircraft and semiconductors. Second, voluntary data unions should be created, including anyone who puts images on the internet, ranging from professional agencies to individuals with family photos. AI companies are currently using these images without permission and without compensation. Lawsuits should be brought to stop this practice, which in many instances is blatant and outrageous copyright violation. Third, guidelines from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration should be updated to prevent the most intrusive forms of workplace surveillance. So-called "bossware" is already spreading widely, and generative AI threatens to make this much more powerful and oppressive. Updating existing regulations can be done and does not require congressional approval.

Making the AI revolution more responsive to workers' and societal needs will take all kinds of regulatory changes. We need to start thinking creatively about the controls and incentives that will guide this technology's future.

The affirmative action calamity brewing at the Supreme Court

Nicholas Goldberg, *Los Angeles Times*, June 1st 2023

No one particularly likes affirmative action. Why would we? It is an imperfect remedy designed to redress a shameful history — an ongoing history — of racism and exclusion. It requires that people be judged, and in some cases denied opportunity, based on the color of their skin. It's built on the premise that society cannot always be colorblind, which goes against everything we have been taught to believe and would like to believe about ourselves. That's one reason so many people prefer to view affirmative action as merely a temporary fix that will one day no longer be needed. That argument — that affirmative action is constitutional but should be "limited in time" — was made most famously by Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor in the case of *Grutter vs. Bollinger*. "The court expects that 25 years from now the use of racial preferences will no longer be necessary..." she wrote for the majority. That was in 2003. Now with O'Connor's supposed deadline approaching, the Supreme Court is about to hand down a decision in two explosive affirmative action cases, one involving Harvard University and the other, the University of North Carolina. Many experts believe the current right-wing court is on the verge of overturning decades of precedent by prohibiting the consideration of race as a factor in college and university admissions.

A decision declaring affirmative action unconstitutional would apparently be fine with most Americans. A Reuters/Ipsos poll in February found that 62% do not believe race or ethnicity should be considered in college admissions. But they're wrong. Affirmative action is both morally justified and badly needed. Banning it would be an enormous mistake. And just to be clear, O'Connor's 25-year time frame — which was cited repeatedly by the court's conservative justices during oral arguments — was never really a deadline at all. It was at best a prediction or maybe just an expression of hope that proved overly optimistic. When asked how long affirmative action would be necessary, she told an interviewer: "There's no timetable. You just don't know." I don't know either, but I do know that today, the wrongs of American racism are still being undone, and affirmative action remains a critical tool in the process. Even though the Supreme Court has ruled that affirmative action is legally justified only by its role in fostering "diverse" student bodies, I believe its chief benefit is as a remedy for the harmful effects of past discrimination. College, the great gateway to the middle class, was for most of U.S. history limited to white students. It wasn't until the early 1960s, during the Kennedy administration, that the integration of college campuses began in earnest, and that taking "affirmative actions" to undo racism became part of the lexicon.

Today, however, despite significant gains, students of color remain unconscionably disadvantaged. A 2022 McKinsey study, among others, showed that Black and Latino people, Native Americans and Pacific Islanders are still underrepresented among college undergraduates, faculty and administrators. Today, white college applicants are still more likely than nonwhites to have attended higher performing, better funded schools. Their families are more likely to have benefited from wealth accumulation. They're more likely to qualify for legacy preferences. African Americans are more likely to live in disadvantaged neighborhoods and attend under-resourced high schools. Former Columbia University president Lee Bollinger and University of Chicago law professor Geoffrey Stone have written that predominantly nonwhite school districts are less likely to offer access to college-prep-level math and science courses. Unsurprisingly, Black students still trail white students in general educational attainment.

Campus diversity, meanwhile, benefits everybody, white students included. Studies show that diversity helps fight racial bias and prejudice. It helps wash away stereotypes. Sure, affirmative action should be temporary. I look forward to that glorious and hopefully not mythical day when the United States no longer struggles with the aftereffects of slavery, segregation and bigotry and the continued effects of institutionalized discrimination. But we'd be foolish to set a deadline for that. In the meantime, the Supreme Court will do what it will do. If affirmative action is prohibited entirely, it could lead to a precipitous decline in nonwhite admissions. California banned affirmative action in admissions to the University of California and other state institutions when it passed Proposition 209 in 1996, and the number of nonwhite students promptly plummeted. [...]

It's possible the court could take a less radical approach than that, with a narrow ruling tied closely to Harvard and UNC, rather than one prohibiting the consideration of race in admissions at schools all around the country. The justices may nod to race-neutral approaches to diversifying colleges and universities, such as giving admissions preference to applicants based on socioeconomic status, or eliminating legacy and donor admissions preferences. Some of these are valuable, promising ideas; others would be less effective. All in all, though, the prospects for affirmative action are pretty grim. It would be a tragedy for a country as troubled as ours, still wrestling to move beyond our own ugly racial history, to take a giant step backward instead of forward.

The Supreme Court didn't further eviscerate voting rights

Erwin Chemerinsky, *Los Angeles Times*, June 8, 2023

After a decade of weakening federal protection of voting rights, the Supreme Court on Thursday reaffirmed that the Voting Rights Act prevents racial discrimination in drawing election districts. This was a surprising and important 5-4 victory for voting rights, with Chief Justice John G. Roberts Jr. writing the majority opinion, joined by Justice Brett M. Kavanaugh and the three liberal justices, Sonia Sotomayor, Elena Kagan and Ketanji Brown Jackson.

The decision in *Allen vs. Milligan* now requires Alabama to redraw its election map to create another district that likely would allow Black voters to elect a favored candidate. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 is one of the most crucial civil rights statutes adopted in American history. Ever since Reconstruction, especially in Southern states, there has been pervasive discrimination to keep Black Americans from registering and voting. For example, in Mississippi, in 1962, less than 7% of the state's eligible Black voters were registered to vote. The Voting Rights Act had two key provisions to remedy race discrimination in voting. Section 5 provided that jurisdictions with a history of race discrimination in voting would need to get pre-clearance from the United States attorney general before making a change in their election systems. This was very effective in preventing discriminatory laws from going into effect. But in June 2013, in *Shelby County vs. Holder*, the court declared unconstitutional the pre-clearance provisions of the law. Almost immediately, states such as North Carolina and Texas put into effect laws that had been denied pre-clearance because of their discriminatory effects. A crucial mechanism for stopping race discrimination in voting was nullified.

The other key provision of the Voting Rights Act, Section 2, prevents state and local governments from having election systems that discriminate against voters of color. In 1982, Congress amended this to make clear that the law prohibits laws that have a discriminatory effect against minority voters; there does not have to be proof that the government had a racially discriminatory purpose. But two years ago, in *Brnovich vs. Democratic National Committee*, the court made it much harder to use Section 2 to challenge state and local election laws that regulate voting — such as rules on absentee ballots and the location of polling places. In an ideologically split decision, the court made it very difficult to prove a racially discriminatory effect and also said that there must be consideration of the state's interest in preventing voter fraud, something never mentioned in the Voting Rights Act.

It is against this backdrop that Thursday's decision in *Allen vs. Milligan* is most significant for what the court didn't do: It did not further weaken the law of voting rights as many expected. Alabama's population is about 27% Black. Alabama has seven seats in the House of Representatives. After the 2020 census, the Alabama legislature in redistricting packed Black voters into one of the seven districts and spread them around the others, with the effect that Alabama was very likely to have only one Black representative in Congress. The Supreme Court, following decades-old precedents, found that this violated the Voting Rights Act. In 1986, the court articulated a test for determining when election districting is racially discriminatory. Under that test, to prove a violation of the law, voters of color must demonstrate that they are large enough as a group to constitute the majority of a district, that they are politically cohesive, and that white voters in the proposed districting map would be likely to defeat candidates preferred by the voters of color.

Many analysts, including me, predicted that the court would use the Alabama case to weaken or overrule this test. This seemed likely because last year the court intervened in this case to allow the discriminatory map to be used in the 2022 primary and general elections in Alabama. [...] But contrary to these predictions, Roberts' majority opinion applied the 1986 test and found that Alabama violated the Voting Rights Act. Quite significantly, the court rejected Alabama's contention that it was impermissible to consider race at all in evaluating whether election districts violate the law. If the court had accepted that argument, the implications for other civil rights laws would have been grave. That would have meant that discrimination in housing or employment could no longer be proved by showing racially discriminatory consequences.

Instead, the court said, "The contention that mapmakers must be entirely 'blind' to race has no footing in our §2 case law." It's a relief that the decision does not change the law or further eviscerate protection for voting rights. Indeed, given the Supreme Court's recent history, its following precedent and finding a violation of the Voting Rights Act is practically a cause for celebration.

The Winner of the Debt Ceiling Deal Is Undoubtedly Kevin McCarthy. Maybe the GOP Can Lead After All

Ari Hoffman, *Newsweek*, May 31, 2023

After weeks of politicians on both sides whipping the media into a frenzy about a debt crisis, the predictable outcome has finally arrived: A deal has been reached, and it undoubtedly reflects House Speaker Kevin McCarthy having bested President Biden. After all, President Biden said numerous times that he would not negotiate over the debt ceiling. White House Press Secretary Karine Jean Pierre parroted those remarks as did many others in the Democratic Party. Yet here we are with the debt ceiling about to be raised and cuts in spending about to be made after the bill cleared a key procedural vote Wednesday afternoon in the Republican controlled House.

McCarthy beat Joe Biden. The president pledged not to negotiate and caved to his opposition. You might point to the 29 Republicans voting against the bill who claim the deal isn't delivering enough spending cuts. They are right—indeed, even McCarthy agrees. “Maybe it doesn't do everything for everyone, but this is a step in the right direction,” McCarthy said in an interview with Shannon Bream on Fox News this Sunday. “I'll debate this bill with anybody. Is it everything I wanted? No, because we don't control all of it. But it is the biggest rescission in history. It is the biggest cut Congress has ever voted for in that process”.

He's right. The deal expands work requirements for food stamps, raising the age for the existing work requirements from 49 to 54. Additionally, The Biden administration has committed to reduce the number of homeless people of all ages who are subject to the requirements. Far Left progressives have strongly opposed these measures, which conservatives have long advocated for. The deal Biden negotiated has enraged the Progressive Caucus, causing the President to have a serious issue with the Left flank of his party, one that is constantly attempting to seize the reigns of powers. The deal will also rescind approximately \$30 billion in unspent coronavirus relief money that Congress previously approved in other legislation. Republicans have long sought to end the out-of-control spending in response to the COVID pandemic and McCarthy was able to negotiate it. He was also able to negotiate a roll back of the White House's efforts to forgive student loan debt, after Biden agreed to end the pause on student loan repayments that was instituted in the wake of the pandemic. The GOP has opposed Democrat's efforts to forgive student loans, and this gives Republicans another win with their base while kneecapping a major progressive victory.

McCarthy even managed to avoid cuts to defense and keep non-defense spending relatively flat in fiscal year 2024. And the deal fully funds medical care for veterans at the levels included in Biden's proposed 2024 budget blueprint, something that both parties claim to agree on. The deal also green-lit the billion-dollar Mountain Valley Pipeline, which is almost complete but has been bogged down in permitting hell for years—another huge concession from a president who nixed the Keystone XL Pipeline via executive order his first day in office and pledged to end drilling. As a bonus, the deal even took a potshot at the EPA [Environmental Protection Agency], putting in place changes to the National Environmental Policy Act for the first time in 40 years and designating “a single lead agency” to develop environmental reviews.

Does the deal reel in the government's out of control spending that got us into this mess? No, but it would be hypocritical of Republicans to claim that only Democrats caused this crisis. Republicans have historically only cut spending when there is divided control of government. Under President Donald Trump, Republicans blew out spending on their own priorities and in response to COVID. Of course, Biden and the Democrats said, “Hold my Bud Light,” and proceeded to make GOP spending look like a drop in the bucket. Biden and the Democrats will not become fiscal conservatives. To pretend otherwise is not factually honest, nor is it realistic. The only way to avoid raising the debt ceiling again in the future is for Republicans to find a message that resonates with the American people and win big in 2024, then promptly avoid falling into the same pattern of failing to make cuts and instead spend on their own priorities after pledging during the campaign to be the fiscally responsible party that is going to cut the pork in the federal budget.

McCarthy was dealt a bad hand, partially of his own making. But getting Democrats to negotiate the debt ceiling after months of them pledging never to do so is a win—a big one.

Immigration fraud case brings tough First Amendment questions to the Supreme Court

Nina Totenberg, *NPR*, March 27, 2023

The issue before the Supreme Court on Monday: whether a federal law that prohibits inducing unlawful immigration for financial gain violates the First Amendment.

Look at the Supreme Court's history, and you will see a lot of cases in which odious defendants bring tough First Amendment questions. Monday's case was one of those. The issue was whether a federal law that makes it a crime to encourage or induce illegal immigration transforms some speech protected by the Constitution into a crime. The defendant in this case is Helaman Hansen, who conned 471 noncitizens into believing that they could obtain U.S. citizenship through adult adoption. By enrolling these noncitizens in this nonexistent program, Hansen defrauded these people of more than \$1.8 million. In 2017, a jury convicted him on 15 counts of mail and wire fraud, for which he was sentenced to 20 years in prison. But it also found him guilty of two counts of encouraging or inducing these noncitizens to remain in the United States, and it is those two counts that were the focus of Monday's argument.

The Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled in favor of Hansen, declaring that the federal law making it a crime to induce unlawful immigration sweeps up a substantial amount of speech that is protected by the First Amendment. The government appealed, and on Monday Deputy Solicitor General Brian Fletcher sought to thread a tiny legal needle: With one hand he made strategic concessions, while with the other he sought to uphold the statute. He conceded that the jury had not been properly instructed on the defendant's intent, and that the statute could be read too broadly. But, noting that the law has been applied for 70 years, he argued that if it is narrowly construed, it does not run afoul of the First Amendment. "Prohibitions on soliciting or facilitating both criminal and civil violations have long been common and have never been thought to raise a First Amendment problem," Fletcher said. "The First Amendment does not protect speech that is intended to induce or commence specific illegal activities." The justices, however, had a lot of questions. "What do you say to the charitable organizations that say, even under your narrowing construction, there's still going to be a chill or a threat of prosecution for them for providing food or shelter and aid," asked Justice Brett Kavanaugh. Justice Sonia Sotomayor followed up, saying, "We do know that the Customs Department made a list of all the people, religious entities, the lawyers and others who were providing services to immigrants at the border and was saying they were going to rely on the statute to prosecute them."

Justice Elena Kagan added, "What happens to all the cases where it could be a lawyer, it could be a doctor, it could be a neighbor, it could be a friend, it could be a teacher and could be anybody, says to a noncitizen, 'I really think you should stay.' What happens to that world of cases?" Responding to a question from Sotomayor about a grandmother who worries that her immigration status might be a burden on her children but stays in the U.S. at their urging, Fletcher acknowledged that when family members urge someone to stay, that is the hardest case. He said there is no way to deal with all the variables that could come up, prompting Sotomayor to ask, "Why should we uphold a statute that criminalizes words . . . that's what we're doing with this statute. It's a first of [its] kind."

ACLU [American Civil Liberties Union] lawyer Esha Bhandari picked up that thread, arguing on behalf of the defendant. Unless the court clips the wings of this statute, she said, "Congress and the states will be free . . . to criminalize speech soliciting violations of the vast range of administrative and regulatory laws that govern us today, from mask and vaccine mandates to parking ordinances." But she too faced some tough hypotheticals. "What about someone who encourages a person who is intellectually disabled to commit suicide?" asked Justice Samuel Alito. Bhandari replied that the government has an interest in protecting the vulnerable, and if a statute were narrowly drawn, it could survive. Justice Neil Gorsuch asked Bhandari how her client's rights are being violated, noting that under just about any standard of intent, he would be convicted. Bhandari acknowledged that her client had defrauded many people and will go to jail for 20 years. But, she said, the challenge here is to the statute as a whole and how it could inhibit speech about almost anything. The government, with all its concessions on Monday, tried its best to persuade the court that a decision narrowly construing the statute would allow it to remain on the books. Whether it won the day remains to be seen.

I Don't Mourn the Queen

Politico, 13th September 2022, by Kehinde Andrews (Professor of Black Studies & author of *The New Age of Empire: How Racism and Colonialism Still Rule the World*)

It is a peculiar sensation to live in a nation plunged into mourning when you cannot comprehend the feelings of loss. Whilst the news of Queen Elizabeth's death sparked concern, sadness and even panic in many of my white colleagues at work last week, I looked on mostly bemused. I am not alone in this feeling of detachment; most of my Black family and friends here feel the same. Yes, it is sad when anyone dies. But none of us knew the Queen; she was not a family member, friend or even acquaintance. She was an image, a figment of the nation's collective imagination that we were told we must adore.

For the children of the British empire, those of us who were born here and those of us who were born in the 15 nations of the "commonwealth," the Queen is the number one symbol of white supremacy. She may have been seen as an institution but for us, she was the manifestation of the institutional racism that we have to encounter on a daily basis.

African American intellectual W.E.B. Du Bois best captured this feeling of disconnection when he wrote, "it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others." Being both Black and American, Du Bois noted, was to be constantly yoked to "this peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness" with conflicting perspectives on life in the nation. To be Black and in Britain also means grappling with double-consciousness. The only real difference between Black Brits and Black Americans is that Britain offshored its racist violence to the colonies. This meant that Britain could believe the mirage that the nation did not have the same racial problems as the U.S., which enslaved millions of Africans within its own borders. But you cannot detach Britain from its empire; the colonies were just as, if not more, important to making the nation "great" as anything that took place on these shores. Gold, tobacco, sugar and cotton were the engines of British industrial development, all supplied by slave labor in the Caribbean and Americas. It was Queen Elizabeth I that launched Britain's slave trade — and the Royal African Company was responsible for enslaving more Africans than any other. Britain's African colonies were essential for the mineral wealth needed to build modern Britain and India. They were the jewel in the crown of the empire where more than \$9 trillion dollars was looted from India alone.

Queen Elizabeth II may have been on the throne to witness the dismantling of the empire. But she was also monarch for the brutal subjection of the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya in the fifties, which Britain recently paid out almost £20 million in compensation to the victims. And she was Queen when the government supported the Nigerian suppression of the Biafran separatists that led to a million children starving to death in the late 60s. The power of the nation and symbolic strength of the monarch have been inseparable from the empire.

My paternal grandmother was born in colonial Jamaica in 1914 and was raised on the fairy tales of the Mother Country and nobility of British royalty. She migrated to Britain in search of better opportunities in the mid 50s as part of the so called Windrush generation, who helped to rebuild the nation after the Second World War. A picture of the Queen had pride of place in her front room and were she alive today, she would have wholeheartedly joined in the collective grief. But my father grew up in the 1960s, facing the cold realities of British racism and could never feel any warmth to either the nation or its figure head. When he was 13, he followed my grandmother to the U.K. It wasn't the warmest of welcomes. [...] Even as a child, I felt instinctively uncomfortable when we were forced to sing the national anthem "God Save the Queen" in school; I refuse to stand when I hear it now. The way the royal family treated Prince Harry and Meghan Markle only compounded those feelings. The only time Markle resonated with many Black Britons is when she told of the pain that the racism of being in the family caused. Nobody but Oprah was surprised to learn there were worries in the family about how dark their baby would be. It was recently revealed that until at least the late 60s, Buckingham Palace banned Black and brown people from being employed there as office workers.

Recently, we celebrated the so-called Commonwealth Games, which is essentially a bootleg Olympics. But the Commonwealth is simply a rebrand; the sporting event was originally called the British Empire Games. It is a collection of former colonies headed up by the royal family whose main purpose appears to be to boost Britain's self-esteem after the end of empire. Until recently, the Queen presided over the games, decked out in her jewels stolen from various colonies, the head of an (almost) exclusively White family, who parades in the spoils of colonialism and rules over vast empire (or what is left of the Commonwealth).

The royal family remains so popular because it is one of the remaining remnants of when Britain was 'great,' a living, breathing piece of colonial nostalgia for the nation to indulge in.

If You're Breathing a Sigh of Relief About the Midterms, Just Wait

Jeff Greenfield, *Politico*, November 9, 2022

If you're in a celebratory mood today, you've got good reason. The fears — including my fears — about a wave of election-deniers sweeping into offices did not happen. Virtually every swing-state denialist candidate for governor, attorney general or secretary of state was defeated. Democratic governors in Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin will serve as bulwarks to keep their elections fair; Democrats actually gained control of the Legislature in Michigan, and Republicans did not win veto-proof majorities in Wisconsin or North Carolina. In every state where abortion was on the ballot, voters chose to protect it.

Looking at the broader picture, the likely congressional outcome — a Republican House with a single-digit majority and an evenly divided Senate — represents one of the best achievements for the White House's party in decades. (Indeed, the probable loss of the House has less to do with this midterm than with the 2020 election; Democrats lost a dozen seats in the House then — the worst performance by a White House-winning party in memory, leaving Democrats with no room for error this time.) The more high-minded of you can take satisfaction in the idea that voters are capable of persuasion, that the much-derided warning that “democracy is on the ballot” — along with anger over the overturning of abortion rights — had salience even in a time when inflation and crime seemed to have more potency. One of the biggest misses of at least some preelection polls was the “finding” that independents were flocking to Republicans; on Election Day, they broke for Democrats.

Now for a reality check. We are likely sailing into some powerful storms, with daunting prospects for both parties and for the health of the body politic. First, imagine you're a mainstream Republican (assuming there are any left) with hopes of taking back the White House. You've watched Trump successfully get his choices nominated to high office, only to see most of them go down to defeat. You want your party to “move on” — that Ron DeSantis landslide in Florida was the highlight of your election night — but you also know that Trump is still the favorite of your party's base, and that he is about to announce for president again. And while you may not say this aloud, you know that if Trump is somehow denied the 2024 nomination, he will angrily denounce the “rigged” result and do all he can to undermine the party in the general election.

Now imagine you are Kevin McCarthy, on the cusp of finally realizing your yearslong hope for the speakership [of the House of Representatives]. You'll likely be dealing with a Republican majority in single digits — and some of those House members have already expressed less than full-throated support for your reign. With a paper-thin majority, you will be at the mercy of the most extreme elements of your party, including all-out propeller heads like Marjorie Taylor Greene. You've already sought to appease your members, but what will the cost of that be next year? Impeaching the president is the least of it. When your majority decides to block a raise in the debt ceiling unless there are massive cuts to Social Security and Medicare, you'll either be leading that charge or risking your speakership. Are you prepared to default on the nation's credit obligations and potentially spark a global financial crisis? The dominant MAGA wing of your party seems fully prepared to do so.

Democrats don't get off easy either. First, the chance for any substantive achievements in the next two years are nil. Biden will be facing a Republican House in full MAGA force (where dozens of election deniers were returned or elected to office). In a chamber where a huge majority of Republicans say Biden is an illegitimate president, the prospects for any cooperation, including avoiding a financial meltdown, are marginal at best. Throw in determined opposition to everything from aid to Ukraine to Covid responses, and the impact of a GOP majority at the mercy of its most zealous elements is (to borrow from Sen. Susan Collins) concerning. Second, look at this finding from the exit polls: More than two-thirds of voters, including a significant majority of Democrats, do NOT want Biden to run again. This is not simply a matter of low approval ratings; presidents can recover from bad numbers. But there's another looming number that can't be changed: the number “8.” On Nov. 20, Biden will be 80 years old. We have never had a president, nor a presidential candidate, running in the ninth decade of life [...]. History suggests that if Biden does not run, his vice president is the logical successor. (In fact, every Democratic vice president since the 1870s has eventually become the party's nominee). But Kamala Harris' performance as a presidential candidate in 2020 did not engender confidence in her strengths as a top of the ticket nominee. Yet turning away from Harris might alienate Black Democratic women, the single most loyal element of the party.

What we face, in sum, is a post-midterm political environment that promises migraine-inducing dilemmas for both parties, and a climate in which once-unthinkable policy consequences appear uncomfortably close to reality.

No, 'wokeness' isn't the reason Silicon Valley Bank collapsed

Justin Ray, *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 15, 2023

The fight against the amorphous, catch-all phrase “wokeness” by the right has seen some odd moments, but it’s hard to top the recent discourse involving Silicon Valley Bank. Journalists, politicians and pundits are trying to use diversity as a scapegoat for the institution’s collapse. *Wall Street Journal* columnist Andy Kessler was widely panned for claiming that the bank may have been distracted by an over-commitment to diversity. “In its proxy statement, SVB notes that besides 91% of their board being independent and 45% women, they also have ‘1 Black,’ ‘1 LGBTQ+’ and ‘2 Veterans.’ I’m not saying 12 white men would have avoided this mess, but the company may have been distracted by diversity demands,” he wrote. Other Rupert Murdoch-owned media properties have also been pushing the narrative that SVB’s collapse took place due to an over-commitment to diversity. On Fox News, House Oversight Committee chairman Representative James Comer called it, “one of the most woke banks.” Fox News also quoted former CKE Restaurants CEO and current Heritage Foundation visiting fellow Andy Puzder as saying: “If you’re not focused on how your company is governed and run, if you’re just focused on being woke, you’re going to have problems.”

In a *New York Post* story headlined, “While Silicon Valley Bank collapsed, top executive pushed ‘woke’ programs.” In another story, the *Post* quoted “a tech insider” as saying that SVB was “the bank of the Democrats.” “If it was the Bank of MAGA, what are the chances it would be bailed out?” the person added. “There’s not a chance in hell.” But as *New York Magazine*’s Kara Swisher said during an appearance on MSNBC: “It’s a nonsense, nonsense argument.” First, Kessler himself admits that SVB’s board was still mostly male and mostly white, calling into question how deep its commitment to diversity actually was. Then, there is the actual truth about the downfall: As *The Chronicle* reported, SVB failed mainly because it invested a lot of customer deposits into long-term Treasury and mortgage-backed bonds. They fell in value when the Federal Reserve began raising interest rates. Then, when many customers needed to withdraw cash as the tech boom fizzled, it had to sell those bonds at a loss.

Fox News’ liberal pundit, Jessica Tarlov, co-host of the roundtable show “The Five,” pointed out another problem with the woke narrative. She said SVB “basically was” a “MAGA” institution, highlighting that conservative political donor and venture capitalist Peter Thiel was one of SVB’s top account holders. His Founders Fund pulled all its money from the bank a week before the government took over. Thiel donated \$1.25 million to former President Donald Trump’s 2016 presidential campaign. He also financially supported many Republican candidates during the past midterm elections.

Moreover, many businesses with SVB accounts have their own issues over racial disparities in leadership. Online-styling service Stitch Fix, for example. In 2021, 90% of its leadership was white or Asian American, with Black people and Latinos each making up 2.5% of top executives. In 2019, NBC News found more than 100 accounts that featured extremist and racist content on the popular online gaming platform Roblox — another company directly impacted by SVB’s collapse. Offensive content “included longstanding neo-Nazi coded language, phrases like ‘Jews to Gas!’ and user names including ‘WhiteRaceBestRace.’ ”

BuzzFeed, yet another client of SVB, has been criticized by its staff for “the overwhelming whiteness of newsroom leadership.” A source told *Vanity Fair* that in 2020 that “over the past couple of years, it feels like there’s been a bit of a drain where the company doesn’t work as hard to retain people of color.”

Finally, it is possible that Trump shares some of the blame. A 2010 law widely referred to as Dodd-Frank strengthened regulations for banks that held at least \$50 billion in assets. They were required to maintain certain levels of funding. A 2018 law spearheaded by Republicans and signed by then-President Trump rolled back banking regulations and raised the threshold to \$250 billion, meaning medium-size banks were exempted.

The belief that diversity commitments led to SVB’s fall feeds into the narrative that when institutions take steps to repair past injustices they crumble. It is the latest tool in the arsenal of those who have sought to dismantle all efforts to aid or even give marginalized people representation. There is no institution too small; they have attacked libraries, bicycle shops and even M&M’s.

In San Francisco, a proposal to issue several forms of reparations to the city’s Black residents has met a similar backlash. The narrative that diversity is toxic has to be destroyed because as institutions try to repair past injustices, these “woke” attacks will grow more fervent and may undo much-needed work.

State must set up local governments to fight poverty

Joe Mathews, *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 28, 2023

If California wants to curb poverty, its local governments must become richer. That's one lesson from Stockton's recent history, as recounted by Stanford Law School Professor Michelle Wilde Anderson in her Zócalo Book Prize-winning book, "The Fight to Save the Town." Anderson carefully connects the dots between the poverty of people and the poverty of local governments. Anderson shows the human impacts of deep, decades-long declines in federal and state support for local governments. From 1979 through 2016, she notes, federal funding for neighborhood development decreased 80%. Local governments responded by taking on debt, reducing services, selling land, and raising taxes and fees.

"When local governments are populated mostly by low-income people, there is typically much less money for public services," Anderson writes. "Weak, broke local governments make it harder for residents to lead decent lives on low incomes or get their families out of poverty. Entire towns become poverty traps." One poverty trap is Stockton, population 322,000, which Anderson depicts both before and after its 2012 bankruptcy. She shows how segregation, drug trafficking, police violence and long commutes (to Bay Area jobs) have impoverished neighborhoods and made Stockton a "city of orphans." Stockton's local government wasn't up to the challenges. Instead of investing in existing residents, the city subsidized real estate developers in pursuit of new developments that were supposed to attract new residents, tourists and tax revenue. The Great Recession exposed the folly of these projects, which were often financed by pension obligation bonds, as well as the city's unsustainable retiree benefit promises to its employees. The results? Layoffs, huge program cuts and bankruptcy.

Anderson's book is deeply interested in how community groups, nonprofits and young officials, led by City Council Member-turned-Mayor Michael Tubbs, responded after the bankruptcy. The story she tells is at once encouraging — people and officials made progress in the most difficult of circumstances — and also sobering, because the progress was so tenuous.

What worked best were intense, multifaceted efforts to empower residents to solve problems in south Stockton neighborhoods after decades of stigma and disinvestment. Working together, local officials, nonprofits and community groups listened to residents and pursued their priorities. This work, mostly by people involved in the Reinvent South Stockton Coalition, started with cleaning up and reclaiming public spaces — first shoring up a park, then shuttering an open-air drug market near a liquor store. Community members opened a clinic that offered mental health resources. And Tubbs and other allies led the way in taking a series of small and large steps focused on treating and reducing the trauma local residents felt.

Poor cities, the scholar concludes, often cut everything except emergency services and public safety, leaving them without the fundamental ingredients that fight poverty: mental health resources, a sense of personal safety, access to living-wage jobs and secure housing. "Our theory of change," one Reinvent leader tells Anderson, "is investing in people. We have to shift the language from people's problems to their assets." South Stockton, and the city as a whole, saw significant gains from this work, though it's far from clear if the progress can be sustained. Tubbs and his allies lost their re-election bids in 2020. The pandemic undermined local systems and community projects. The founder of one important group, Fathers & Families, was arrested, undermining trauma recovery work. Anderson is clear-eyed about the need to change the very structure and organization of local government. One of her suggestions for places like Stockton is "changing jurisdictions," which could mean moving around municipal lines or combining cities into regional units. She also argues that we need new ways of thinking and talking about troubled cities — not as "hellholes" that are "dying" but as places that, with the right resources and new structures for residents, can make poor residents wealthier.

In California, I'd go even further than Anderson and suggest that empowering cities requires restructuring the state itself. California, since the passage of Proposition 13 in 1978, has become heavily centralized, with tax policies and resource allocations for localities mostly decided at the state level. Returning power to local governments would require so many changes to existing policies and budgeting that the best path forward would be a new state Constitution. Our two most recent governors, Jerry Brown and Gavin Newsom, have both championed local government and fighting poverty, at least rhetorically. Meanwhile, both men centralized more power in their offices and eschewed constitutional reform. Fighting poverty in this state requires politicians at the state level to do the very opposite — and place more resources and power in the hands of people, their communities and their local governments.

Labour take note: red-wall voters want an ambitious plan for renewal – not tough talk and flag waving

The Conversation (UK), 10th May 2023, by James Morrison (*Associate Professor in Journalism, University of Stirling*)

If projections can be relied on, Labour has good reason to feel confident of supplanting the Conservatives as biggest party at the next general election. Yet it remains far from clear that Keir Starmer is heading for a House of Commons majority. A Tory-to-Labour swing of 4.5% in 2023's local elections fell marginally short of the 5% switch-around he needs to enter single-party government at Westminster. Labour made gains in this year's red wall salvage operation, which included the successful recapture of councils in Stoke-on-Trent and Blackpool. But it still stuttered in post-industrial areas where it might have been expected to capitalise on broken Tory promises about levelling up. Among its tally of mixed results were only modest advances in once deep-red heartlands such as Bassetlaw, Sandwell and Darlington, as well as other "left-behind" places New Labour annexed in 1997, such as Great Yarmouth." That's to say nothing of the party's failure to sway "Worcester woman". The fabled floating voter credited with propelling Tony Blair to victory voted Green in 2023. Party co-leader Carla Denyer mused that "deep dislike of the Tories" had failed to translate into enthusiasm for "Starmer's uninspiring Labour". So what exactly do people want from Labour? And why is it still struggling to fully exploit the mix of ennui and anger felt by so many voters who turned Tory in 2019?

Buses, doctors, jobs

While carrying out fieldwork for my recent book, *The Left Behind*, I interviewed residents, business owners, community activists and parish councillors in several post-industrial areas contested in the local elections this year – from Stoke and Great Yarmouth to Leigh in Greater Manchester. Doing so gave me a clear sense of the concerns preoccupying voters in the regions that switched to Conservative MPs in 2019 but are still waiting for promises of levelling up to materialise.

Most apparent was the need for a vision of a more socially just, interventionist approach to regulating the economy and reviving public services. This is the most likely way to motivate a resurgence in Labour support. The "anyone-but-the-Tories" backlash witnessed in the locals followed a campaign dominated by party-political point scoring over who could talk toughest on crime and antisocial behaviour. But my interviewees were much more likely to complain about poor-quality, precarious jobs, lack of opportunities for young people, unaffordable housing and the impact of long years of austerity on overstretched schools and GPs, desolate high streets and unreliable or non-existent bus services. Labour may have comfortably won the council election in the ward covering the sprawling post-war Stoke housing estate of Bentilee, but it did so on a paltry turnout of 16%. Here there is a deep-seated disillusionment with politicians of all hues which was described by a local pensioner who told me: "So many people on the estate now say, 'I'm not voting; they're all a waste of time'".

She despaired of the fact that an area once characterised by "employment, and plenty of it" in pottery factories (where she worked as a manager's PA) now had few jobs other than in a single area of "rejuvenation": distribution centres. [...] A carless foodbank volunteer, from [nearby Gorleston, said she had been forced to turn down several paid jobs in town because she had no way of reaching work in time for the start of her shifts. On the rare occasions when people did mention crime or antisocial behaviour (key concerns, according to team Starmer) they tended to view them as symptoms of under investment, not delinquency. Though critical of "gangs" that drove her and her son out of Bentilee, a working single mum reflected that young people had "nothing to do" there thanks to the closure of its youth club.

Asking the wrong questions

As ever, perceptions of which issues are most salient to voters depend on what exactly you ask them and how you frame your questions. The "deep-dive" focus groups that pollster Deborah Mattinson conducted in ex-Labour strongholds for her 2020 book, *Beyond the Red Wall*, were almost exclusively concerned with asking why so many people had abandoned the party in 2019. Perhaps unsurprisingly, three factors featured prominently: dislike of Jeremy Corbyn; a sense of being ignored and patronised by middle-class, socially liberal Labour leaders; and frustration at the party's nebulous position on Brexit.

In the three years since, Mattinson, now Starmer's director of strategy, seems to have continued asking herself (and subsequent focus-groups) much the same questions. As a result, instead of addressing the evident material interests of red-wall voters, Labour is still fighting the last war.

The people in lost constituencies want Starmer's Labour to spend more, not less, than New Labour. This is the most significant aspect of "red-wall sentiment", and yet the one Starmer seems reluctant to recognise.

What's a Luddite? An expert on technology and society explains

The Conversation (UK), 12th May 2023, by Andrew Maynard (Professor of Advanced Technology Transitions, Arizona State University)

The term “Luddite” emerged in early 1800s England. At the time there was a thriving textile industry that depended on manual knitting frames and a skilled workforce to create cloth and garments out of cotton and wool. But as the Industrial Revolution gathered momentum, steam-powered mills threatened the livelihood of thousands of artisanal textile workers. Faced with an industrialized future that threatened their jobs and their professional identity, a growing number of textile workers turned to direct action. Galvanized by their leader, Ned Ludd, they began to smash the machines that they saw as robbing them of their source of income. It’s not clear whether Ned Ludd was a real person, or simply a figment of folklore invented during a period of upheaval. But his name became synonymous with rejecting disruptive new technologies – an association that lasts to this day.

Questioning doesn’t mean rejecting

Contrary to popular belief, the original Luddites were not anti-technology, nor were they technologically incompetent. Rather, they were skilled adopters and users of the artisanal textile technologies of the time. Their argument was not with technology, per se, but with the ways that wealthy industrialists were robbing them of their way of life. Today, this distinction is sometimes lost. Being called a Luddite often indicates technological incompetence – as in, “I can’t figure out how to send emojis; I’m such a Luddite.” Or it describes an ignorant rejection of technology: “He’s such a Luddite for refusing to use Venmo.”

In December 2015, Stephen Hawking, Elon Musk and Bill Gates were jointly nominated for a “Luddite Award”. Their sin? Raising concerns over the potential dangers of artificial intelligence. The irony of three prominent scientists and entrepreneurs being labeled as Luddites underlines the disconnect between the term’s original meaning and its more modern use as an epithet for anyone who doesn’t wholeheartedly and unquestioningly embrace technological progress.

Yet technologists like Musk and Gates aren’t rejecting technology or innovation. Instead, they’re rejecting a worldview that all technological advances are ultimately good for society. This worldview optimistically assumes that the faster humans innovate, the better the future will be. This “move fast and break things” approach toward technological innovation has come under increasing scrutiny in recent years – especially with growing awareness that unfettered innovation can lead to deeply harmful consequences that a degree of responsibility and forethought could help avoid.

Why Luddism matters

In an age of ChatGPT, gene editing and other transformative technologies, perhaps we all need to channel the spirit of Ned Ludd as we grapple with how to ensure that future technologies do more good than harm.

In fact, “Neo-Luddites” or “New Luddites” is a term that emerged at the end of the 20th century. In 1990, the psychologist Chellis Glendinning published an essay titled “Notes toward a Neo-Luddite Manifesto.”

In it, she recognized the nature of the early Luddite movement and related it to a growing disconnect between societal values and technological innovation in the late 20th century. As Glendinning writes, “Like the early Luddites, we too are a desperate people seeking to protect the livelihoods, communities, and families we love, which lie on the verge of destruction.” On one hand, entrepreneurs and others who advocate for a more measured approach to technology innovation lest we stumble into avoidable – and potentially catastrophic risks – are frequently labeled “Neo-Luddites.” These individuals represent experts who believe in the power of technology to positively change the future, but are also aware of the societal, environmental and economic dangers of blinkered innovation. Then there are the Neo-Luddites who actively reject modern technologies, fearing that they are damaging to society. New York City’s Luddite Club falls into this camp. Formed by a group of tech-disillusioned Gen-Zers, the club advocates the use of flip phones, crafting, hanging out in parks and reading hardcover or paperback books. Screens are an anathema to the group, which sees them as a drain on mental health.

I’m not sure how many of today’s Neo-Luddites – whether they’re thoughtful technologists, technology-rejecting teens or simply people who are uneasy about technological disruption – have read Glendinning’s manifesto. And to be sure, parts of it are rather contentious. Yet there is a common thread here: the idea that technology can lead to personal and societal harm if it is not developed responsibly.

And maybe that approach isn’t such a bad thing.

No miniskirts. No railing about being a working mother.

The Daily Mail, 17th September 2022, by historian Amanda Foreman

Leading historian AMANDA FOREMAN explains why the Queen was a true feminist icon who changed the world for millions of women – in very surprising ways

Ask someone for the name of a famous feminist and no doubt you'll get one of a few prominent women batted back to you. Germaine Greer. Gloria Steinem. Hillary Clinton. But Elizabeth Windsor? That would be a no. She looked the opposite of today's powerful women with her knee-length tweeds and distinctly unfashionable court shoes. I, though, argue differently. As a historian with a particular interest in female power, I believe one thing above all puts the Queen in a special category of achievement. Not the length of her reign. Not even her link to the courageous wartime generation. No, it is her global impact on the cause of gender equality that should be remembered, all without donning a miniskirt or wailing MeToo. All without spilling emotions, making herself a victim or hiding the effects of age and motherhood.

I believe the Queen is the ultimate feminist icon of the 20th Century, more a symbol of women's progress in this century than other icons like Madonna or Beyoncé could dream of. Females everywhere, particularly those past menopause, have much to thank her for. But when it has been previously suggested the Queen was a feminist, or that women should celebrate her life, critics have bitten back sharply. In 2019 Olivia Colman, who portrayed the Queen in the Netflix drama *The Crown*, provoked equal cheers and jeers for describing her as 'the ultimate feminist'. A few years before, Woman's Hour chief presenter Emma Barnett had her intellectual credentials questioned for calling the Queen a 'feminist icon'. They justified the view for different reasons. For Colman, it was because the Queen had shown a wife could assume a man's role while retaining her femininity. The argument went in reverse for Barnett: the Queen had shown her gender was 'irrelevant to her capacity to do her job'. Yet no King would ever have his masculinity and the definition of manhood so conflated in the same way. It's doubtful anyone will question whether King Charles defines the essence of what it is to be a man. In the midst of all the grief for the Queen, we should remember at the beginning of her reign Elizabeth's potential power to effect change provoked as much unease as it did anticipation.

In a patriarchal world, female empowerment is a force to fear. After all, we never talk about 'male empowerment', do we? Our two other long-lived queens, Elizabeth I and Victoria, had the same scrutiny. Foreign affairs, great questions of state, probity in government, what did that matter compared to the burning issue of what it meant to have a woman placed above the heads of men? It was not easy for Elizabeth II to escape from under the shadow of Queen Victoria, the figurative mother of the nation.

Initially, it wasn't even clear she wanted to. Though the command for brides to obey their husbands had not been part of the Book of Common Prayer since 1928, Elizabeth included it in her wedding vows. Aged 25, she was a mother-of-two when she made her accession speech before the Privy Council. Accompanied by her husband, Elizabeth looked even younger than her years, surrounded by a roomful of mostly old men. But after the Privy Council meeting, the comparisons with Victoria stopped. And you can begin to see her innate feminism come to the fore. Elizabeth did not lose her self-confidence in between pregnancies and pass over the red boxes or deputise Philip to meet her Ministers. Far from it. She took on the role of sovereign and Philip accepted his as the world's most famous house-husband. In reality, there were few actions or speeches of the Queen's that could be classed as declaratively feminist – such as the time she drove Crown Prince Abdullah of Saudi Arabia around Balmoral in her Land Rover when Saudi women were forbidden to drive, going at such breakneck speed while chatting that the Prince begged her to slow down.

No, instead of examples like these, the Queen was a feminist for reasons most women can instantly relate to: first, she established clear boundaries between the demands of her job and those of her family. Society still expects wives will drop everything for the family, no matter how consuming their careers, so husbands can go to work. Not once did the Queen say or imply she ought to shift her weekly audience with the Prime Minister, or cancel the ribbon-cutting of a hospital because of some domestic concern. Second, society judges working mothers much more harshly than working fathers, giving the latter a free pass if their job is important enough but condemning the former as a terrible person if her children don't turn out to be outstanding successes. The Queen's fitness as sovereign has never been tied to her fitness as a mother. Although she always made her family a part of her life, Elizabeth did not allow it to define her as Victoria did. Third, society makes middle-aged women feel that they are invisible. [...] For over five decades, the Queen showed what strength and purpose look like on the body of an older woman. She tore up the rule book on gender roles without society falling apart or families breaking down. Despite heavy restrictions on what she could do as a woman let alone a Queen, she forged her own path – and invited the rest of us to follow.

Strike-hit NHS hospital has to SHUT intensive care beds after nurses ignored union's last-minute plea to offer 'life and limb' care during today's unprecedented walk-out

The Daily Mail, 2nd May 2023, by Shaun Wooller (Health Editor for *The Daily Mail*)

A hospital was forced to close intensive care beds after nurses ignored their union's request to provide 'life and limb' care, an NHS boss has revealed. Thousands of nursing staff in half of England's hospitals, mental health and community services began a 28-hour walkout on Sunday evening. Last-minute talks between the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) and NHS England agreed 'to protect life and limb services', with the union allowing nurses to provide a minimal level of staffing in intensive care and trauma.

But Nick Hulme, chief executive of the East Suffolk and North Essex NHS Foundation Trust, revealed he was only able to admit one patient to the intensive therapy unit at Colchester Hospital after striking nurses defied their leaders' exemptions and failed to turn up to work. He told *Times Radio*: 'Unfortunately, despite that exemption, the nurses still chose not to come in, they're not obliged to come in even if asked to come in by ourselves and the RCN. So we were in a position where we had to significantly reduce the capacity on that ITU down to the fact we could only admit one patient because that patient was too difficult, was too sick to transfer last night.'

The RCN has escalated strike action after members voted to reject a government pay deal that would have seen nurses receive a 5 per cent rise and one-off bonus of up to £3,789. It has seen some nurses walking out of intensive care, A&E and cancer wards for the first time. Mr Hulme added: 'It has been more difficult this time. And I think the escalation, you kind of wonder where it's gonna go next. So which is why we do need a quick solution. We need all parties to get around the table to recognise there is no negotiation, there's no outcome without compromise.'

NHS England had warned patients to expect major 'disruptions and delays to services'. RCN leader Pat Cullen today urged Health Secretary Steve Barclay 'not to be disrespectful' to nurses amid their 'biggest strike yet' over the bank holiday. It came after Mr Barclay described their ongoing industrial action as 'premature' and 'disrespectful' to the other trade unions who are meeting to discuss the Government's pay offer tomorrow.

Under the NHS Staff Council, the unions will consider the offer of a 5 per cent pay increase for 2023/24 along with a one-off payment worth between £1,655 and £3,789 for the current financial year for nurses in England.

Most unions who make up the council have voted individually to accept the deal but the overall decision is based on an electoral college system, with votes allocated in proportion to the size of the union membership. The 28-hour RCN action will end just before midnight on Monday after a High Court judge ruled it would be unlawful for it to continue into Tuesday as originally planned. This morning, Ms Cullen defended nurses after Mr Barclay described their strike as 'disrespectful' to other unions and urged him to 'get round this table immediately' to resolve the dispute. She told *Sky News*: 'There's certainly no disrespect being shown from our nursing staff, I can say that categorically. I would ask the Secretary of State not to be disrespectful to those hundreds of thousands of nursing staff that have participated in this ballot and that are losing another day's pay today, standing out on picket lines – standing up for our health service that's been totally broken by this Government. An NHS in crisis, seven million-plus people on waiting lists – so how are we going to address all of those issues, how are we going to address tens of thousands of vacant posts that we've got in England? If we don't, then we will continue with serious risk to patient safety and we will never get the backlog sorted. So, it really is incumbent on this Secretary of State to get round this table immediately with myself and the Royal College of Nursing, and put more money (on the table) and let our nursing staff get back and do what they want to do, and that is care for our patients.'

Matthew Taylor, chief executive of the NHS Confederation, told *Sky* that strikes have 'taken a heavy toll' on services and urged unions to accept the pay deal. I think our view now is that given that most staff have voted in favour of this deal, it is time to accept it, for the unions to work together and for us to think more long-term about what we need to do to address that crisis of 120,000 vacancies in the health service,' he said. [...]

On cancer care, Dr Diwakar said there 'will be an impact on cancer services other than those where there are life and limb-threatening services needed', with any other May 1 appointments 'rescheduled as quickly as possible'. Nurses comprise a quarter of NHS staff and are the biggest proportion of the health service workforce. Healthcare workers are also staging a protest in central London on Monday under Unite.

The union said this demonstration will coincide with a strike by its members from Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust and the Yorkshire Ambulance Service.

God's pronouns are causing conniptions in Britain

The Economist, 2nd March 2023

God was very clear on many things. He said: "I am the LORD." He said: "I am...the Almighty." He said: "I am Alpha and Omega." However perhaps because He tended to communicate by angels, divine inspiration and stone tablets, rather than by email with sign-off, He did not specify His pronouns. Now an argument is brewing among some in the Church of England (c of e) over whether He is indeed best referred to as He/Him or whether He might also be referred to as She/Her; or neither; or all of the above. Omnipotence allows the non-binary to be so much more expansive.

Not to mention confusing. All debates over pronouns risk becoming befuddling; debates over which pronouns to use for a bodiless, sexless, omnipresent deity who exists beyond time can become more befuddling still. Naturally this does not prevent theologians from having them. While C of E traditionalists wish to keep Him as Him, some want additional liturgy to be developed to allow them to speak of God in a non-gendered way. The debate is unlikely to be resolved soon: the C of E officially began discussing this in 2014; will begin a joint project on gendered language this spring; and estimates it will be years before it is resolved. *Sub specie aeternitatis*, that is brisk: Anglicans began discussing transubstantiation 500 years ago and the issue is still not settled.

Sex and God are currently causing conniptions in other ways in Britain. When Kate Forbes, a Scottish politician and Christian, said that she would have voted against gay marriage, it resulted in the near-scuppering of her bid to be the leader of the Scottish National Party. In February, when the C of E said it would start allowing the blessing of gay marriages in churches, that resulted in a split in the Anglican Communion (a club of churches) and—a sure sign of Anglican outrage—merciless declarations from bishops worldwide that they were praying for each other.

Both debates tend to make traditionalists chunter about woke nonsense. (Vladimir Putin is among those who disapprove.) In truth what is most striking about the debate over God's sex is its antiquity. Christians have been discussing God's sex for centuries in ways that make LGBTQI+ categories seem conservative. There are ancient texts in which the Holy Spirit is referred to as "she" and "mother" and others in which God has breasts which are milked by the Holy Spirit. Sexing a Trinity is tricky.

Both sides of these debates tend to turn to the Bible as an authority. Not without reason: the Bible is the inspired word of God. The problem is that God inspired quite a lot of words—modern editions run to 1,000-odd pages in a tiny font—and many of them disagree either with each other or with current Christian doctrine. Anglicans today might argue that God is neither male nor female. But the Bible offers ample evidence to the contrary. In its pages, God is a "male and masculine" deity, says Francesca Stavrakopoulou, professor of Hebrew Bible at Exeter University. The Bible contains verses detailing everything from God's muscles (big); to his genitals (also large). But those verses tend to find their way into fewer C of E press releases.

In truth, Christians have long operated a pious pick'n'mix approach to their quarrels. "The issue *du jour* is homosexuality," says Diarmaid MacCulloch, emeritus professor of the history of the church at Oxford University. But this issue is "a new one, which seems to threaten the masculinity of a great many Anglican bishops worldwide." Such debates invoke antiquity but are often more revealing of modernity. A concept called politicomorphism argues that instead of things being done on earth as in heaven, often the reverse is true. Many of the bishops who split from the Anglican Communion come from conservative countries such as Sudan, in which homosexuality is illegal.

But all Christians have their limits. Anglicans are in mild-mannered disarray over which pronoun to use for God, yet arguably there is a word that solves their debate perfectly. The pronoun "they" is not only gender neutral but can also, much like a trinitarian God, simultaneously be both singular and plural. However its use in the singular is frowned on by the fuddy-duddy sort of grammarian and, as one Christian theologian observes, "Christian theology has probably not caught up with [its] modern use." Evidently there are some innovations that even Anglicans can't abide.

Britain's love of tradition comes at a price

The Financial Times, 20th September 2022, by Janan Ganesh (biweekly columnist and associate editor)

Imagine spending these last 40 years in Germany. You see a relatively homogenous nation become one in which a quarter of the population have a migrant background. It absorbs, at short notice, a much poorer country of 16mn people called the German Democratic Republic. It grows out of pacifism to wield lethal force in Kosovo and beyond. Through all this social change, which should rock the political system, you enjoy a scarcely believable level of civic stability. Olaf Scholz is just the fourth chancellor you have known since October 1982.

All praise, then, to the Hohenzollerns. Only a monarchy, I am led to understand, could have presided over such orderly evolution.

Forgive the snark. It is just that, amid Britain's real and natural grief, some bold claims have been made of late about the uses of tradition. One is that only by keeping some key things the same can a society change: continuity enables its opposite. The implication is that, without the monarchy, the UK would never have become a polyethnic and irreligious nation, at least not so peacefully. Who believes this? And can they not think of republics that have managed the same feat? In a generation or two, Ireland swapped the pervasive church for legal abortion, agriculture for professional services, scant diversity for quite a bit, little wealth for rather a lot.

This isn't a case for a UK republic, a cause for which there is neither great demand nor need. The point is rather that Britain gives its traditions far too much credit. At best, they are innocuous. At worst, they impose a material cost on the nation. There is a link between Britain's conservatism and its seeming fate as a middle-income country with a world capital attached.

Think of all the constraints on growth in the UK. The connecting theme is traditionalism.

One is the planning regime, which stops the expansion of productive cities and money-spinning research laboratories. It does so on the touching premise that England's countryside is uniformly beautiful. All democracies have Nimbys. In few are they so able to spin their self-interest to other voters as a defence of the national soul. (Often, they are defending some grass by junction 6 of the M1.)

Or take the fiscal treatment of the old. With student loan repayments, a working graduate faces a severe effective marginal tax rate. An entrepreneur who forms and sells a business likewise owes the state a share of the capital gain. Sit on a house since 1990, by contrast, and amazingly little will be asked of your passive asset appreciation. Nor will any government with a survival instinct tamper with the terms of your pension. Again, the problem is not just the elderly's raw weight of votes. It is the ease with which the rest of the electorate is moved by mystical appeals to tradition: old age as a moral achievement, residential property as something inviolate.

There is yet a third example of what we might call expensive conservatism. But Brexit is something the UK is still years away from being able to discuss. The leaders of that movement still insist it was a vote for a more, not less, open country. (On immigration policy, they have been roughly as good as their word.) Most of the 52 per cent who voted that way, though, wanted a more familiar and traditional Britain. Only a liberal zealot would deny the legitimacy of that desire. Only the intellectually dishonest, six years on, would deny the economic cost of it.

At each turn, Britain's economy seems to run into a growth-blocking wall of past-worship. Ancient universities? A national specialism. Training the less academic? The halfhearted project of every government. And so labour productivity continues to lag much of the rich world.

In a sense, the nation's dilemma is captured in the persons of Liz Truss and King Charles III. One is a modern-minded, growth-at-all-costs prime minister. The other is a pastoral romantic. There are encouraging signs of the monarch growing terse and elliptical in the expression of his opinions. But these command a following in the country regardless. To arrest the UK's decline, Truss will have to confront them.

There is no disgrace in choosing tradition over growth.

Other countries seem to do just that in their revealed preferences. But Italian per capita income is easier to live on when there is also Italian weather. Japanese stagnation is not so bad when there are also Japanese crime rates. If the UK embarks on the economic trajectories of those countries, what is its cushion? Meaning, unity, comfort in grief: as the past two weeks have shown, Britain finds all these things and more in tradition. It won't find prosperity there.

The abortion pill case is a disaster for innovation everywhere

Brooke Masters, *Financial Times*, April 19, 2023

Imagine for a moment that Danco Laboratories made widgets, instead of mifepristone, the abortion drug now on the front lines of the US culture wars. Strip away the angry rhetoric about bodily integrity and unborn babies and focus on what has happened to this New York-based company's basic livelihood over the past two weeks. A Texas-based federal judge in effect banned all sales of its only product by rescinding regulatory approval granted more than 20 years ago. An appeals court stayed that ruling but imposed restrictions that require entirely new packaging and change where and to whom the product can be sold. A third federal court in another part of the US ordered Danco to keep selling the product as it is and prevented it from making any changes.

Emergency appeals to the US Supreme Court routinely use hyped-up language, but Danco really is facing "regulatory chaos" that has thrust the company into "untenable limbo" and "uncharted waters". The justices are expected to rule by Friday whether to put all the rulings on hold while the company appeals. Those engaged in less fraught lines of business may be tempted to dismiss Danco's woes as having nothing to do with them. But this judicial intervention should send chills down the spine of anyone working in a regulated industry. It undercuts the administrative expertise and legal certainty that are essential for innovation.

Founded in the 1990s after larger pharma groups refused to take on mifepristone, Danco has long faced pressure from anti-abortion groups. The company uses a postal box as its mailing address, manufactures overseas and keeps the names of its investors and top executives secret. More than a million women have used the pill in the US since Danco steered it through the Food and Drug Administration's approval process in 2000 and a series of later decisions that gradually expanded access. Most recently, the FDA ruled the pill could be sold in retail pharmacies. Medical abortions now account for more than half of those conducted nationwide. Then, in early April, a Texas judge appointed by Donald Trump ordered the FDA to revoke its original 2000 approval. According to the Biden administration, the decision marks the first time in the agency's nearly 100-year existence that its scientific judgment on safety has been overridden by a US court.

Relying largely on anecdotal evidence, Judge Matthew Kacsmaryk cut the legs off the globally respected US system for approving medicines and dealing with reported side-effects. The judge ruled that healthcare workers who personally oppose abortion had the standing to bring the case because they might at some point have to treat a patient who had taken mifepristone. That flies in the face of generations of decisions that require plaintiffs to have been personally harmed by a government action. The Texas judge also found the FDA approval process was inadequate because the clinical trials did not explicitly include some real-world uses of the drug, and held that the 2000 approval could be retroactively challenged because Danco had restarted the clock when it sought to expand access in 2016 and afterwards.

A coalition of drugmakers and investors wrote in a legal brief supporting Danco that if such rules had been applied to other drugs "it is unlikely that a single one would have been approved — or that their approvals would have gone unchallenged — and countless patients would have suffered needlessly". Without a predictable process for drug approvals and dealing with health concerns that arise later, the US will become a far less hospitable place for drug development. This is a disaster not just for American patients, who will be deprived of early access to new medicines, but for the entire world because the US is the most important healthcare market and a major driver of global innovation. Currently, the US receives 68 per cent of global biotech investment, according to the industry group Bio, and half of the top 20 biggest spenders on pharma research and development last year were American companies. Kacsmaryk may eventually be overturned. But the fact that he was willing to support such an attack on the FDA should trouble not just drugmakers but every industry that relies on regulatory approvals. If anyone can retroactively challenge a government agency's expert decision at any time, the risks rise around backing anything new, from gas pipelines and self-driving cars to financial products and vaccines. The last thing a divided country already addicted to lawsuits needs is an open invitation to file more of them.

Coronation day arrests transform the profile of UK republicans

The Financial Times, 12th May 2023, by William Wallis

Before the coronation of King Charles III, the leader of the UK's republican campaign group, Graham Smith, had rarely featured beyond the fringes of the media. But as is often the way when free speech comes under threat, his arrest ahead of Saturday's ceremony and detention during festivities — along with seven other members of Republic — has propelled Smith into the headlines. The incident has also led to him being invited to speak to MPs in parliament next week about his experience at the hands of police.

"We have gone from being a campaign group that was hardly known about to a household name," said Smith, adding that paid membership had grown by thousands in a week and crowdfunding had surged. He argued that a softer approach to the demonstration Republic had organised with initial consent from London's Metropolitan Police might have been more successful in blunting their effect. "If, for example, [the King] had sent his own staff down with coffee and biscuits, we would have found that very difficult," said Smith.

Support for abolishing the monarchy remains a minority cause in Britain, with the most recent polls suggesting one-quarter of people identify as republican, up from one-fifth a year ago. But the near taboo that existed around the cause during much of the 70-year reign of Queen Elizabeth has eroded, and the number of people who believe preserving the monarchy "is very important" has slipped to a 40-year low of 29 per cent, according to the National Centre for Social Research. Political analysts attribute the decline partly to timing: the backdrop of scandal and enmity within the royal family, and the succession of a King who has yet to win the same degree of public affection as his mother.

But controversy over the cost and pomp of the coronation and a ham-fisted effort to get the public to swear allegiance to King Charles have further opened up the debate. The arrests, for which the Met has since apologised, have meanwhile given the republican movement an unintended boost. "It has opened up a space for discussion that probably wasn't there before — whether that's to do with Republic or the high-camp ridiculousness of the ceremony," said Tim Bale, professor of politics at Queen Mary university of London. Speaking about the grounds on which the police detained him, using a new public order law rushed into effect last week, Smith said: "There is a whole new side to the campaign now that we have had this injustice meted on us. We are not just this group of people campaigning on a niche issue. We are central to much wider debates about the constitution and our rights."

While no one is predicting the imminent demise of the monarchy, recent polling shows its most ardent supporters are ageing. Meanwhile, Bale said, the fact that a plurality of young people are now opposed, gives pause for thought on how long the institution can command consent. "The age gradient is incredibly steep when you look at those surveys. If you were a member of the royal family, you would be worried if your most loyal subjects shuffled off this mortal coil and were replaced by a load of young people who either don't give a damn or are actively hostile," he said. This is particularly the case according to Sir John Curtice, a respected polling expert, because while in the past people have tended to change their minds as they aged, today's younger people are markedly more against the monarchy than 20 years ago. "The baseline has shifted," he said.

Royalists now face a challenge, Curtice added, if they want to stop the debate moving from the relative margins to a place where the BBC as national broadcaster feels the need to represent republican voices regularly to be fair. "The monarchy is going to have to continue to demonstrate its value and relevance," he said.

All eyes are now on King Charles, and whether his purported desire to modernise the institution translates into tangible change. "If he reforms it in a careful and sophisticated way, the monarchy could survive a long time," said Norman Baker, the former Liberal Democrat minister who has written extensively on royal finances. "If he sticks to not paying taxes, taking helicopters and private jets, and holds on to [outdated] ceremony, it will be dangerous." Nick Barber, professor of constitutional law at Oxford university, said there should at least be some agreement now on the need for more open conversation about what might come next, underscored by last week's events.

He said he did not foresee any near-term change but that when change did come, it might do so in a hurry "during a constitutional crisis or scandal".

"In one sense that will be very difficult," he said, pointing to likely disagreement over what kind of head of state might replace the King. "It could also be simple. We are always told the monarch doesn't play a big and active role in the constitution, and to the extent that is true, it isn't a role you have to rush to fill," he added [...].

‘A streak of extremism’: US book bans may increase in 2023

Adam Gabbatt, *The Guardian*, December 22, 2023

Book bans have plagued many US schools throughout 2022, with stories focusing on LGBTQ+ and race issues being targeted by conservatives across the country, and the right aims only to step up its attempts at censorship in the new year, experts warn. States including Missouri and Utah have seen intensifying crackdowns in recent months, with some Utah school libraries now requiring permission slips for students to borrow books covering

LGBTQ+ themes. Elsewhere the convincing re-elections of Republican governors in Florida and Texas, which have some of the most restrictive laws around education, mean that change is unlikely there in the short term. There is hope, however, with many educators, librarians and activists fighting back against book bans and winning some key victories in 2022. But restrictions have surged through the US in recent years. Through the first eight months of 2022, there were 681 attempts to ban or restrict library resources, targeting 1,651 different books, according to the American Library Association. Books about, or by, LGBTQ+ persons or people of color have been disproportionately targeted by rightwing activists, who frequently have links to deep-pocketed Republican donors. Hundreds of thousands of dollars have been spent on school board elections – traditionally small-scale affairs – in Texas alone, the *New York Times* reported in mid-December.

Texas and Florida have led the charge. Florida, whose recently re-elected governor, Ron DeSantis, signed into law the so-called “don’t say gay” bill earlier this year, has 566 book bans in place across school districts, second only to Texas, where the Republican legislature has also supported bills which enable censorship in schools. Between July 2021 and June 2022, 801 books were banned across 22 Texas school districts in Texas, *Texas Monthly* reported in November. “I don’t expect this to be waning,” said Jonathan Friedman, director of free expression and education programs at Pen America, which champions freedom of writing and speech worldwide. “In many parts of the country, there is a kind of streak of extremism that is continuing to ramp up.”

The restrictions came after Missouri passed a new law, SB 775, which banned providing “explicit sexual material” to elementary or secondary school students, including by assigning certain texts as homework or loaning them out of libraries. The legislation saw school districts remove works about Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo; visual depictions of Shakespeare’s works; and *Maus*, the Pulitzer-prize winning graphic novel about the Holocaust, which was banned from some schools in Tennessee in January 2022. As elsewhere, books which reference or are written by LGBTQ+ people or non-white people were targeted in Missouri, and in December the state’s ACLU filed a lawsuit against one school district after it removed the novel *Cats vs Robots #1: This is War* by Lewis Peterson and Margaret Stohl, a book about a space war between cats and robots which briefly references non-binary gender identity, from some school libraries. “Across the state, from school boards to lawmakers and other officials, we have seen a coordinated effort by the government to censor books in both school and public libraries, especially those authored by and featuring the perspectives of people and communities of color, LGBTQ+, and other marginalized groups,” Gillian Wilcox, deputy director for litigation at the ACLU of Missouri, said in a statement. [...] In a bleak period, there have been some victories for people who oppose censorship. In Texas, the Round Rock Black Parents Association successfully campaigned for the book *Stamped (For Kids): Racism, Antiracism, and You* – a history of racism in the US by the Black authors Jason Reynolds and Ibram X Kendi – to remain on the shelves, after it faced a ban.

But people opposing bans or proposed bans frequently come up against formidable foes. Censorship in states across the US has frequently been pushed by conservative groups linked to deep-pocketed rightwing donors. Groups like Moms for Liberty and Parents Defending Education have been instrumental in book-banning attempts in the US, often presenting themselves as small, “grassroots” efforts, while in reality they have links to prominent, wealthy Republicans. “There is a degree of organization and coordination behind this,” Friedman said. “That is the only thing that can explain why it looks so similar in so many places, and why it has spread so quickly,” he added, noting also that some political candidates will write to numerous school districts.

Recent efforts have expanded to conservatives targeting publishers themselves. A proposed law in Texas would require publishers to put age restrictions on books sold to school districts. For all the furor among the right wing, however, Friedman pointed out it appears it is rare for the vocal pro-censorship people to have read the books themselves. Lists of offending books circulate among rightwing groups, and frequently conservatives will pluck titles and complain to school boards, while those complaints demonstrate a lack of familiarity with the works. “Watching this for a year, I would venture that a huge number of the bans we’ve seen would not have happened if school districts insisted that people filing petitions spelled authors’ names and book titles correctly,” Friedman said. He concluded: “If [the school boards] just said: ‘You can’t submit a form with spelling errors,’ it would make a big difference.”

Joe Biden ends Ireland tour with passionate address to thousands

The Guardian, 14th April 2023, by *Rory Carroll and Lisa O'Carroll*

Joe Biden has concluded his visit to Ireland with a passionate riverside address to tens of thousands of people at his ancestral town in County Mayo. The US president turned his farewell speech outside St Muredach's cathedral in Ballina on Friday night into a celebration of Irish and American values that appeared partly aimed at US voters. "My friends, people of Mayo, this is a moment to recommit our hearts, our minds and souls to the march of progress. To lay the foundations brick by brick for a better future for our kids and grandkids," Biden said. He bounded on to the stage by the banks of the river Moy in a display of energy and stamina after a hectic four-day visit that tacitly rebuked doubts that, at the age of 80, he is too old to run for another term in the White House.

He cast the story of his ancestors leaving famine-stricken Ireland for liberty and opportunity in the US as a parable of the American dream. "I've never been more optimistic – and I've been doing this a long time – about what we can achieve if we stick together and stick to our values. This is a time of enormous possibilities," he said. Calling himself "Mayo Joe, son of Ballina", the prospective Democratic candidate for 2024 invoked traditional values. "Our strength is something that overcomes everyday hardships, and above all our courage allows us to march forward in faith. Family is the beginning, middle and the end – that's the Irish of it." The 27,000-strong crowd, which had queued for hours and passed through airport-style security, gave the president a rapturous reception, concluding a whirlwind week that stamped his Irish identity on his presidency, evoking comparisons to a 1963 visit by John Kennedy. Ballina is the birthplace of Biden's great-great-great-grandfather Edward Blewitt.

Earlier on Friday, Biden prayed at the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Knock, a Catholic shrine, during a highly personal pilgrimage through County Mayo. By chance, an ex-US army chaplain who works at the shrine, Fr Frank O'Grady, had tended to Biden's son Beau, who died of cancer in a US military hospital in 2015. The two men spoke, and Biden wept. He also visited a hospice in the Mayo town of Castlebar that has a plaque dedicated to Beau Biden.

US flags and Biden posters festooned Ballina, which resembled a US town on the Fourth of July. Families queued to take selfies in front of a mural of Biden. "The kettle is on Joe, come on home," said a poster. Harry McCafferty, a shoe repairer, said Biden had charmed the nation. "He's so friendly, he has a great way with him. And it's great for Ballina. People who have never heard of Ballina will know of it after today." The rapture bookended a homecoming for a man who, the *Irish Times* said, "just loves being Irish". It was Biden's third time in Ireland since 2016, but his first as president.

The address outside the cathedral followed three days during which the president caught the public imagination – and made some gaffes – during visits to Dublin and the Cooley peninsula in County Louth, where another branch of his family lives. The relatively freewheeling tour of the Irish republic, where Biden visited a pub and deli and did walkabouts, contrasted with a brief, politically delicate visit to Northern Ireland earlier in the week when he marked the Good Friday agreement's 25th anniversary amid tension over the Democratic Unionist party's boycott of power sharing.

The former DUP leader Arlene Foster said Biden "hates" the UK, a claim repeated by some British commentators. US and Irish officials rejected the assertion. Another protest came from five leftwing members of Ireland's legislature, who boycotted his address to the Dáil on Thursday, saying US support for Israel and Saudi Arabia was hurting Palestinians and Yemenis.

Biden's speech to the legislature won standing ovations and followed in the footsteps of his predecessors Kennedy, Ronald Reagan and Barack Obama. "I'm at home," he declared. "I just wish I could stay longer." His official Twitter account said the trip had embodied the Irish phrase *céad míle fáilte* – a hundred thousand welcomes. "Like my grandfather used to say: 'If you're lucky enough to be Irish, you're lucky enough,'" the tweet added. The president visited a heritage and genealogy centre in Crossmolina to learn more about his ancestor Edward Blewitt, a civil engineer, and his wife, Mary Mulderg, who emigrated to the US in 1851 and helped to plan and build Scranton in Pennsylvania, which is now twinned with Ballina.

Alan Dillon, a local politician who played Gaelic football for Mayo, asked the president to "say a little prayer" to break a purported curse that has prevented the county from winning the All-Ireland Senior Football Championship, also known as the Sam Maguire cup, since 1951.

Biden concluded his speech in Ballina with a rallying cry. "Mayo for Sam!" The crowd roared. He was to return to the US on Saturday.

Can Extinction Rebellion really be the new centre ground of the climate movement?

The Guardian, 24th April 2023, by Ellie Mae O'Hagan (*writer and head of external engagement at the Good Law Project*)

Over the weekend, tens of thousands of climate activists and concerned citizens converged on Westminster for “the Big One”, a climate demonstration with more than 200 participating organisations, including trade unions, community groups and charities, and led by Extinction Rebellion (XR). The demonstration’s convivial atmosphere was somewhere between a county fair and Glastonbury: participants tried out screen printing, ate together on College Green and took part in talks about the climate crisis. It was easy to forget that in 2020, XR was hanging by a thread. The pandemic decimated the movement on the ground – because its members could no longer meet, recruit others or plan activities. Also, the actions of a handful of protesters who blocked a London commuter train used by working-class people in October 2019 were received very badly, and did lasting damage to the group’s reputation (an XR spokesperson later apologised). “People are very keen to talk about the climate crisis,” one XR member recently told me, “but when they find out we’re from Extinction Rebellion, they don’t want to know.”

In the post-lockdown era, XR has been re-evaluating its strategy in light of harsher protest laws, smaller numbers on the ground and the emergence of radical grouplets such as Just Stop Oil. In the 2000s, climate activists focused less on public opinion and more on stopping new oil, gas and coal projects from being built. But by the end of the decade, that tactic came unstuck in the shadow of the 2008 global financial crisis. Activists became “keenly aware of the fact that they were talking about climate change in the shadow of the most significant financial disaster of our generation”, one activist from that era tells me. Eventually, many members of the climate movement redirected their work into the anti-austerity protests of the 2010s and climate activism took a backseat to protesting about public services being cut. But something was happening during those years that is rarely acknowledged: young anti-austerity campaigners were, for the first time, learning about the disastrous consequences of global heating from the climate activists they were meeting at anti-austerity protests. It was this nascent coalition of economic and environmental interests that led to new movements such as Green New Deal Rising and the Labour for a Green New Deal group, which successfully lobbied the party under Jeremy Corbyn to develop its green industrial revolution policy.

Yet in the midst of all of this Extinction Rebellion burst on to the scene in October 2018, with little connection to the movements that had come before. It broke all the understood rules of winning people over to a movement. It rejected hope in order to speak about the climate crisis in the starkest possible terms, was willing to upset other groups that were potential supporters (its first protest was to occupy Greenpeace) and created a prohibitively high bar to entry by encouraging people to get arrested. It shouldn’t have worked. But in April 2019, thousands of people flocked to central London to shut down the city as part of XR’s first big action. By May 2019, UK polls were revealing a surge in concern about the climate crisis.

Over the six months following the April 2019 protests, XR gained momentum. But like any movement, it contained contradictory views about tactics, strategy and where to go next. From 2021 onwards, activists frustrated at XR’s apparent inadequacy as a vehicle set up Insulate Britain and Just Stop Oil, campaigns that focused on attention-grabbing, disruptive protests – such as throwing soup at priceless artworks. And it was this decision that inadvertently presented an opportunity for XR to reinvent itself. Faced with increasingly draconian protest legislation and being outflanked in terms of radical tactics, XR put out a provocative statement on New Year’s Day 2023 announcing “we quit”. In it, the group pledged to stop focusing on arrest as a tactic, and instead grow a mass movement by concentrating on activities that are more commonly associated with political parties.

The purpose of the weekend’s events was to act as a giant recruiting exercise. [...] It was a focal point for coalition building: there was a trade union hub (North Sea oil workers have recently been on strike), Green New Deal Rising brought representatives of the youth movement it has been quietly building, Just Stop Oil left the Van Goghs alone in favour of picketing government buildings and Greenpeace’s new directors were there with a stall showcasing the organisation’s desire to build relationships with the grassroots.

While Just Stop Oil has been overwhelmingly successful in achieving its aim of drawing attention to climate change, there is undoubtedly also a need for a grassroots movement that welcomes people who may not be ready or daring enough for protests that could well land them in prison.

So will it succeed? The answer to that question lies in your hands. XR has invited you to become part of a new, thriving campaign to protect and restore our world. About 60,000 people accepted that invitation over the weekend. I am one of them. Will you?

Let's teach children about slavery properly by connecting it to our present

The Guardian, 18th May 2023, by English teacher and writer Lola Okolosie

How do we teach the painful history of transatlantic slavery? As a series of distinct facts relating to the past? Or, to paraphrase the great Toni Morrison, as a weight working itself out in our lives? The former has, we are slowly coming to admit, led to collective amnesia. In this forgetting, the families, institutions, cities and countries that grew rich through the enslavement of Africans could perform a neat excision of this diseased part of themselves.

When, in the wake of George Floyd's murder, protesters pulled down the statue of the slave trader Edward Colston, something else broke too: the neat lens through which history is understood as events that occurred in another time whose reverberations are dimmed in the present and which we have no power to redress. I couldn't say much of the above to the pupil who, during a lesson on Caliban in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, asked what *good* Black History Month was, if all that was taught related to slavery. The question revealed a great deal, not least a belief that this history had nothing to do with him. My response as his teacher was to emphasise that, yes, there is much more to black history than enslavement, but that, still, this bitter history matters to us all.

[...] For educators like me, the challenge, then, is not only the fight to have this history included in our curriculum, but to contextualise for our pupils how it relates to the world today. This neat trick of viewing the past as concluded was on display again on a recent family holiday to the Republic of Benin. Determined to give my children a sense of the history elided in the English curriculum, I booked a walking tour following the slave route in what was once west Africa's busiest slave port, Ouidah. We began in Auction Square. Here, those captured in the raids by the Dahomey kingdom were "exchanged". Our guide, Oscar, who apologised for his excellent English, pointed to an imposing building known locally as Place Chacha. It was named so in honour of Francisco Félix de Souza, a Brazilian viceroy and powerful slave merchant; Oscar told us that on auction days, De Souza would try to speed up the process of selling humans by using the neologism "chacha".

De Souza would go on to settle permanently in Ouidah. Today, Oscar informed us, De Souza's descendants continue to reside on the site of their ancestor's former residence. A grand four-storey palace stared down at us. Stunned by the revelation, I asked about anger and reparations, but Oscar waved my question away. Since De Souza married local women, his offspring were "one of us". Bygones are bygones. And as for reparations? They had been paid when, post abolition, a contingent of formerly enslaved people returned from Brazil demanding compensation. The king of Dahomey agreed to this, giving land, now the town's Brazilian quarter, to the returnees. Oscar guided our gaze to a district of dilapidated single-storey buildings directly opposite Place Chacha. If we hadn't already been to Brazil, he joked, we now could say we had.

I couldn't laugh at the well-meaning joke. Wasn't this a stark visual of the past in the present? Wasn't the history of plunder visible right there in the grandeur of Place Chacha? Wasn't the cheapness of compensation paid by those made powerful from accumulated wealth, who set the terms of what is "fair", evident in the crumbling structures of Ouidah's Brazilian quarter? The tour ended with the group standing beside the "door of no return". A huge concrete arch covered in etchings of shackled bodies, it symbolises the embarkation point of enslaved people being sent to the Americas.

It was, however, undergoing renovation and thus was ringfenced. Our guide pointed instead to a blue imitation arch adorned with Chinese script and the name Yunnan Construction and Investment Holding Group. This, Oscar told us, was the new Marina Project.

The project – an extensive tourist complex containing several hotels with restaurants, memorial gardens and a spa – also features a full-scale replica slave ship, which visitors apparently will be able to enter in order to experience the horror of the hold.

Benin, keen to promote itself as a place to which Afro-Brazilians, African Americans and Caribbeans can "return", is, to be sure, doing important work in elevating the presence of this painful heritage. But watching the Marina Project promotional video released by the government detailing the look and feel of the site, I felt nothing but dread. Animated people, dressed in western garb, sitting at tables on restaurant terraces overlooking those sunning themselves on loungers or taking a dip in pools. It promised a sanitised walk through history. For educators in England, the lesson is clear. It is not enough to simply give our pupils knowledge of this history. There is work, too, in helping them draw the links between the past and how it has shaped the world we know. In doing so, we might be able to accept the truth: that it is a shared history with which all of us must reckon.

Nicola Sturgeon resigns as First Minister after nine years

The Herald (Glasgow), 15th February 2023, By *Gabriel McKay*

Nicola Sturgeon has resigned as First Minister of Scotland after close to nine years at Bute House.

She called a surprise news conference this morning to announce her decision, stating that she would remain in post until a successor is appointed. Sturgeon said: "Being First Minister of Scotland is, in my admittedly biased opinion, the very best job in the world. It's a privilege beyond measure, one that has sustained and inspired me in good times and in the toughest hours of my toughest days.

"I am proud to stand here as the first female and longest serving incumbent of this office and I'm very proud of what has been achieved in the years I've been in Bute House.

"However, since my very first moments in the job I have believed that part of serving well would be to know, almost instinctively, when the time is right to make way for someone else and when that time came to have the courage to do so even if to people across the country and in my party it might seem too soon.

"In my head and in my heart, I know that time is now, that it is right for me, my party and the country so today I am announcing my intention to step down as leader of my party."

She told reporters that her decision was "not a reaction to short-term pressures". Ms Sturgeon said: "Of course there are difficult issues confronting the government just now, but when is that ever not the case? [...] Sturgeon has been First Minister since being elected unopposed as SNP leader in the wake of Alex Salmond's resignation following the lost independence referendum in 2014.

She guided the party to an unprecedented 56 out of 59 Scottish seats at the subsequent Westminster election and secured a second term at Holyrood the following year. The SNP were once again the largest party at the 2021 Holyrood election, gaining a seat but once again falling one short of a majority. They agreed a power sharing deal with the Scottish Green Party to form a government.

Sturgeon saw a bid to hold a second referendum on independence repeatedly rebuffed by Westminster, and the Scottish Government lost a legal challenge to hold one at the Supreme Court which ruled that it was not within Holyrood's power to hold a consultative ballot.

She announced that her party would contest the next Westminster election as a 'de facto referendum', with a special SNP conference to be held next month to decide on whether that will be put into action then or at the next Holyrood election.

In recent weeks Sturgeon has faced a backlash following the passing of the Gender Recognition Reform Act, which was blocked by the UK government using a section 30 order. The bill was passed with the support of Labour, the Scottish Greens and the Lib Dems but has been criticised in some quarters for allegedly infringing on single-sex spaces. The issue was thrust to the forefront in the wake of the Isla Bryson case in which a rapist identified themselves as trans and sparked a political storm.

Sturgeon made clear she is "not leaving politics" despite stepping down, adding that she will continue to fight for Scottish independence. Scottish Deputy First Minister John Swinney, one of several possible candidates who could succeed Nicola Sturgeon as leader of the SNP, has thanked the First Minister after her decision to step down.

"I am very sorry (Ms Sturgeon) has decided to step down as First Minister and (the SNP) leader," he tweeted. "She has given outstanding leadership to our country, Government and Party.

"As the first female, and longest serving First Minister, she has achieved much for Scotland. Minimum unit pricing of alcohol, expansion of early learning, measures to tackle domestic violence, delivery of The Promise and crucially, leadership through Covid, are just some.

"For our Party, she has delivered breathtaking electoral success, winning every election during her leadership, and securing two Scottish Parliament victories.

"It has been my privilege to support her as Deputy First Minister. She has my warmest good wishes for the future and heartfelt thanks for all that she has done for Scotland, for the cause of Independence and the Scottish National Party."

Mr Swinney will not take over the role in the interim, with Ms Sturgeon to remain in situ until a new leader is elected. Closing her speech, the First Minister said: "To the people of Scotland, to all of the people of Scotland, whether you've voted for me or not, please know that being your First Minister has been the privilege of my life. Nothing, absolutely nothing I do in future will ever come anywhere close. Thank you from the very bottom of my heart."

Pro-life movement is the dog that caught the car

B.J. Rudell, *The Hill*, April 20, 2023

For half a century, the pro-life movement resided in a self-made and self-contained cocoon, operating with equal parts political savvy and practical ignorance.

Politically, they hammered the consistently more popular pro-choice position, seemingly made permanent by *Roe v. Wade*. They demanded the eradication of women’s bodily autonomy in favor of the unborn’s bodily autonomy — even if that “body” was merely a cluster of cells.

The movement pinned down progressives and their pro-choice allies, drawing out votes and public statements based not on when abortions should be legal, but rather when they should be illegal. Pro-life proponents turned a little-known procedure and an amorphous timeframe into a push for a “partial-birth abortion” ban, tying late-term and at times even second-trimester abortions to infanticide, suggesting that women regularly conspired with doctors to simply murder babies they no longer wanted. The movement fed off of horror and disgust from the right, as well as the left’s disunity governing the sliding scale of abortion rights. The power of the pro-life movement was that it would never quit and never compromise. Its disciples were true believers in the unborn’s “sanctity of human life.” For half a century, Republicans advanced an absolutist, unforgiving, immovable position. As written in the GOP’s most recent party platform, “the unborn child has a fundamental right to life which cannot be infringed.”

The long game was brutally effective. A significantly higher percentage of pro-life voters became single-issue voters compared to their pro-choice counterparts. Red states began chipping away at *Roe*’s foundation, backed by a motivated corps of arguably the nation’s most rabid conservative operation. But in the aftermath of last year’s *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization* ruling by the Supreme Court, something strange happened: The pro-life movement’s muted celebration looked more like the end of a midseason baseball game than the end of a 50-year battle for supremacy.

In most red-dominated states, they waited months to change abortion laws. For example, it took ultra-pro-life Florida nearly a year to get something on the books. Think about that: A governor whose increasingly dim path to the White House cuts straight through the pro-life movement couldn’t get a deal done until 11 months after the leak of the Supreme Court’s *Dobbs* ruling, and 10 months after the ruling went into effect — and by most accounts, his actions did little to bolster support for his flailing non-candidacy, while also generating increased ire from the nation’s much larger pro-choice population. This is where political savvy and practical ignorance collide. The GOP’s pro-life commandment has no wiggle room. For half a century, they decreed that from the moment of conception, a human life is created and that life has a “fundamental right” to continue living. No questions asked. No exceptions.

But *Dobbs* changed the game. After two generations of platitudes disguised as policy, Republicans were handed the legal means to eradicate abortion — to live up to the principles of their most sacred doctrine. And then states like Florida waited months — close to a year — hemming and hawing on devising a political solution to what for 50 years had supposedly been their holy humanitarian mission. Why the delays? Why the exceptions for rape, incest, and the life of the child bearer? Why is the perennial frontrunner for the GOP presidential nomination largely silent on whether to ban abortions?

Because this movement was never pro-life. During *Roe*, they could be stridently rigid. But with the onset of *Dobbs*, once they were forced to act on these supposed convictions, they’ve appeared woefully unprepared. They clearly never planned for this shift in responsibility — from tyrannical evangelicals to politically calculating legislators. It has become evident that Republicans are, in actuality, “partial lifers.” There is a sliding scale of what’s acceptable politically, and they’re desperately trying to figure out where that is. It’s no longer about protecting life from the moment of conception; it’s about protecting their political careers through the moment the polls close. And now, they must rein in an increasingly divided flock while fending off an increasingly motivated opposition. These are trying times for a majority of Americans who believe that a woman — not the government — should have ultimate control over her body. If there can be any silver lining in these otherwise horrific developments, it’s that this new “partial-life movement” — once one of the nation’s most dominant political forces — has been exposed as a feckless morass of contradictions.

Ahead of 2024, the timing couldn’t be better for a reinvented and more unified pro-choice America.

End Confederate Heroes Day. And don't stop there

The Editorial Board, *Houston Chronicle*, January 19, 2023

5 Texas has marked Confederate Heroes Day on Jan. 19 every year since the 1970s. That, in turn, has led to another tradition: legislators asking why are we celebrating leaders who betrayed their country and fought to preserve the institution of slavery? Rep. Jarvis Johnson has once again filed a bill to end the holiday — state employees have the option of taking a paid day off — that honors a hateful past and that has even coincided with Martin Luther King Jr. Day. Despite these repeated efforts in the Legislature, somehow, the day lives on, for five decades now, and four more if you count the day's predecessors honoring Jefferson Davis later in the year and Robert E. Lee on his birthday, which is today.

10 This editorial board has already joined the chorus of voices calling for the end of the holiday. This year, we have a new message: end Confederate Heroes Day and don't stop there. The country has been in the midst of a "racial reckoning" for years now, following the Charleston church shooting in 2015 and again after the police murder of George Floyd in 2020. Army bases, streets and schools have been renamed. Statues have come down. The struggle to do away with these vestiges of a propaganda campaign to romanticize the country's long history of racism suggests just how limited this reckoning has been.

15 Efforts to take down Confederate monuments — some in the dead of night, some only after white contractors refused to do the work and some, in the case of Houston, to be relocated inside the Houston Museum of African American Culture — have had to fight against organizations and states committed to keeping them intact, including at the Texas Capitol. That we have removed some of the Confederate cause's most potent symbols is not a hollow victory, but it is an incomplete one.

20 Are we dismantling the forces that put them there? In Texas, our fight cannot end with Confederate memorials, school names and holidays. Before the U.S. South fought a war defending slavery, Texas did. In 1826, a proposed ban of slavery in the Mexican state where Stephen F. Austin was growing his fledgling colony confirmed his worst fears. The colony's original contract, historian Alice Baumgartner notes, protected not only the colonists but their "property" too. Without slavery, Austin said they would surely face poverty. He protested. "What would the world say," he wrote to the Mexican lawmakers, if the "Government were to take away that property from those colonists against their will?" With the help of representatives, Austin managed to secure enough of a loophole to protect slavery and he carried on recruiting more slaveholders. But the issue remained a point of contention until the Texas Revolution, fought by and large, as historian Andrew Torget documents, to ensure that slavery could continue despite rising abolitionist sentiment¹.

30 Texas styled itself a haven for slaveholders in the U.S. South who feared the brewing anti-slavery attitudes at home. In the decade before the Civil War, the enslaved population soared in Texas. Enslavers were not just protected but encouraged. No free Black person was even allowed to live in the state without special permission. When the *San Antonio Herald* complained that too many enslaved people were running away to Mexico and that "something should be done," noted historian Randolph Campbell, the state dispatched Texas Rangers to retrieve some of the estimated thousands of people who found freedom farther south. Will we rename the city of Austin? Probably not. The power isn't always in the renaming, though, it's in the remembering. The full remembering. Ending Confederate Heroes Day is an easier call. Rep. Jarvis Johnson said that this session, his third time filing the bill, he has bipartisan support and is hopeful that he'll get a hearing.

40 We are hopeful too. Not just for a discussion about Confederate Heroes Day but an expansive inquiry into the soul of a state forged in the fight for slavery. The same state that, more than 150 years later, didn't observe Martin Luther King Jr. Day for years after it was finally made a federal holiday. Removing a statue or ending a holiday may stop the uncritical celebration of a harmful history. But that alone doesn't reckon and it doesn't confront. Only our engagement with that history can do that.

¹ Texas was part of Mexico in the 1820s, until the Texas Revolution of 1835-1836. It became an American state in 1845.

After Allen shooting, Abbott should unite Texans not inflame anti-immigrant fears

The Editorial Board, *The Houston Chronicle*, May 10, 2023

In 2019, a 21-year-old man made the 10-hour drive from Allen, Texas, to a Walmart in El Paso. There he began firing a semiautomatic weapon in the parking lot, then entered the store and continued his rampage. Twenty-three people were killed. Why? In an online manifesto the shooter had decried a Hispanic invasion and warned of ethnic replacement. Less than three years later, the violence is closer to home for Allen, a rapidly diversifying suburb of Dallas where recently eight people were shot and killed at an outlet mall. Again, the shooter, who was killed by a police officer already in the area, seems to have supported white nationalist ideologies. The investigation is ongoing. But early reporting suggests he had a troubling social media history replete with misogynistic and racist rhetoric.

The governor's response to this tragedy has been muted. He attended a vigil in Allen on Sunday but hasn't spoken to the public. Instead, he launched a new border security initiative that played into the very sorts of fears that helped motivate the El Paso shooter's violence and that seem to have influenced the shooting in Allen. To be sure, Abbott addressed the shooting briefly, going on Fox News to repeat the party line after mass shootings: It's not the guns, it's mental health. "We are working to address that anger and violence by going to its root cause," Abbott said, "which is addressing the mental health problems behind it." It's true that mental health funding will likely get a needed boost this legislative session, which may help Texas climb from its rock-bottom ranking for mental health care access. It's also true that we aren't likely to get the kinds of common-sense and widely supported gun reforms we've repeatedly called for session after session.

Either way, the governor seemed eager to move on. By Monday, he was stationed in front of military aircraft at the Austin airport, announcing that he would send hundreds more Texas National Guard soldiers to the border this week. The Texas Tactical Border Force, as he's dubbed it, was busy loading Black Hawk helicopters and C-130s and preparing to "repel large groups of migrants trying to enter Texas illegally." It's a preview, perhaps, of the sort of power he'd wield under House Bill 20, which if passed would create a Border Protection Unit controlled by the governor, and with the ability to deputize everyday citizens to go about arresting and detaining migrants. The military theater plays well for Abbott. While the federal government has also dispatched forces in preparation for the likely increase in migrants at the border, Abbott has criticized them as merely doing "paperwork." His force would be armed and ready for conflict. Steeped in military rhetoric, Abbott's approach feeds the fear that too often leads to the very anger and violence he claims to want to address.

Some saw the move, just the latest in a series of efforts to capitalize on a strained border, as a pivot away from the state's latest mass shooting. The border is a tried and true rallying call for the governor — the same governor who just days ago was quick to claim that the five victims of a shooting in San Jacinto County were "illegal immigrants." The border unit announcement isn't a distraction from this weekend's violence. No, it's a doubling down.

If Abbott wants to address the "root" issues, he may have to consider that the call is coming from inside the house. The rise in domestic terrorism and white nationalism is not just a Texas problem — see, for instance, the 2018 attack on Pittsburgh's Tree of Life synagogue that left 11 people dead — but Texas leaders have a responsibility to denounce hatred in all its forms, especially when it comes to immigration. The shooter was Hispanic. Some have wondered, how could he have been a neo-Nazi or affiliated with white supremacist ideologies? Many Hispanic Americans also identify as white, of course — "Hispanic" is not a racial category — and some are even white nationalists. One of the most prominent leaders of the Proud Boys, Henry "Enrique" Tarrío, is Hispanic. He and four others were found guilty of seditious conspiracy for their actions on Jan. 6, 2021. Scholars have long known that white supremacy and far-right extremism can adapt and that here in Texas in particular, white racial identity has been a fuzzy concept. [...]

Though the border is hundreds of miles away for Allen and for many Americans, its rhetorical power is ever-present in American life, the proverbial line holding back the so-called invasion. Many reasonable Texans are concerned about safety along the border and want to see it managed in an orderly way that stops illegal crossings. But inflamed rhetoric and militarized displays risk contorting those worries until they become a combination of paranoia and hate that disfigures our society.

This state already bears the scars of hate-fueled violence. What we need now is a message of shared humanity, a message that unites and heals. Instead, Abbott gives us fear. He should know better.

The purpose of Rishi Sunak's new anti-strike laws is obvious

The Independent, 8th January 2023, by Phil McDuff

Barristers, rail workers, nurses, postal workers, civil servants, the list goes on. 2022 saw huge chunks of the British labour force finally stop putting up with a decade of real-terms pay cuts, poor working conditions, and the slow crushing of the public sector. Some have won their demands – most recently bus drivers in Sunderland, who secured an 11 per cent rise after strike action by the GMB union – while others fight on. The Conservative government, in collaboration with its tame sections of the press, has leaned hard on the old Thatcherite playbook of blaming “union barons” and “greedy workers” for disruption. It has insisted that the seventh largest economy in the world simply cannot afford to pay workers any more money or invest in their workplaces.

Public support has not gone down as much as the government would have liked. Rail workers, who have been subject to an aggressive media campaign to demonise and misrepresent them, have seen opposition to their strike action grow, but are still backed by almost half the country, according to YouGov. Nurses and ambulance workers have two thirds of the public on their side. With the PR campaign to demonise workers not delivering the results, prime minister Rishi Sunak is now threatening to crack down on workers' right to withdraw their labour entirely. He has proposed measures to allow unions to be sued, and even for striking workers to be sacked, if “minimum service levels” are not maintained in key sectors. Leaked emails seen by *The Observer* seem to indicate he at least considered going further, preventing certain sectors from unionising altogether.

Sunak, notably, did not announce any measures to hold the government itself accountable if public services don't hit “minimum service levels”. Nor has he explained how such service levels can be maintained if industries which already struggle with recruitment and retention sack large swathes of their workforce. As of the last NHS vacancy figures from June 2022, there was a vacancy rate of 11.8 per cent for nursing staff, with over 45,000 positions either unfilled or staffed by agency workers. If the problem is “not enough nurses”, it seems unlikely that even fewer nurses can solve the problem. The UK's public services barely worked even when the workers weren't striking. In August Andy Burnham, Mayor of Greater Manchester, tweeted: “12 cancellations by @AvantiWestCoast this morning – the first day of a reduced timetable meant to bring stability. This is a failing service.” Nothing appears to have been done since then to solve the problem that the rail operators do not employ enough staff, and rely on people working overtime to fill in the gaps.

Not enough people, working too many hours for not enough money, using equipment that's falling apart, while those at the very top hand down ever-madder demands that are increasingly disconnected from any reality on the ground. This is the situation these workers find themselves in, and this is what they are striking to stall and – perhaps, if they're lucky – reverse. Last month John Burn-Murdoch published an astonishing article in the *Financial Times*. In comparison with other peer nations, he showed, investment has plummeted in this country, and outcomes have suffered as well. “Twelve years on from the start of austerity,” he wrote, “the data paint a damning picture, from stagnant wages and frozen productivity to rising chronic illness and a health service on its knees.”

The burden of this has fallen on the poorest. The UK is one of the most unequal of all the developed nations. Those earning the least go to work for wages that don't cover their bills, in jobs with poor standards, unpredictable hours, and from which they might find themselves fired at any time. At the other end of the scale, a vast proportion of the wealth that the UK's economy generates every year ends up in the hands of a tiny fraction of ultra-wealthy households. More and more people in the UK are slipping down the ladder, whether from “doing alright” to “just getting by,” or from “just getting by” to “we can pay for food or heat but not both”.

Many people earning six figure sums for the media have been berating unions for making “unreasonable” demands against this backdrop. Why should someone who already has a good job not have that job made worse, like everybody else? Why should they, too, not suffer every impact of the race to the bottom which is slowly crushing millions of people in this country? Workers are striking because they know it will not stop here. This winter might be a confluence of crises, but it could get a lot worse.

The ruling class has more wealth and power than anyone in history, with access to mysteries and treasures and luxuries that would have made Solomon weep, but it's still not enough for them. Like a toxic fungus spreading through a tree, blindly unaware that its relentless expansion is killing the host it needs to survive, they have been sucking everything out of the country in an unwinnable race to have enough private wealth that it won't matter to them when society crumbles away underneath them. [...]

Good Friday Agreement changed history, Mitchell tells anniversary event

The Irish Examiner, 17th April 2023, by Jonathan McCambridge, David Young and Catherine Wylie, PA

The people of Northern Ireland and their political leaders changed history 25 years ago when the Good Friday Agreement was signed, a major conference in Belfast has been told. Former US senator George Mitchell, who chaired the negotiations in 1998, also said the deal set an example for peace around the world, and urged people in the region not to let it “slip away”. Former US secretary of state Hillary Clinton, who is hosting the Agreement 25 conference as part of her role as chancellor at Queen’s University in Belfast, urged current politicians to move forward with “the same spirit of unstoppable grit and resolve” as their predecessors had done. Ex-US president Bill Clinton, Tony Blair and former taoiseach Bertie Ahern are also scheduled to participate in the three-day event, 25 years on from the landmark accord.

Taoiseach Leo Varadkar and British prime minister Rishi Sunak are due to attend later in the week.

The agreement largely ended Northern Ireland’s 30-year sectarian conflict. Making the keynote address at the opening of the conference, Mr Mitchell said: “Twenty-five years ago the people of Northern Ireland and their leaders changed the course of history. “It was a day when history opened itself to hope. The people of Northern Ireland supported, worked for and established a democratic, peaceful process as their preferred form of governance. They overwhelmingly rejected political violence as a way to resolve their differences. If history teaches us anything, it is that history itself is never finished. On the evening the agreement was reached, I commended the men and women who wrote and signed it, but I also said it would take other leaders in the future to safeguard and extend their work. And so it has. I am here, with many others, to sound that bell one more time.”

Mr Mitchell said the peace deal was not perfect, but called on the current and future leaders of Northern Ireland to act with “courage and vision”. He said: “To find workable answers to the daily problems of the present, to preserve peace.”

At the end of his address, Mr Mitchell said the referendum which approved the Good Friday Agreement had shown people around the world the “possibility of hope”. He said: “When you approved the agreement you were also talking to Israelis and Palestinians, to Colombians, to Africans, Asians, to Americans – in fact you were talking to the world. This is an agreement for peace and for the future, not just here, but everywhere.” He added: “We need people who believe, who know that the possible does exist within the impossible – don’t let it slip away.”

The Good Friday Agreement created powersharing institutions at Stormont that involved nationalists and unionists governing Northern Ireland together in a mandatory coalition arrangement. While the pact largely ended the Troubles, which had claimed more than 3,600 lives since the late 1960s, it has failed to bring long-term political stability in the region and devolution has collapsed several times in the last two decades.

The anniversary comes amid another period of collapse, with the DUP blocking powersharing in protest at post-Brexit trading arrangements that have created economic barriers between Northern Ireland and Great Britain. The barriers were first introduced under the Withdrawal Agreement’s contentious Northern Ireland Protocol. The UK and EU recently agreed the Windsor Framework as a way to cut the red tape created by the protocol. While the DUP says the framework has gone some way to address its concerns about the protocol, it says significant problems remain. The party has opposed the framework at Westminster and has made clear its boycott of Stormont will continue until it secures further assurances from the UK government over its concerns around sovereignty and the application of EU law in Northern Ireland.

Mrs Clinton said the Windsor Framework on post-Brexit trade provided Northern Ireland with an opportunity to become an economic hub for global trade and investment. “While the Good Friday Agreement is an enormous achievement, we know that peace, prosperity and progress that so many have worked tirelessly to achieve remains incomplete,” she said. “The work of integration and housing and schools is far from finished, neighbourhoods remain divided, poverty and unemployment persist, the difficulties of the past continue to threaten the present. You know, we are at a standstill with the Northern Ireland Assembly no longer functioning. But the Windsor agreement provides a path forward not just for convening but for positioning Northern Ireland as an economic hub for global trade and investment through privileged access to the UK and all of its trading partners, as well as the EU. [...] You stand as an example to the world of how even the staunchest adversaries can overcome differences to work together for the common and greater good.”

No.

The Editorial Board, *The National Review*, November 15, 2022

To paraphrase Voltaire after he attended an orgy, once was an experiment, twice would be perverse. A bruised Donald Trump announced a new presidential bid on Tuesday night, an invitation to double down on the outrages and failures of the last several years that Republicans should reject without hesitation or doubt. To his credit, Trump killed off the Clinton dynasty in 2016, nominated and got confirmed three constitutionalist justices, reformed taxes, pushed deregulation, got control of the border, significantly degraded ISIS in Syria and Iraq, and cinched normalization deals between Israel and the Gulf states, among other things. These are achievements that even his conservative doubters and critics — including the *National Review* — can acknowledge and applaud.

That said, the Trump administration was chaotic even on its best days because of his erratic nature and lack of seriousness. He often acted as if he were a commentator on his own presidency, and issued orders on Twitter and in other off-the-cuff statements that were ignored. He repeatedly had to be talked out of disastrous ideas by his advisers and Republican elected officials. He turned on cabinet officials and aides on a dime. Trump had a limited understanding of our constitutional system, and at the end of the day, little respect for it. His inability to approximate the conduct that the public expects of a president undermined him from beginning to end. The latter factor played an outsized role in his narrow defeat to a feeble Joe Biden in 2020 in what was a winnable race. Of course, unable to cope with the humiliation of the loss, he pursued a shameful attempt to overturn the result of the election. He didn't come close to succeeding, but it wasn't for lack of trying. The episode ended with Trump, in a grotesque abuse of his powers, trying to bully Vice President Pence into unilaterally delaying or changing the count of electoral votes on January 6 and with an inflamed pro-Trump mob storming the Capitol while the president gave no indication that he particularly minded. [...]

Since then, Trump has maintained his grip on the party and done all he can to force it to accept his delusions and lies about the 2020 election — boosting conspiracy theorists and fanatics and targeting for defeat, with considerable success, anyone pushing back too hard against him or his obsessions. Trump's success in imposing his fixations and candidate choices on the GOP played a large role in the GOP debacle in the midterms. This political backdrop raises the possibility that his low-energy announcement speech may be a damp squib. Certainly, GOP voters should give up on the idea that Trump is a winner. After securing the GOP nomination with plurality support in 2016, Trump didn't exceed 47 percent in either of his campaigns, winning in 2016 with 46.1 percent and losing in 2020 with 46.8. This is, to say the least, a very narrow electoral path, and one must assume that with all that's transpired since 2020, Trump is weaker than in his first two races.

The party's position has significantly eroded under his hegemony. When Trump announced his first campaign in 2015, Republicans were coming off a historic wave election, which brought them to 54 Senate seats, and 247 House seats. Republicans then lost the House in 2018, lost the Senate in 2020, and blew a chance for large gains this year. Now, they are looking at 49 or 50 Senate seats, and a razor-thin margin of control of the House of Representatives. On top of this, Republicans had 31 governorships; they now have 25, and have lost crucial ground in state legislatures, too.

A lesson of the midterms was that association with Trump and “stop the steal” were liabilities, and no one is more associated with both of those things than Donald Trump himself. Democrats helped choose MAGA candidates that were eminently defeatable in GOP primaries this year, and nominating Trump — whom Democrats are pining to run against again — in 2024 would replicate this experience on a much larger scale. Needless to say, Trump is a magnetic political figure who has managed to bond countless millions of Republicans to him. Many GOP voters appreciate his combativeness and hate his enemies, who so often engaged in excesses in pursuit of him. Once he won the nomination in 2016, they understandably voted for him in 2016 and 2020, given the alternatives. But the primaries won't present a choice between Trump and progressives with calamitous priorities for the nation, but other Republicans who aren't, in contrast to him, monumentally selfish or morally and electorally compromised. (And it should be added, won't be 78 years old if elected and ineligible to serve two terms.) It's too early to know what the rest of the field will look like, except it will offer much better alternatives than Trump.

The answer to Trump's invitation to remain personally and politically beholden to him and his cracked obsessions for at least another two years, with all the chaos that entails and the very real possibility of another highly consequential defeat, should be a firm, unmistakable, No.

Stop dithering, British Museum – give the Elgin Marbles back

The New Statesman, 10th January 2023 by Andrew Marr (political editor of the *New Statesman*, former political editor of *BBC News*)

Give them back. For goodness' sake, just give them back. In June I spoke to George Osborne, now chair of the trustees at the British Museum (though he has, I believe, some other jobs as well). I asked him about the Parthenon marbles, known in Britain as the Elgin marbles – the largely headless, armless frieze of chunky men, draped women and confused-looking horses created by Phidias (Plutarch tells us) around 430 BC.

5 Much of it now resides not above Athens's most famous war memorial and civic bank but in an echoing, grey chamber in the British Museum. That's because the Parthenon, after being converted into a mosque under Turkish rule, had been used as a munitions dump and partly blown up in 1687. In 1800, Thomas Bruce, the Earl of Elgin, employed a team of artists to sketch the ruins, and claimed the following year he had instructions from the Turkish authorities to remove them for safekeeping. Eventually Bruce took them to London. It's
10 not true that this was considered acceptable at the time: among others, Lord Byron protested vociferously at the vandalism and theft. But it is true that their presence in London changed British culture, sparking a revived craze for Hellenism and influencing artists into modern times. You only need to see them to realise that without those wrinkled mysteries, there would have been no Henry Moore.

The point is they are not ours – they are a central part of Greek heritage. Osborne knows this. In June he told
15 me there was “a deal to be done where we can tell both stories in Athens and in London”. When I asked if they could be moved to Greece, at least for a while, he replied “this kind of arrangement” might be suitable. The argument over their repatriation has been heating up ever since. We shouldn't fool ourselves that when the marbles go home to Greece, they'll regularly pop back again via Heathrow. But it doesn't mean our museums will empty of everything not made in Shropshire or Essex. Each case is different. The Parthenon is
20 to Greece what Stonehenge is to England; if Stonehenge was moved to Texas, we'd feel the same. Sending them home, open-heartedly and without conditions, would right an old wrong and do a lot for Britain's shaky reputation as a reliable European partner. The museum, in short, must get on with it. Give. Them. Back. [...]

Harry's distraction act

And so from opera to soap. Republicans have long argued that part of the “function” of monarchy is to
25 distract the masses from what really matters. Whether it is the dramas of Shakespeare, Georgian misbehaviour or the clattering processions of Victorian times, the main thing about royalty is its ability to get itself talked about. If the royal family is not the opium of the people then it's the people's pot. Harry is widely criticised for trying to bring down the monarchy. But in trying to get Britain talking about his bare buttocks being spanked by an older woman, his frostbitten penis, and getting floored by big brother Wills – rather than about the NHS or inflation – surely Harry is proving himself the most traditional royal of all?
30

Repressed melodies

I'm keen to promote the work of female composers on my new Classic FM show (Sunday mornings, 10am to 1pm), not out of box-ticking but because, as they have been elbowed out, we have missed out on so much
35 wonderful music. We began with Louise Farrenc, a Parisian composer of three symphonies and a successful fighter for equal pay; and Augusta Holmés, French but of Irish descent, whose work included symphonic poems, patriotic oratorios, songs and opera. She was greatly admired by Saint-Saëns, but at times had to use a male pseudonym. More to come.

There's growing interest in the painting of forgotten female artists as well: such as the National Gallery's show comparing Manet and his pupil Eva Gonzalés. “Woke” reassessment of art history is easily mocked, but it's
40 also revealing a glorious flood of work the patriarchy kept stuffed under its grand walnut desk.

The shock of the old

Ambling lately into the Tate Britain, I was struck by the dominance of relatively old-fashioned representational art with a strong political twist. Is this something in the wider culture or just a quirk of curating? In the main
45 hall, there's the huge, colourful, pugnacious *The Procession* by the British-Guyanese sculptor Hew Locke, referring to migration, the sugar trade and symbols of nationality.

Beyond it is a display of fictitious black portraits, once seen, never to be forgotten. Painted with gusto and subtlety by Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, it refers to earlier traditions in painting. So too do modern frescoes by Hannah Quinlan and Rosie Hastings dealing with LGBTQ experience – pictures in conversation with
50 Renaissance art and yet utterly modern. I was brought up to think of abstract art and conceptual art as modern. Am I, perhaps, now out of date?

“Crabs taught me to be anti-capitalist”: how a Margate museum is on a mission to change politics

The New Statesman, 21st January 2023, by Hugh Smiley (*Communications Officer for Labour MP Barry Gardiner*)

What do capitalism, colonialism and the climate crisis have to do with crustaceans?

Walking through the Old Town of Margate my eye was caught by a blue and red sign. “Crab Museum,” it read. “Is it really just a museum about crabs?” I said to my sister. “Only one way to find out,” she replied. So to satisfy our curiosity, we entered this centre of crustacean education. Located above the Pie Factory Gallery (which doesn’t make pies), the Crab Museum is possibly the most political, anti-capitalist and pro-crab space in the country.

When entering via a small walkway there are early signs that this museum has a broader scope than one might expect. A timeline of the history of the universe, told through crabs, can be seen on the yellow walls, accompanied by cartoonishly adorable drawings.

I spoke with two of the three founders, brothers Bertie Terrilliams and Ned Suesat-Williams, who opened the Crab Museum alongside their friend Chase Coley, about their venture. “It is a museum about crabs. But it’s more than a museum about crabs,” is how Suesat-Williams, who trained as an archaeologist, introduces the concept. “We use crabs as a way to discuss all manner of other things”, from science and history to “what we humans call politics”.

While the museum itself is a fairly modest space, with one large open room populated with wooden displays, models and microscopes, there is an enormous amount to be found in all kinds of unexpected places. When I opened a small display marked “DANGER!! TRUTH INSIDE DO NOT OPEN”, I was met with large bold text proclaiming “CAPITALISM CAUSED CLIMATE CHANGE”. The display explains that “for a capitalist, the ocean floor is only valuable because of the oil or minerals it might contain – not because of the ecosystems there that took millions of years to evolve”. The museum argues that this mindset has caused “gigantic damage to the environment”, either directly through extraction (for example fishing) or indirectly from the polluting byproducts of fossil fuels, for the profit of a wealthy few.

But isn’t all this a bit irrelevant? “Well it has a lot to do with crabs,” explains the engraved text of the display. “Human civilisations need a healthy planet to live on and a healthy ecosystem requires a whole variety of living things working together – this includes crabs.” If humanity wants a world to live in which hasn’t been ravaged by climate change, it needs to be inhabitable for all its creatures, “no matter how squishy or spiky”.

In addition to geography, economics and climate science, there are history lessons here too. “There are many angles from which thinking like a crab can find you at the door of colonialism,” argues Suesat-Williams. A small, green side section of the museum features a bank note from the Cayman Islands, a British Overseas Territory in the Caribbean, with images of crabs alongside the visage of the Queen Elizabeth II. Through this seemingly minor connection, the museum explores the subject of colonialism and its lasting damages. The Cayman Islands were seized by the British in 1670 and were a part of the Transatlantic slave trade, which “saw Britain abduct 3.1 million Africans and sell them into a lifetime of brutal servitude”.

The display argues that humans try to “borrow” from the natural world in the hopes that some of the qualities associated with animals will rub off on themselves, be that the “British Bulldog spirit” or the US’s eagle of bravery. The historical use of crabs as a “physical manifestation of state power” is another way in for the curators to explore colonialism. Crabs in this sense are used to examine how capitalism drove global conquest. “[Christopher] Columbus was looking at islands as a place to extract wealth from, not as a place to explore,” says Suesat-Williams. The museum highlights the exploitative nature of global capitalism by presenting a contrast: instead of appreciating crabs as living creatures that contribute to a healthy ecosystem, colonialists viewed crabs (and other living beings, including humans) as nothing more than objects from which to extract wealth.

“Crabs taught me to be anti-capitalist,” Terrilliams, a geographer and writer, claims. “I want to be led by the crabs, and in trying to be as objective as possible in studying the natural world I found it quite naturally led me in the direction of an anti-capitalist narrative.” Crabs have been affected by capitalism in a number of different ways, the brothers argue. The negative byproducts of capitalism, colonialism and climate change – such as overfishing, rising sea temperatures and species extinction – “are all a part of the same historical movement”, Terrilliams says, destroying the ecosystems and environments that crabs occupy. [...]

While the subjects that the museum explores, most notably climate change, remain a constant in people’s lives that can often be ignored, perhaps their unusual approach could uniquely cut through.

G.O.P. State Lawmakers Push a Growing Wave of Anti-Transgender Bills

Maggie Astor, *The New York Times*, January 30, 2023

Over the past three years, Republican state lawmakers have put forward a barrage of bills to regulate the lives of transgender youths, restricting the sports teams they can play on, bathrooms they can use and medical care they can receive. But even by those standards, the start of the 2023 legislative season stands out for the aggressiveness with which lawmakers are pushing into new territory. The bills they have proposed — more than 5 150 in at least 25 states — include bans on transition care into young adulthood; restrictions on drag shows using definitions that could broadly encompass performances by transgender people; measures that would prevent teachers in many cases from using names or pronouns matching students' gender identities; and requirements that schools out transgender students to their parents.

The flood of legislation is part of a long-term campaign by national groups that see transgender rights as an issue on which they can harness voter anger — as with the campaigns against remote learning and critical race theory that reshaped many school boards and lifted Republicans in Virginia's elections in 2021 — though the 10 midterm elections provided little evidence of it. The potential consequences for transgender people, for whom harassment and threats have become common and suicide rates are high, are profound. Many express a sense that the power of their government is being turned against them as they try to live their lives.

Legislation in Oklahoma and South Carolina would make it a felony to provide hormonal or surgical transition 15 treatment to transgender people younger than 26 — an uncharted incursion into adults' health care. And bills in more than a dozen states would ban it for minors, which Arkansas was the first to do in 2021, against the consensus of major medical organizations. A bill in Mississippi — declaring that “separate is not inherently unequal,” an allusion to *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the 1896 ruling in which the Supreme Court upheld segregation — 20 would define sex as immutably set at birth, denying transgender identities under state law. A measure in West Virginia would define “any transvestite and/or transgender exposure, performances or display” as obscene, potentially outlawing transgender people's presence around children. Not all, or perhaps even most, of the measures will become law, and those that do may face legal challenges. But as of Tuesday, more than 10 bills had made it through committee, and at least six had passed a full legislative chamber, according to Erin Reed, 25 a legislative researcher.

She and other transgender advocates said they worried that the most aggressive bills, even if never enacted, could ease the passage of slightly less aggressive bills by making them seem like compromises. The people pushing these laws include Christian conservatives — among them some of the same figures who fought the legalization of gay marriage — and political operatives. Many bills contain nearly identical language, suggesting 30 a common template.

But the bills arriving in legislatures show a movement expanding beyond what it pitched itself as. The 25-year-olds who would be unable to receive transition care in Oklahoma and South Carolina are not, after all, children. An Arizona bill would ban drag shows on Sunday mornings whether or not minors were around. Even as bills reach further, many lawmakers still frame their arguments around children. State Representative Jim Olsen, the 35 sponsor of the Oklahoma ban on transition care up to age 21, said in an interview, “The desire is simply to protect young people from choices that later on in their life can be mentally and physically harmful and some of them will grow to regret.”

Even among Republicans, support for aggressive legislation is not universal. When Arkansas passed its ban on transition care for minors in 2021, it did so over the veto of its Republican governor, Asa Hutchinson. Beyond 40 health care, lawmakers are reaching deeper into transgender people's lives. The bill in Mississippi defining sex as immutably set at birth would have implications for, among other things, accommodations from bathrooms to sports teams to prisons. [...] Advocates said the new bills told transgender people that their identities were debatable, and their rights a political football. “We want to bring this conversation back to the reality of the people that are being directly affected,” said Casey Pick, senior fellow for advocacy and government affairs at the Trevor Project, a suicide prevention organization for L.G.B.T.Q. youths. “The rhetoric is vicious and hard 45 to hear, and it filters down. It filters through a constant media cycle on down to dining room tables and family holidays where youth are feeling excluded.”

In a recent poll conducted by Morning Consult for the Trevor Project, 86 percent of transgender and nonbinary youths said debates over state laws had hurt their mental health. Ms. Oakley of the Human Rights Campaign 50 said this was why she disliked the framing of anti-transgender legislation as a culture war. “It's not a war,” she said, “when there are powerful politicians on one side and there are terrified kids on the other.”

Biden Should Take Voters' Concerns About Age Seriously

The Editorial Board, *The New York Times*, April 22, 2023

Only 47 percent of Democrats want to see Joe Biden on the ballot in 2024, according to the latest Associated Press poll. That's not because they think he's done a bad job in office. Democrats tend to like President Biden and continue to give him good marks on handling the economy and foreign policy. But many Democrats, particularly younger ones, are worried that he will simply be too old to be effective in a second term, which would end when he is 86. "My problem with him running in 2024 is that he's just so old," one Democrat told pollsters. That may be deeply unfair — people age at different rates — and in Mr. Biden's case, it's impossible to deny that politics and conspiracy theories, rather than facts, fuel at least some of the concern. But candidates shouldn't pretend, as Mr. Biden often does, that advanced age isn't an issue. Mr. Biden is 80 now, the oldest American to serve as president, and even supporters, including the political strategist David Axelrod, have expressed deep worries that his age will be both a political liability in 2024 and a barrier to a successful second term. If Mr. Biden runs again, as he recently said he intends to, questions will persist about his age until he does more to assure voters that he is up to the job. Mr. Biden's age makes him an outlier even in an era when the nation's political leadership is getting older. The current Senate, where the average age is 63.9 years, is the second oldest since 1789. The House, where the average age is 57.5 years, is the third oldest. By comparison, the average age in the United States is 38.8 years.

Concerns about age — both in terms of fitness for office and being out of touch with the moment — are legitimate, as Mr. Biden acknowledged in an interview in February with ABC News. His standard line, repeated in that interview, is: "The only thing I can say is, 'Watch me.'" But Mr. Biden has given voters very few chances to do just that — to watch him — and his refusal to engage with the public regularly raises questions about his age and health. The usual White House method of demonstrating a president's mastery is to take tough questions in front of cameras, but Mr. Biden has not taken advantage of that opportunity, as *The Times* reported on Friday. He has held fewer news conferences and media interviews than most of his modern predecessors. Since 1923, only Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan took fewer questions per month from reporters, and neither represents a model of presidential openness that Mr. Biden should want to emulate. His reticence has created an opening for critics and skeptics.

The president also needs to talk about his health openly and without embarrassment, and to end the pretense that it doesn't matter. Those who are watching him with an open mind have seen a strong performance this year. His State of the Union address on Feb. 7 shattered the Republican attempts to portray him as doddering. With a passion rarely seen at one of these speeches — let alone in his political history — Mr. Biden presented a remarkably effective defense of his presidency and gave a preview of what is likely to be an imminent re-election campaign. *The Times* reported last summer that Mr. Biden's overall energy level has declined, and he continues to stumble over words in his public appearances. But those flaws alone don't signal a politician who is too old to run again. His first term, in fact, is already full of accomplishment: The economy has added 12.6 million jobs since he took office, inflation is cooling, and he has signed significant legislation to fight climate change, improve access to health care, and make investments in manufacturing and infrastructure. He has stood up to Russia's destructive campaign in Ukraine, and rallied the West to Ukraine's side.

Nonetheless, as Mr. Biden nears his actuarial life expectancy, concerns about his ability to handle the demands of campaigning and a potential second term are unlikely to disappear. Only a combination of performance and complete candor will change the minds of skeptical voters. Old age remains a sensitive topic, and many people, particularly men, are reluctant to discuss personal infirmities for fear of demonstrating weakness or being pushed aside by impatient younger generations. There is good reason for the federal government's prohibition of age discrimination in employment — a protection that begins at age 40. Ageism is real. That law, however, doesn't apply to people who are running for office. Voters have every right to ask questions about the medical condition of a candidate who wants their support. In 2016 both Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton gave the public very few details about their health. (Mr. Trump released a particularly preposterous doctor's letter claiming he would be "the healthiest individual ever elected to the presidency.") [...]

If he runs again, Mr. Biden will need to provide explicit reassurance to voters; many of them have seen family members decline rapidly in their 80s. Americans are watching what Mr. Biden says and does, just as he has asked them to do.

Farewell, racial stereotypes. Now we have the true tale of an Indian princess turned suffragette

The Observer, 21st May 2023, by Anjali Mohindra (stage, screen and voice-over actress and writer)

My first major role on an award-winning, crowd-rousing, primetime British television show, *Bodyguard*, as the suicide-bomber Nadia, became a national talking point on the portrayal of South Asian women on screen. To be the poster person of this timely moment of discourse felt terrifying. It made me question my internal GPS: what was my own position in this global conversation on representation? Eager to tell more South Asian stories, I began screenwriting a few years ago and am working on my first series. Trying to repurpose obstacles into vaulting poles has become my new strategy, and this is exactly what the subject of my upcoming writing project, Princess Sophia Duleep Singh, did 100 years ago. As the daughter of the last Maharajah of Punjab, and goddaughter of Queen Victoria, Sophia's life was nothing short of extraordinary: her actions so bold and anarchic that the press were urged to keep them under wraps lest it cause a royal scandal and tarnish the British crown.

One might have understood their need for positive optics after refusing to return the north Indian kingdom to its Punjabi king. The East India Company had been circling Punjab for decades, and, on the death of Sophia's grandfather, King Ranjit, it had seized its opportunity. It posed as a friend, offering to help protect the young King Duleep from external threats, and then forced him and his mother, the formidable Jindan Kaur, into exile in Britain, separating him from everything he knew.

My father proudly worked for the British army as a budget manager in the UK and Germany, but years later was held at gunpoint in an attempted robbery. "Go home" was spat at him. The injustice of my dad spending decades working for his country only to be told he didn't belong, boiled my blood. It's been on something of a gentle simmer since. Princess Sophia's father went through the wringer himself. His former kingdom brought a chunk of wealth to the British empire, yet in Britain, a country he was kept in against his will, he was labelled an ineligible bachelor. [...] He was regarded as coming from an inferior race. The royal office refused Duleep's re-entry into India, fearful that his presence might spark an insurrection. Feeling trapped, he turned his attention to fashioning his British countryside home into a Moghul palace. Duleep eventually died alone in Paris.

From the debris of her father's defalcated dynasty (a *Game of Thrones*-esque story in itself), Sophia channelled her fury into becoming the patron saint of the underdog. She built shelters for neglected migrant workers, treated wounded Indian soldiers (more than a million of whom fought for Britain in the First World War), and battled for the advancement of women both British and Indian.

While her sister Catherine and her partner, Lina, hid Jewish children from the Nazis and her other sister, Bamba, trained to become one of the first female doctors, Sophia was busy in London throwing herself at the prime minister's car, smacking a "Votes for Women" poster on to his windscreen. It's no wonder Winston Churchill labelled Sophia "a dangerous woman". For many South Asians, seeing the brilliant Sharma sisters lighting up our screens in *Bridgerton* has been thrilling. Those who cry "woke!" may call it unnecessary "diversity" casting, but the truth is the Duleep-Singhs were out there in their silken skirts making major moves. Statues are being felled as my generation hungers for the truth; the time has never felt riper for stories like Sophia's. We've had flying nannies with magical handbags, talking cars and time-travelling doctors. I almost can't believe there was a real-life British Indian heroine who did incredible things in the face of adversity. Her story might have been lost were it not for trailblazing Anita Anand, whose "Punjab-(ra)dar" homed in on a sepia photograph of Sophia, prompting years-long research that she compiled into her book, *Sophia: Princess, Suffragette, Revolutionary*.

Sophia features on Anand and William Dalrymple's podcast *Empire* (with its millions of downloads) and with mainstream successes of books such as Sathnam Sanghera's *Empireland* it's clear there is an appetite beyond South Asians for this story. Throw in the fact that the Koh-i-noor diamond (formerly in the possession of Sophia's forefathers) has made global news, with many calling for the world's most valuable diamond to be returned to India after the death of Queen Elizabeth II: Sophia's story is a veritable goldmine.

From *Never Have I Ever* and *Ms Marvel* to *Wedding Season*, there's been an exciting shift. The world's first brown female superhero and stories that centre Indian characters are hugely important steps for South Asian kids the world over to feel seen and to know that the opportunities afforded their white counterparts are within their reach too. As Marian Wright Edelman said, "you can't be what you can't see". Let's pole-vault our way into the reality we're hungry for: game-changing South Asian women at the fore and cue the lights up on the incredible Princess Sophia Duleep Singh.

Bullet-resistant shields in schools underscore a societal failure

The Philadelphia Inquirer, The Editorial Board, December 27, 2022

After a record year for school shootings, America continues to look for answers beyond sensible gun safety measures. It is an ongoing tragedy of our making.

Preparing kids for school used to mean new shoes, a book bag, pencils, copybooks, and other supplies. But one New Jersey school district plans to equip schools with bullet-resistant shields to protect students and teachers. Some school safety experts say the shields are well-intentioned but not practical. Perhaps, but the very fact the Gloucester City school system feels compelled to take such action speaks to the sad state of America's gun epidemic. There are more guns than people in the U.S., and gun violence recently surpassed car accidents as the leading cause of death among children.

School shootings have become an accepted fact of life — and death — across America. Active shooter drills and lockdowns are now part of the safety protocol at most schools. In recent years, some parents have bought their kids bulletproof backpacks. A growing number of states allow teachers and staff to carry guns. Some research shows that active shooter drills and other safety measures add to the trauma kids are experiencing. Now come bullet-resistant shields donated by Leo Holt, president of the freight transportation company Holt Logistics in Gloucester City. Holt's generous gesture is one man's attempt to keep students, teachers, and staff safe.

Sadly, none of the previous efforts have slowed the rise in school shootings. There have been 50 school shootings in 2022, according to *Education Week*. That is by far the most ever in a single year, topping last year's record of 35. More appalling is the casual response to such horrific tragedies. The school shootings get brief news coverage before most everyone moves on. Then comes the next shooting. And the next one.

Many Republican elected officials offer little more than "thoughts and prayers" to the victims and families. After 19 children and two adults were slaughtered by an 18-year-old gunman at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas, in May, U.S. Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene (Republican, Georgia) issued this tweet: "We don't need more gun control, we need to return to God." Such inane sentiments contribute zilch to solving the problem. This month marked the 10th anniversary of the mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Connecticut. A 20-year-old gunman massacred 26 people, including 20 children who were 6 and 7 years old. That was the moment many thought elected officials would finally come together and pass substantive gun safety measures to address America's gun problem. But just months after the Sandy Hook shootings, a bipartisan bill to expand background checks sponsored by U.S. Senators Pat Toomey (Republican, Pennsylvania) and Joe Manchin (Democrat, West Virginia) was defeated by a Republican-led filibuster. Other efforts to pass major gun safety proposals — such as a ban on automatic assault rifles, universal background checks, required permits for the purchase or possession of a gun, and raising the age limit to purchase a gun — have been blocked as well, even though polls show the majority of Americans support such measures.

In June, Congress passed the first major gun safety legislation in 30 years. The bill increases incentives for states to pass red flag laws, expands an existing law to prevent people convicted of domestic abuse from owning a gun, and expands background checks on gun buyers under age 21.

Those are all worthy steps, but more must be done to limit the easy access to guns. It is worth remembering that school shootings — and the broader gun epidemic — are not a red or blue state problem. They are an American tragedy. Other countries have responded quickly to mass shootings by implementing real gun safety measures. In marking the anniversary of Sandy Hook, President Joe Biden rightly said we should have "societal guilt" for taking so long to confront the nation's gun problem. Biden reiterated his call to ban assault weapons and high-capacity magazines that have no purpose other than to kill a lot of people, very quickly.

The school shootings that have come before and after Sandy Hook should have been enough to move lawmakers to pass substantive gun safety measures. The thought of a New Jersey school district resorting to bullet-resistant shields underscores the collective failure to keep children safe.

Our weak political class shows us the need for a new Scottish Enlightenment

The Scotsman, 10th June 2023, by Susan Dalgety

I was asked a pertinent question earlier this week. During yet another discussion about gender ideology, someone said, “I am not suggesting these things don’t matter, they do. But nearly 25 per cent of Scottish children live in poverty. We should consider what takes up time in politics.” He gave me pause for thought. This week alone, the Scottish government’s flagship recycling scheme – designed to help meet its ambitious net zero targets – collapsed in disarray. Businesses, from corner shops to global corporations, have been left out of pocket after investing in equipment for an unworkable scheme. And the debacle has, once again, exposed the deep rift between governments in Edinburgh and London, one that may suit narrow party interests but damages Scotland. A few days ago, an expert in domestic abuse told STV that more must be done to protect women from their violent partners.

Meanwhile, figures published this week by the End Child Poverty Coalition reveal that a quarter of Scottish children live in poverty. Even in a rich city like Edinburgh, nearly 20 per cent of children are suffering. And in our biggest city, Glasgow, the figure is around a third. I could go on. Islanders are cut off from the mainland as the lifeline ferry system collapses. Our NHS seems unable to heal itself, struggling to recover from the pandemic. Our working-age population is about to go into decline. By 2027-28, tax receipts will be 3.5 per cent less than the Scottish Government’s spending commitments. Scotland is in danger of not working.

Yet, as my interlocutor pointed out, much of the political discourse in our country currently focuses not on how to increase productivity, fix the NHS or close the education attainment gap, but on whether a woman can have a penis. On the positive side, the transgender debate – sparked off by the Scottish government’s determination to introduce self-ID – has given birth to a vigorous and growing women’s movement across Scotland. And, unlike the rest of the UK, where critics of gender reform are drawn mainly from academia, law and the media, here it is ‘ordinary’ women who lead the campaign. Women who discovered their political voice during the 2014 referendum, others who are staunch defenders of the United Kingdom and many who, until now, had never done a political act in their life, yet are now willing to break the law or risk their livelihood, so strong are their feelings about the issue.

But what this grassroots campaign has also done is expose the inadequacy of Scotland’s political class. Whether through sheer stupidity or malice aforethought, MSPs and government ministers have contemptuously ignored public opinion, dismissing the women campaigners as bigots and refusing to engage with them on the substantive issues around gender reform. And it is not just the SNP and their partners, the Scottish Greens, who are guilty of closing down debate. Earlier this week, Pauline McNeill, a highly respected Labour politician, was forced to withdraw from a meeting she had helped organise about the Equality Act following a formal complaint that, because the event was being held during Pride month, it appeared to be “a deliberate attack on trans people and their allies”. A charge that in 2023 is akin to an allegation of racism, and, if upheld, could potentially destroy McNeill’s career.

The anonymous attack is reminiscent of McCarthyism – “Are you now or have you ever been a bigot, Ms McNeill?” – and the Scottish Labour leader, Anas Sarwar, should have dismissed the vexatious complaint immediately, and agreed to attend the meeting himself. Instead, there has been a stony silence from the Labour leadership, leaving McNeill exposed. But perhaps even worse is the message that this incident sends about the state of Scottish politics. The meeting, which McNeill organised with former SNP minister Ash Regan, is to discuss the definition of sex under the 2010 Equality Act in light of self-ID and the recent judgement in the Court of Session that a person’s legal sex was not limited to their biology. A similar event took place in Westminster on Thursday night and passed by without incident, yet here in Scotland the topic is deemed not suitable for discussion.

This is why the gender ideology debate matters. If our politicians are not confident enough to resist the authoritarian tendencies within our body politic, and instead are content to close down free speech on a topic as straightforward as biological sex, then what hope do we have that they possess the intellect and stamina to tackle child poverty or climate change? Or even fix the NHS? But 300 years after Adam Smith’s birth, do I detect a glimmer of hope in Holyrood? A display of critical thinking even? During a debate on Wednesday to mark the philosopher’s anniversary, secured by SNP MSP Michelle Thompson, several women MSPs emphasised Smith’s core argument that free speech is crucial to economic and social progress. [...] A basic lesson in good governance that our political leaders appear to have skipped, to all our detriment. Time for a new Scottish Enlightenment?

The UK can't ignore Scotland's gender recognition Bill

The Spectator, 10th January 2023, by Debbie Hayton (a teacher and a journalist)

On Monday we learned that Gender Recognition Certificates (GRCs) issued in Scotland might not be accepted in England and Wales. Last month Scotland passed its contentious Gender Recognition Reform Bill, which means that anyone over the age of 16 can legally change their gender after three months, even if they don't have a diagnosis of gender dysphoria.

5 But now, according to the *Times*, UK government sources say that unless the Scottish government amends its legislation and requires someone to have a medical diagnosis of gender dysphoria, Scottish gender recognition certificates won't be recognised in the rest of the UK.

10 The UK government may think this is the 'Legoland driving licence' solution to gender recognition, with Scotland issuing GRCs to anyone who wants one, but with those certificates having as much validity south of the border as permits issued by the Lego City Driving School on the public highway. But there is a problem that the UK government may not have considered.

15 At the moment, a GRC is not designed to be produced on-demand to prove someone's legal sex. That would defeat one key purpose of the original 2004 Gender Recognition Act – to protect the privacy of transsexual people. Section 22 of the GRA makes it an offence for officials to disclose the fact that someone has even applied for a GRC.

20 It was a different world in 2004. Back then it was assumed that transsexuals would want to re-integrate back into society in their 'acquired gender' and get on with their life. The goal was to let people move beyond transition, not wallow in it. At the time, the government assumed that there were only about 5,000 transsexual people across the UK, most of whom would have gone through a medical process of gender reassignment.

25 Today, transgender people constitute a very different group. Census data released last week shows that there are far more of us – 262,000 in England and Wales alone – with a so-called gender identity different from their sex registered at birth. But the basic mechanics of the Gender Recognition Certificate process largely remain the same as in 2004.

30 When a Gender Recognition Panel issues a GRC, they email a copy to the relevant office, for example the General Register Office in England and Wales, or National Records of Scotland. The relevant office then issues a new birth certificate showing a person's new gender – male or female. Crucially, there is no indication on the new birth certificate that someone has changed their gender.

35 If Nicola Sturgeon's SNP government gets its way, anyone born in Scotland will soon be able to apply for a Scottish GRC – simply because they want one – and then will receive a new birth certificate from National Records Scotland. England and Wales might decide not to recognise Scottish GRCs but they can't refuse to recognise Scottish birth certificates.

40 The Equality Act 2010 – legislation reserved to Westminster – allows providers to deliver single-sex services where they can be objectively justified. But those rights are compromised if service providers cannot prove that the holder of a GRC is not the sex they are claiming to be. A transwoman might look like a man, sound like a man and walk like a man, but if their birth certificate says they are female, their paperwork will not distinguish them from a woman.

45 That has been an ongoing conundrum since the UK started issuing GRCs almost 20 years ago, but the Scottish GRR bill is a game-changer because it removes all checks and balances from the process. Now the Bill has been passed, it is likely that many more GRCs will be issued in Scotland, to a far more diverse group of people.

Refusing to accept Scottish GRCs in the rest of the UK is an unworkable solution. But even if we could contain the problem, Scotland is just as much a part of the UK as England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The UK government cannot and must not abrogate its responsibilities to the people of Scotland who have a right to single sex services.

45 And Scotland's gender Bill compromises the rights of organisations to provide single-sex services *throughout* the UK. It should therefore be challenged by the Scotland Act. Section 35 allows UK ministers to do just that – and prohibit Holyrood's presiding officer from submitting the Bill for royal assent. Yes there will be howls of outrage from the SNP, and no doubt Sturgeon would drag the matter through the courts. But what really matters is the court of public opinion, especially in Scotland. The SNP has been spoiling

for a fight over sovereignty. Where better for the UK government to challenge them than over an issue that is unpopular among the people of Scotland? Polling suggests that two thirds of Scots oppose self-ID.

Scotland and England aren't drifting apart

The Spectator, 1st June 2023, by Eddie Barnes, campaign director of *Our Scottish Future*

Are Scotland and England drifting inexorably apart? To find out if that's true, at Our Scottish Future, we carried out extensive polling of people across Scotland, Wales and England, asking if they feel negatively or positively about our governing system. Did they feel invisible to people in Westminster? Two thirds of those polled in Scotland said yes. Polling in Wales, and both the north west and north east of England, has produced similar figures.

We pressed Scots further: did they feel common bonds with people across the UK? When it came to Geordies, Liverpoolians and the Welsh, the answer was very frequently yes. It was only when it came to Londoners that this frayed – only 17 per cent of Scots say they feel common bonds with the capital. It is probably right to conclude that those who said 'no' were thinking of 'Westminster' and 'Whitehall' rather than actual Londoners.

There is an obvious conclusion from these polls, one that cuts across the narrative pushed by the SNP over the last decade. The characterisation of Scotland and England moving apart from one another is simplistic; instead, we are seeing a coming together of people across the UK – including parts of the south.

On both the left and the right, there is a common desire for more economic agency and political control in their communities. And while the two specific issues are very different, the sense of dislocation that lay behind support for Scottish independence and Brexit are not dissimilar.

Michael Gove's levelling up white paper found common ground with Labour's commission on the future of the UK: Britain's gaping geographical divisions are key factors in this demand for change. The gap between our wealthier communities and poorer ones is among the highest in the OECD. Little wonder, then, that people want a more balanced Britain when the economic disparities in the UK are so stark.

Labour's commission went further, arguing that the economic imbalances were 'exacerbated by the gross over-centralisation of the UK state – a system of government where power and control are hoarded by a few people in Westminster'. In short, the argument is that economic and political empowerment must go hand in hand. Unless Britain's regions and nations get more political control, they remain 'begging bowl' communities, prone to remote and often inappropriate decision making from the centre.

When leaders from different political traditions separately reach identical conclusions about the way the UK is run, perhaps they might be onto something. In January, the Conservative mayor of Birmingham, Andy Street, spoke of how 'Whitehall's bidding and begging-bowl culture is broken'. He continued: 'The sooner we can decentralise and move to proper fiscal devolution the better.' Street's unlikely ally was former Labour prime minister Gordon Brown who, earlier this week, spoke of Britain's need for 'major reform' so that 'the way we run ourselves is more democratic, less corrupt and more responsive to the wishes of people from across our diverse nation'.

The case for reforming the UK state will, at a rally tonight in Edinburgh, be redoubled by a series of leaders from around Britain. Brown will be joined by Welsh First Minister Mark Drakeford, Manchester mayor Andy Burnham and West Yorkshire mayor Tracy Brabin. The quartet will set out a joint message: Britain is wildly over-centralised. They will call for more political power to be pushed into our cities and regions. Westminster and Whitehall, they believe, are in dire need of fundamental reform.

It is not all one way, however. Britain should not be Balkanised. What the leaders this evening are demanding is a new way to 'do' Britain, to improve our cooperation with one another. What better example to use than Scotland? When powers were devolved to Edinburgh 25 years ago, Whitehall effectively carried on pretty much as before. Flimsy institutional arrangements were made to ensure the existence of 'shared' government as well as 'self' government for the country – with deeply damaging results. Who would have thought that when a nationalist administration took over in Edinburgh in 2007 that these wafer-thin arrangements would be exploited and used to muster grievance and division?

A new Britain, governed by the twin principles of solidarity and subsidiarity, is urgently needed. It will work for England's regions. It will assure Scots that they can have more power within the Union. It is essential to rewire Britain to give its people and their communities the agency and control they seek.

Ireland's migrant hypocrisy

The Spectator, 11th June 2023, by Ian O'Doherty (opinion columnist and writer for the *Irish Independent*)

'Cead Mile Failte', which means 'a hundred thousand welcomes', is a sentiment the Irish have long held dear. We pride ourselves on our welcoming nature, our music, our famous pub culture and the fact that the average tourist will be almost overwhelmingly love-bombed by locals who are happy to see a new face and will want to regale them with tales of local lore. But recently it seems that Ireland may have used up its welcomes and is, instead, retreating back into the dark terrain of nativism and suspicion of foreigners.

For a country that liked to boast about its welcoming nature, the last few weeks have seen the rise of a brand of anti-immigrant sentiment that has verged on the murderous. When the number of indigenous homeless people is roughly similar to the number of migrants requiring assistance, it's a recipe for disaster. The most shocking example occurred in inner city Dublin during a stand-off between pro-migrant and anti-migrant protesters. With an estimated 65,000 people having arrived on Irish shores in the last few years, these flashpoints have become increasingly frequent, but the events at the clash on Dublin's Sandwith street shocked the nation. In what must surely rank as one of Ireland's lowest moments, the tents belonging to a makeshift encampment of migrants were completely torched.

It was a genuinely shameful moment, and one which has deeply upset many people.

It is the kind of openly racist violence that has never been a part of Irish life, yet it is becoming more common and, in some circles, more acceptable. Similar attitudes have been displayed across the country. Recently, asylum seekers had to be removed from a shelter in county Clare because of threats to their safety. Various parties had placed bollards and blockades across the roads to prevent any more migrants arriving, and there were menacing threats of burning down any hotel which dared to accommodate asylum seekers.

That's not to say that all the locals who were involved in these protests are intrinsically racist or bigots. Many of them were happy to appear on Irish news channels and openly give their name as they explained the reasons for their objections. Just like we're seeing in the UK, they are usually concerned about government policy and the lack of communication from officials. There are many reasons to explain the lurch towards anti-immigrant sentiment but the only true constant is Ireland's record-breaking housing crisis. Never in the history of the state have so many people been homeless and it's a crisis which has been either ignored or terribly mismanaged by successive Irish governments.

Unfortunately, it's also the main reason why Sinn Fein will probably win the next general election, ushering in what will undoubtedly be a period of economic chaos and a super sized version of tax and spend. And when the number of indigenous homeless people is roughly similar to the number of migrants requiring assistance, it's a recipe for disaster and cause for serious concern.

Yet incredibly, many on the Irish left refuse to look at the genuine concerns of ordinary citizens and instead focus on their two favourite topics – Trump and, inevitably, Brexit. It has been virtually impossible in Ireland to have a rational discussion about Brexit. Yes, there were concerns of national interest and the farce of the Northern Ireland Protocol which managed to be both baffling and incredibly boring.

But the largest democratic vote in the UK's history also unleashed a wave of anti-English hatred that hasn't been seen since the darkest days of the Troubles in the 1970s. According to many well-respected Irish commentators, who really should know better, the 17 million people who voted Leave were simple-minded Little Englanders, racists and bigots. There is no nuance, and no willingness to understand the various reasons why so many people voted for Brexit.

No, instead, we are still fed the narrative that Britain thanks to Brexit is either becoming, or has already become, a fascist state.

In Ireland, it almost felt as if the long dormant hatred of the English had been given permission to rear its ugly head. And this time rather than complaining about Perfidious Albion from a position of weakness and servitude, the insults are delivered with a sense of smug moral superiority.

Irish politicians have long prided themselves with being the 'best boys in the class' in the school that is the EU and they were happy to look at our closest and most important neighbours with utter disdain, something our European masters enjoyed enormously.

Yet far from the UK descending into some sort of fascist hellscape, it's in Ireland where the tents of homeless asylum seekers are being set on fire. It's in Ireland where migrants are rescued from shelters because of credible threats to their life. And, for once, the chin stroking *bien pensants* of the *Irish Times* can't blame Brexit for that.

Now Keir Starmer should disavow Critical Race Theory

The Telegraph, 12th December 2022, by Tom Harris

Wes Streeting has shown that there are at least some in Labour's leadership who are not afraid to say what's necessary, even to those who might normally be considered to be on "their side". The shadow health secretary speaks for millions of NHS patients who are fed up with the constant demand to view the NHS as a subject of public worship, rather than as a publicly-funded institution that is as flawed as any other public service and one that should be held to account for how it spends tax-payers' money.

But the hostile reaction Streeting has received from his own party's Left and from the vested interests in the NHS will serve as a warning to anyone else in the Labour Party who might be considering taking the side of ordinary voters rather than that of the establishment it wishes to lead after the next general election.

Which is a pity, because when Labour refuses to put its head over the parapet, whether on standing up to climate change extremists, the activities of grooming gangs targeting vulnerable girls in the North, or the encroachment on women's rights from trans ideology, then they leave the door wide open for the Conservatives and others on the Right to say what the vast majority of traditional Labour voters are thinking.

Labour politicians may well wish to distance themselves from the culture wars on the grounds that too many on the Left are on the wrong side of them, and perhaps, if left well alone, they will simply disappear. That is to place hope over experience, for they are not going away, and at least part of the reason for that is that Labour has failed miserably to speak up for the majority of its own voters who feel uneasy about some of the latest diktats on race and gender theory, but who are too afraid to speak up. That's why they have elected representatives – to speak up on their behalf. Last week a group of Conservative MPs, making use of Freedom of Information laws, compiled a dossier detailing the £7 billion cost to the public sector of Whitehall and quangos' relentless (and costly) focus on "woke" issues. The Conservative Way Forward Group claim that £557 million is spent every year on equality and diversity jobs in the public sector – enough to pay for 12,500 nurses.

A million working days are lost to the public sector every year, the report claims, through staff having to leave their day jobs to one side in order to take part in equality and diversity training. The Arts Council's "unlearning whiteness" course has particularly infuriated Tory MPs. But why hasn't it infuriated Labour MPs too?

Few in Keir Starmer's party, beyond the Corbynite hard-Left, will publicly defend the divisive and irrational dogmatism behind Critical Race Theory (CRT), with its emphasis on white privilege and institutional racism. This Government has set its face against such ideologies, and yet many of its advocates continue to make money by hiring themselves out to public bodies to lecture us on how we should all be judged, not by the content of our character, but by the colour of our skin. CRT gets short shrift from at least some Labour MPs privately, so why do they say nothing publicly? Why has it been left to the Right to identify this colossal waste of public money at a time when the country is undergoing the worst cost-of-living crisis in living memory and the Government is levying record high taxes?

We all know the answer: because too many of Labour's stakeholders have a vested interest in certain ideological agendas. Labour adherence to these groups can win it no extra votes and no extra seats when the general election comes around, but still they remain cowed, perhaps fearful of saying something that a retired teacher or social worker attending their next local party meeting will take issue with them. We also know that the Conservatives know this: they are rightly confident that Labour will be put on the back foot whenever this dossier of nonsense is put to them (if it ever is).

Streeting has shown that it doesn't have to be this way. If it is possible to defend the NHS at the same time as criticising it, then it is surely possible for Labour to re-establish itself as the spokesperson for working class Britain without compromising its anti-racist credentials. It must be possible for it to defend the rights of trans people to live as normal a life as possible, free from bullying or prejudice, while at the same time drawing a line in the sand that marks the limit of the extent to which women's rights to single-sex spaces are compromised.

That is a balancing act, but as many have already observed multiple times: if you can't ride two horses at the same time, you shouldn't be in the circus. Labour should be careful not to assume that because all the criticism of woke projects is coming from the Right, then traditional Labour voters will automatically dismiss it as prejudice. [...]

It's time Labour started speaking up for those communities, and ignoring the well-paid advocates of division on their own side. Because if they don't, someone else will.

Seven PMs lead tributes as Betty Boothroyd dies aged 93

The Telegraph, 29th March 2023, by Camilla Tominey, associate editor

Seven prime ministers have paid tribute to Betty Boothroyd, the first female Commons Speaker, following her death at the age of 93.

The crossbench peer, who broke 700 years of tradition when she was elected as Speaker in the spring of 1992, died at Addenbrookes Hospital in Cambridge on Sunday.

5 Renowned for her unwavering sense of fair play, unshakeable sense of humour and passionate belief in the sovereignty of Parliament, Baroness Boothroyd's term of office coincided with Sir John Major's attempts to defend his slim majority.

10 She was in the Speaker's chair during the extensive parliamentary wrangling over the Maastricht Treaty, had to navigate the sleaze scandals that beset the Major government and witnessed Sir Tony Blair's meteoric rise in 1997.

When she retired from the Commons three years later, she ended her remarks with the phrase most commonly associated with her – “time's up” – to cheering and waving of order papers.

Rishi Sunak, the Prime Minister, described Baroness Boothroyd as “a remarkable woman”, adding: “The passion, wit and sense of fairness she brought to politics will not be forgotten.”

15 Sir John said: “Betty Boothroyd was a superb Speaker, easy to like and easier still to admire. As Speaker, she was full of common sense and utterly fair in her rulings. She handled a fractious Commons with great skill. She set a standard for every future speaker.”

Sir Tony paid tribute to her as “a big-hearted and kind person”, adding: “She was a truly outstanding Speaker, presiding with great authority, warmth and wit, for which she had our deep respect and admiration.”

20 Boris Johnson hailed her “elegant authority”, saying: “She made history”, while Theresa May described her as “formidable in the Chair” and commanding respect from across the House.

David Cameron said: “She always struck me as perfect for the job – bags of common sense, loved the institution she served, lots of natural authority, and always able to see the wood for the trees.

25 “It was an honour to meet her after she left the Commons and went to the Lords. We've lost a great public servant, a great character and a great trailblazer.”

Gordon Brown said the former speaker was “tough, yet charming, compassionate and caring”.

Sir Lindsay Hoyle, the current Speaker, said Baroness Boothroyd had broken the glass ceiling “with panache”, adding: “It was heartening to hear a Northern voice speaking from the Chair.”

30 Born in Dewsbury, Yorkshire, in 1929, the only child of textile workers Ben and Mary Boothroyd, she attended council schools before studying at Dewsbury College of Commerce and Art, now Kirklees College.

A trained dancer, she was a member of the Tiller Girls dancing troupe, appearing at the London Palladium before a foot infection brought her dancing career to an end.

Having won a national speaking award, she turned to politics and worked as secretary to the Labour MPs Barbara Castle and Geoffrey de Freitas before travelling to the US to campaign for John F Kennedy.

35 When she returned to London, she continued her work as secretary and political assistant to various senior Labour politicians including Harry Walston, a former foreign minister.

She was later elected to a seat on Hammersmith Borough Council in 1958 and remained there until 1968, by which time she had contested several Labour seats before finally winning West Bromwich in a by-election in 1973.

40 After a stint as an MEP, she got her big political break in 1987 she got her big political break when she became a deputy speaker under Bernard Weatherill, the then Commons speaker. After five years in the role, she made history by succeeding him as Speaker.

A fierce advocate of parliamentary sovereignty, she described the House of Commons as “the chief forum of the nation today, tomorrow and, I hope, for ever.”

45 In 2011, she described the idea of an elected House of Lords as “wantonly destructive”, warning that it risked power struggles with the lower chamber.

In her 2001 autobiography, she explained her decision to put public service above marriage. She had an active social life, taking up paragliding while on holiday in Cyprus in her 60s, and described the hobby as both “lovely and peaceful” and “exhilarating”.

The ‘anti-racist’ mission to destroy Britain is working – and we have surrendered

The Telegraph, 10th April 2023, by Robert Tombs (a Fellow of St John’s College, Cambridge)

It was inevitable that the monarchy would be attacked for involvement in 17th- and 18th-century slavery. Nearly every other national institution has been already. A new King and the forthcoming Coronation make it a tempting target. The King, quite understandably, has expressed support for a historical investigation, and perhaps this will calm things down until after the Coronation. But the monarchy would sooner or later have become a target as the symbol of the nation, its unity and its history – the very things that “anti-racist” and “anti-colonial” activists aim to undermine. They have an ally in Vladimir Putin, who attacks the West’s “centuries of colonialism”.

We play along with the pretext that the obsession with slavery and colonialism is about history. We even acquiesce in activists’ claims that the aim is uncovering some long-hidden aspect of our past and “facing up to it”. But real history seeks above all to understand and it aims at getting the complete story. Trawling through the past in a search for something discreditable is crude propaganda. There is no serious historical purpose when institutions such as the Church of England, Cambridge University, Kew Gardens, the National Trust, or the Bank of England solemnly announce that they are investigating their guilty past. It is perfectly well known that Britain, and hence the monarchy and many other institutions, were involved in the slave economy. It is equally well known that nearly every other country was – not only European countries, but African, American, Asian and Middle Eastern ones too.

Many people also realise that Britain, and hence its monarchy, were the leaders of a long global campaign to end the slave trade and then slavery itself. Successive governments were responding to a tide of public pressure, including mass petitions and boycotts of slave-grown products – sufficient proof that Britain has long been one of the least racist societies. Of course, efforts to end slavery were not wholly successful, but they were sustained and often heroic. Moreover, they were unique: the British anti-slavery policy was strongly resisted by American, European, Arab and, of course, African states, which had to be persuaded by diplomacy, bribery and sometimes force. This epoch-making endeavour, not participation in the slave trade, is the part of our history that is now being deliberately downplayed and distorted. Yet while we need to reiterate the basics – of which many children and young people seem ignorant – argument alone is not enough, as it assumes a willingness to listen and be convinced by plain fact.

In reality there is no such willingness among those who are singling out Britain, as if this country and its monarchy were uniquely tainted. Sometimes their motives seem to be ideological, as succinctly expressed by the newly elected National Education Union general secretary, Daniel Kebede, who has spoken of “taking back education from a brutally racist state”. But behind such ideological verbiage there are plenty of less exalted motives. “Anti-racist” and “anti-colonial” notoriety is a shrewd career move in those reaches of academia, publishing, curatorship and entertainment where competition for jobs is intense and outstanding ability rare: how else can you tell one professor of post-colonial literature or lecturer in hate studies from another?

Major institutions have repeatedly given in to pressure from junior staff. The trustees of such bodies, usually well-meaning people but rarely experts, seem frightened of doing their duty to safeguard their institutions in the interests of the wider public. Yet in law, trustees have huge and largely unaccountable discretion, and if they give in to every “woke” initiative, the consequences will be serious and in some cases irreversible.

The sorry saga of the Benin Bronzes is a study in such institutional failure. A large number of these objects were brought back by a British expedition in 1897, and are now found in many museums in Britain, France, Germany and the US. The kingdom of Benin, far from being a defenceless victim of gratuitous colonial aggression, was a violent slave-owning despotism that killed slaves for ritual purposes and the 1897 expedition put a stop to that.

International museum curators have decided, without bothering much about other opinions, that the bronzes should be given back unconditionally as “colonial loot” to Nigeria. This consensus is based on a systematically distorted account of 1897, which passes over the anti-slavery aspect of the British intervention in silence.

The Horniman Museum and the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge are among those disposing of important collections of Benin bronzes. Yet the Nigerians themselves are quarrelling over ownership. Moreover, American descendants of enslaved Africans have formally requested that the bronzes should be kept safe in Western museums where they can be seen, and they strongly object to their being donated to the successors of the slavers who sold their ancestors. But they have been ignored.

Roald Dahl ebooks ‘force censored versions on readers’ despite backlash

The Times, 25th February 2023, by Ben Ellery & James Beal, social affairs editor

Owners of Roald Dahl ebooks are having their libraries automatically updated with the new censored versions containing hundreds of changes to language related to weight, mental health, violence, gender and race. Readers who bought electronic versions of the writer’s books, such as *Matilda* and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, before the controversial updates have discovered their copies have now been changed.

5 Puffin Books, the company which publishes Dahl novels, updated the electronic novels, in which Augustus Gloop is no longer described as fat or Mrs Twit as fearfully ugly, on devices such as the Amazon Kindle.

Dahl’s biographer Matthew Dennison last night accused the publisher of “strong-arming readers into accepting a new orthodoxy in which Dahl himself has played no part.”

10 Yesterday Puffin, the children’s division of Penguin Random House, announced it would publish additional classic editions of the stories with the original texts. It comes following a wave of criticism, including an apparent intervention by the Queen, who called on writers to resist encroachments on their freedom of expression. Dennison, who wrote the Dahl biography *Teller of the Unexpected*, said: “For me there’s an irony to the current automatic updating of Dahl’s ebooks.

“Time and again, in his writing for adults as well as children, Dahl championed the bullied against the bullies.

15 “Yet here we have a kind of cultural assertiveness that strong-arms readers into accepting without alternative - though, happily, not without demur - a new orthodoxy in which Dahl himself has played no part.

“This particular revisionism sits oddly with Dahl’s irrepressibly anarchic outlook, his distinctive combination of mischief and wonder, and, of course, ignores the fact that words, central to a writer’s armoury, are a matter of choice in order to manipulate meaning and conjure effect.”

20 Puffin and the Roald Dahl Story Company began a review of Dahl’s work in 2020. *The Daily Telegraph* revealed it led to edits including “old hag” becoming “old crow” in *The Witches* and “You must be mad, woman” became “you must be out of your mind”.

Clarissa Aykroyd, 43, who works in children’s publishing, reported on social media that ebooks she bought before 2020 had been changed. She told *The Times*: “It feels Orwellian that we are having the updated versions forced upon us and has made me weary of ebooks. I assumed that because the changes to the work were so big that I would be given the option of whether to download it.” Puffin UK said it had “listened to the debate” as it announced it will publish a classic collection of 17 of his texts.

25 The publisher added it understood there were “very real questions around how stories can be kept relevant for new generations”. It said the books will be available alongside the sanitised versions “offering readers the choice to decide how they experience Roald Dahl’s magical, marvellous stories.” Yesterday Robert Hampson, professor emeritus at Royal Holloway, University of London, who is chair of The Joseph Conrad Society, said erasure of the Polish-British novelist from *Matilda* made “no sense”. The censored edition of *Matilda* has removed a reference to Conrad as an author read by the protagonist and replaced him with Jane Austen.

30 Hampson said current critiques of Conrad originated from a 1975 lecture about his famous novella *Heart of Darkness* by Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe, who argued that the author was racist. The book, published in 1902, follows fictional sailor Charles Marlow and his journey as a river steamboat captain for an ivory trading company. Hampson told *The Times*: “In 1975, Chinua Achebe gave a lecture in which he argued that Conrad was a racist. I know that some black readers find the text offensive and difficult to read - but this is not universally the case. Achebe refuses to accept that Marlow is a fictional character and insists that Marlow’s racist representation of Africans is Conrad’s - rather than what we might expect from a British sea-captain in the 1890s.”

Francesca Dow, managing director of Penguin Random House Children’s Books, said: “We’ve listened to the debate over the past week which has reaffirmed the extraordinary power of Roald Dahl’s books and the very real questions around how stories from another era can be kept relevant for each new generation.

45 “As a children’s publisher, our role is to share the magic of stories with children with the greatest thought and care. Roald Dahl’s fantastic books are often the first stories young children will read independently, and taking care for the imaginations and fast-developing minds of young readers is both a privilege and a responsibility. We also recognise the importance of keeping Dahl’s classic texts in print. By making both Puffin and Penguin versions available, we are offering readers the choice to decide how they experience Roald Dahl’s magical, marvellous stories.”

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No, Biden's immigration policies are not to blame for the fentanyl crisis

David J. Bier, Jeffrey A. Singer, *The Washington Post*, October 27, 2022

David J. Bier is associate director of immigration studies at the Cato Institute. Jeffrey A. Singer practices general surgery in Phoenix and is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute.

Fentanyl, the synthetic opioid responsible for 88 percent of opioid overdose deaths in the United States, is showing up in campaign ads across the country. The message is simple: Fentanyl would disappear if illegal immigration disappeared. This is wrong. If anything, border crackdowns have exacerbated the crisis.

5 Much of this narrative places blame on President Biden for less restrictive immigration policies, which have supposedly caused the highly potent fentanyl to “pour across our border.” But this misunderstands the obvious reality about the drug: Because it is so potent, a large supply can be easily concealed. That makes it easy to enter the country through legal border crossings. Indeed, legal travelers smuggle nearly all fentanyl into the country. It is far easier for one of the approximately 20,000 Border Patrol agents, backed up by 24/7 cameras and aerial surveillance drones, to spot a human being crossing illegally than it is for port inspectors to spot a substance that might be no bigger than a pencil tip in someone's pockets, baggage or cargo.

10 The government estimates that it intercepts barely 2 percent of hard drugs entering the country at legal crossing points. At the same time, it estimates that it apprehends about 80 percent of people crossing illegally. Even if that latter number is an overestimation, there would be no reason to cross illegally to bring in fentanyl since doing so legally is much easier. That explains why 90 percent of fentanyl from Mexico seized in the United States was discovered at legal entry points or interior vehicle checkpoints, not illegal crossing routes. And why barely 0.02 percent of the people arrested by Border Patrol agents possessed any fentanyl.

15 This also helps explain why 86.3 percent of fentanyl trafficking convictions were of U.S. citizens, not illegal immigrants. It makes sense for the cartels to hire U.S. citizens as smugglers because they are subject to the least scrutiny when crossing the border. If it were easier to transport fentanyl by crossing illegally, U.S. citizens wouldn't be hired for the smuggling jobs. You might think that maybe what we need is to restrict both legal and illegal crossings. That's exactly what occurred during the pandemic in 2020 and 2021. The government banned asylum seekers, expelled illegal crossers to Mexico and restricted legal entries only to “essential” travelers. Biden kept the travel restriction until this year, and expulsions to Mexico continue.

20 Yet that didn't improve the overdose crisis. Instead, cartels quickly switched from smuggling heroin to the far more dangerous fentanyl, allowing traffickers to supply the same illicit market with far fewer crossings. In those years, fentanyl's share of the combined heroin-fentanyl border seizures increased from one-third before the pandemic to 90 percent. Fentanyl overdose deaths nearly doubled from 2019 to 2021. The harsher the crackdown, the more smugglers shift to more potent, easier-to-conceal drugs, such as fentanyl. This is similar to the unintended consequences of the crackdown on prescription painkillers. Non-medical users who relied on stolen or diverted pills did not stop using opioids as a result of the crackdown; they switched to the more dangerous heroin. Meanwhile, genuine pain patients suffered immensely. Fentanyl is entering the United States because consumers — almost all of them U.S. citizens — are willing to pay for illicit opioids. As long as there is demand, supply will follow. That's the lesson of the past century of prohibition — first of alcohol, then drugs. Policymakers must focus on helping people with addictions, not on banning immigration or throwing more taxpayer dollars at ineffective border measures.

25 How can politicians help? Drug prohibition makes non-medical use dangerous and deadly. If politicians can't repeal prohibition, they should at least enact proven harm-reduction strategies, including needle exchange and syringe services programs; distributing drug testing equipment such as fentanyl test strips so users can reduce their dose or even discard a drug they got on the street; and making the overdose antidote naloxone widely available over the counter or even in vending machines. The government should also let physicians treat addiction like any other disease. In the United States, patients often travel miles to take their methadone in front of staffers each day at government-regulated clinics. Lawmakers should let people with addiction receive take-home methadone treatment directly from their doctors, as they have been doing in Britain, Canada and Australia since the 1970s. Politicians should also lift strict quotas on how many patients doctors may treat for addiction using buprenorphine.

40 Politicians first blamed the drug overdose crisis on physicians and drug companies. Now, they are blaming the problem on immigrants. They've blamed everyone but the true culprits: themselves. This November is voters' next opportunity to hold both parties accountable.

California is in decline. And it's likely to get even worse.

Henry Olsen, *The Washington Post*, January 19, 2023

California's status as the most important state in the nation will remain secure for quite some time. But its falling population coupled with its \$22.5 billion budget deficit suggest it could experience a swift and wrenching decline. The Golden State has long been said to be where America's future happened first. It grew in population in each census since its admission as a state in 1850, overtaking
5 New York as the country's largest state by the early 1960s. Its economy, first based in agriculture and resource extraction and later in entertainment and high technology, often fueled national developments. "California Dreamin'" was more than just a hit song; it was a description of what much of the country and even the world wanted.

But the state's last few rocky years have shown that ever-increasing power and wealth are not
10 inevitable. California offers natural beauty and economic opportunity, but people decide how much they want to pay for these things just like other goods. The state's exorbitant housing costs and high taxes are a significant deterrent to living there, driving many people to flee. Since 2000, more people left California than moved there from other parts of the country, causing the state to lose a House seat after the 2020 Census for the first time ever. That outward flow of people is turning into a
15 flood. The state's population dropped by more than 500,000 people between July 2020 and July 2022. Outmigration to other states fueled the decline: Almost 900,000 more people have moved to other states from California in the past three years than have moved in. Clearly, something happened during the pandemic to make a lot of Californians decide it was time to move. Failures in crime, education and homelessness are the likely culprits. Crime rates have risen significantly since 2019,
20 with homicides jumping an astounding 41 percent. Violent crime rates leveled off in 2022 in some areas but continued to increase in others.

The state also closed schools more frequently and for longer periods than many other states. Public school enrollment plummeted statewide since the pandemic began, with the largest declines in liberal, urban areas that were likeliest to close the schools. The state's already large homeless
25 population also swelled in recent years, rising to more than 173,000 in 2022 from 115,000 homeless people in 2015. Together these factors surely pushed some people already frustrated with high taxes and living costs to cut and run. This exodus poses massive risks for the state's finances because of its reliance on revenue from the rich. As of 2018, almost 35 percent of California's personal income tax revenue came from the sliver of taxpayers earning \$1 million or more. Nearly two-thirds come
30 from those earning more than \$200,000. That means a small change in these people's residence can cost the state billions. Elon Musk, for example, sold around \$23 billion in Tesla stock last year. California taxes capital gains at a hefty 13.3 percent in his tax bracket, but Musk shifted his personal residence from California to Texas when he moved Tesla's headquarters to Austin in 2021. His move alone, then, likely cost the state billions of dollars in revenue. Similarly, engineers or
35 computer coders in the state who can now do their jobs from anywhere bring their wages with them if they leave, cutting tax revenue even further.

This looks eerily similar to the reasons behind New York's precipitous decline in the 1970s. New York, like California, was once the epitome of American aspiration and growth. But its leaders grew complacent and allowed a toxic brew of high taxes, spiraling crime and rising homelessness
40 to rock the state. New York City's population plummeted by more than 800,000 people — or roughly 10 percent — between 1970 and 1980. The state lost five House seats in the 1980 Census, and the city's population did not fully recover until changes in tax and crime policy in the 1990s made the city attractive again. California could learn a lesson from New York's experience and start to shift course now. Some Democrats are already talking a good game; Los Angeles's new mayor,
45 Karen Bass, has pledged to tackle crime, homelessness and housing affordability, and Gov. Gavin Newsom wants to cut state spending rather than dip into reserves. But real change will run into powerful interests that are important to the state's Democratic politics. It could take a New York-style collapse to force significant change. Given the direction California is heading, that unhappy prospect is no longer unthinkable.

How public employee unions damage schools, policing and government itself

George F. Will, *The Washington Post*, February 8, 2023

Two public schools in Manhattan illustrate the high stakes of a political choice that the nation, and many states and municipalities, must reconsider. In 2019, Success Academy Harlem 2 charter school ranked 37th among New York state's 2,413 public elementary schools, one of which, PS 30, had only about a third as many pupils as Harlem 2, spent twice as much per pupil and ranked 1,694th. PS 30 and Harlem 2 operate in the same building. The contract for PS 30's unionized teachers is 167 pages long, mostly detailing job protections, and what teachers can and cannot be required to do. The contract for Harlem 2's nonunion teachers is one page long. Those teachers can be fired at will, and are paid 5 to 10 percent more than PS 30 teachers on the other side of the building.

This contrast is presented in Philip K. Howard's new book *Not Accountable: Rethinking the Constitutionality of Public Employee Unions*. Think first, however, about this:

In the private sector, employee vs. employer bargaining concerns the allocation of profits. A private business facing extortionate union demands can relocate or go out of business. A government can do neither. Collective bargaining presupposes adversarial conflict, but in "negotiations" between government employee unions and government, the unions want government to do what government wants to do: expand, using money from a third party, the citizenry. In 2006, New Jersey's Democratic governor — management — assured a rally of 10,000 government employees, "We will fight for a fair contract!" Who would fight whom?

Particularly at the state and local levels (e.g., school board elections), public employees wield union power to elect their employers, who reciprocate with contracts containing labyrinthine job protections.

A 2011 book reported that over an 18-year period, just about two of Illinois' 95,000 teachers were dismissed annually for unsatisfactory work. Because California's 300,000 teachers are unionized, Howard says, two or three a year are terminated for performing poorly. Consider this from a pro-union blog: "We don't need to swap out all the bad and mediocre teachers for better teachers, any more than we should swap out our struggling students for more advanced students."

Burdensome grievance procedures discourage federal executive branch officials from filing negative assessment of employees, 99 percent of whom receive the "fully successful" rating. Public sector unions exist to make the world safe for mediocrity by opposing, as Howard says, any reform aimed at introducing merit or other forms of accountability. Police unions, too, win contracts with thick layers of protections to shield substandard performers from accountability. Of the approximately 2,600 complaints the Minneapolis Police Department received in the decade before the murder of George Floyd, 12 led to discipline, the most severe being a 40-hour suspension. In 2017, a *Post* report on 37 large cities' policing found a dismissal rate of 130 officers a year out of 91,000. Seventy percent of San Antonio officers fired for cause from 2006 to 2017 were rehired after contractually mandatory arbitration.

It is quaint that the 1939 Hatch Act bars "political activity" by federal employees, the unionized 25 percent of whom pay dues that fund unions' political activities. Public sector unions are, Howard says, "a political force unlike any in American history — amassed and entrenched using state power." These unions spend \$1 billion to \$3 billion a year influencing political decisions: "No other interest group, no industry, comes close to mobilizing that amount of political money." Public employee unions dictate rules for government with a beyond-satire granularity: Why was paint flaking off the top of the walls in New York City schools? Howard: "The union contract only allowed custodians to paint up to ten feet; any higher and the school would have to pay extra to hire a member of the painters' union to complete the work."

Elected federal, state and municipal executives lack effective authority. Although the unions have achieved this from officials selected by democratic processes, Howard thinks this fact does not nullify two constitutional defects: The guarantee clause (every state is guaranteed "a republican form of government") was written, Howard says, to prevent an aristocracy or other entrenched group from becoming a permanent power beyond the ability of voters to remove it. And the nondelegation doctrine should forbid government from ceding to private entities core decisions about governance. This doctrine is, however, unenforced, and the Supreme Court has declared the guarantee clause "non-justiciable": to be enforced by politics, not the judiciary. Howard's book is, however, a potent summons to politics, which can still bring such unions to heel.

In Michigan, an agenda countering the anti-woke GOP frenzy takes shape

Greg Sargent, *The Washington Post*, March 27, 2023

5 Democrats who control the Michigan state legislature scored a huge win last week by repealing the state’s “right to work” law, which helped decimate unions’ ranks by letting workers opt out of dues. The repeal will allow organized labor in the state to rebuild, boosting Democrats in the heart of the industrial Midwest. But the move also offers Democrats something less obvious: an opening to craft an effective response to the reactionary culture war mania unfolding in many red states.

10 The pro-union bill, which Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer will sign in the coming days, follows other measures Democrats passed this month to strengthen LGBTQ anti-discrimination protections and repeal an old state abortion ban. In this, Michigan Democrats are using the majorities they won in 2022 to advance an agenda that’s economically and socially liberal — as developments that can complement one another. “We’re going to stand for civil rights and labor rights at the same time,” State Senator Darrin Camilleri, who represents a swing district around Detroit, told me. Doing both, he added, is “showing that we can deliver for working-class people across the board.”

15 Republicans often talk about the culture wars in class terms. Party leaders say their “anti-woke” agenda embodies “working-class values.” Republicans who lean toward populism go further, genuinely trying — to some limited degree — to create a pro-worker agenda that combines economic and culturally conservative or reactionary appeals. Democrats, by contrast, are regularly sucked into fruitless battles over whether to emphasize economic or social issues. This is often a proxy for a dispute over which groups in their coalition to prioritize: working-class voters, especially Whites who have been abandoning the party, or more affluent, culturally liberal suburbanites.

20 But these Michigan developments hint at a more nuanced approach — one grounded in a bet on the changing nature of the American working class and its place in the Democratic coalition. In the emerging Democratic reading, the old vision of a White, male, breadwinning working class concentrated in burly jobs shapes much political analysis, but it’s a pundit fiction. With service, retail and health-care sectors growing as manufacturing and mining jobs dwindle, the new working class is far more ethnically and culturally diverse — and more socially liberal — than commonly supposed. Those developments are entangled with the decline of labor, which has partly resulted from many “right to work” laws such as the one in Michigan. This has produced a crucial combination in today’s working class, as Rich Yeselson explains in the *American Prospect*: It’s both more diverse in ethnicity and life experience and less represented by unions than before.

25 What Michigan Democrats are doing reflects these deep currents. Repealing “right to work” is meant to rebuild labor representation (a long, difficult task) and working-class support. But it also shows the party no longer fears that robust social liberalism will alienate working-class voters. “We have this vision of the working class as socially conservative,” labor historian Erik Loomis told me. “This is largely not true.” The new working class, he said, represents “the broad diversity of the United States,” so choosing between economic and cultural issues is a “sucker’s game.” Camilleri sees this firsthand. Michigan still has many manufacturing workers. But many are non-White, and a large, diverse service workforce also turns out for Democrats. On top of that, he says, many working-class women — Whites included — voted for Democrats in 2022 “because of abortion rights.”

30 [...] There is grounds for some optimism. Research by political scientists Paul Frymer and Jacob M. Grumbach has found that higher rates of unionization make workers less susceptible to cultural grievance appeals. Grumbach tells me repealing “right to work” could help. All this could also begin reversing what you might call the “curse of 2010.” The advent of “right to work” in Michigan — and neighboring Wisconsin — resulted from the GOP’s 2010 takeover of many state governments. As the *American Prospect*’s Harold Meyerson notes, those laws — entrenching antilabor policy in the heart of the Democratic Rust Belt — were as central to the GOP’s radicalization as a national party as its hard-right cultural lurch has been. If Michigan Democrats repeal “right to work” while protecting abortion and LGBTQ rights — making voters feel represented in the process — it could start undoing those big developments that haunt the party and the country.

35 There is a long way to go. Wisconsin, where the GOP controls the legislature, will remain “right to work” for years to come. Democratic majorities have proven skittish about implementing pro-labor policy in places with less union history, such as Virginia. But getting the labor-culture balance right could prove just the antidote to the reactionary GOP frenzy. If Republicans can sell their culture war agenda as appealing to “working-class values,” so too can Democrats sell an unabashed liberal answer to it as better for workers — on economic issues and cultural values alike.

America's strength is learning through history — not rewriting it

Ken Chenault, Ken Frazier, *The Washington Post*, May 26, 2023

Ken Chenault is former chairman and CEO of American Express, and current chairman and managing director of venture capital firm General Catalyst. Ken Frazier is former president, CEO and executive chairman of the board of directors of Merck, and current chairman of health assurance initiatives at General Catalyst.

5 Last week, Florida enacted new laws that defund diversity and equity programs and restrict how educators can discuss issues of race and gender — both historical and contemporary — in the state's public colleges and universities. This legislation is one of many recent attacks on the very American values that its proponents purport to defend — and one among dozens of similar measures gaining ground in legislatures across the United States. Government should not prescribe or proscribe the free expression and exchange of ideas within our institutions of higher education, or anywhere else. As Thomas Jefferson wrote of the university that he founded (and of self-government as a whole), “Here we are not afraid to follow truth wherever it may lead, nor to tolerate any error so long as reason is left free to combat it.”

10 As two business leaders, we are speaking out and calling on others to do the same. For one thing, these statutes and proposals — among other attacks on diversity and equity — will render our economy, businesses and workforces weaker and less competitive. We know that diversity initiatives help organizations build and benefit from teams with wider ranges of experience and perspective, increasing creativity, productivity and profitability. Future business leaders must become more proficient, not less, at fostering community and belonging within their organizations, exactly the opposite of what this legislation promotes. More fundamentally, any attempts to limit our freedoms to think and speak our minds contradict the values that bind us together. As Americans, we should vigorously disagree and debate all manner of public policies. We, by definition, contain multitudes, with differing perspectives and divergent opinions. This is healthy for our democracy.

15 But prohibiting certain ideas — whitewashing curriculums, banning books — is just a new expression of the old extremism that we ought to be studying and then repudiating, not denying and then reinforcing. The textbooks of our youth presented vastly incomplete, even misleading, portrayals of U.S. history and our forebears' roles in it. They rarely explored the contributions of Black people or countless other communities that have shaped our shared history. During recent decades, scholars and teachers have worked to correct these omissions — to recover and relay a fuller, fairer, more representative story of our past. Much of this work, the more inclusive light in which we see our struggles and our progress, is now imperiled.

20 Today, expressions of intolerance and bigotry that once were relegated to the fringes are migrating to the center, at the cost of common ground and the common good. While this trend is insidious, it need not be inevitable. The vast majority of us still believe that we all are created equal. We all are endowed with inalienable rights. And among these are the freedoms that allow faculty and students, and everyone else, to engage with our past and future without fear of state-sanctioned censorship or retaliation. When our laws suppress free speech or erase uncomfortable parts of our history, they are testing our core principles. They are also denying our young people crucial training in critical thinking — in learning how to think, not what to think; how to follow the data to the truth, however inconvenient.

25 These principles and skills are essential to our democratic capitalism — the greatest market system in the world — in which our tradition of free inquiry fuels innovation and commerce. They also are essential to democratic citizenship and pluralism, which depend on our collective abilities to understand the complexity of the human experience and the myriad ways that the past is present in our lives, laws, organizations and institutions. When we reckon with our past, we see what can happen if we allow the merchants of resentment and grievance to pit us against one another. We see the danger of neglecting that most American value of all, “*E pluribus unum*”: from many we are one. But we also see the inverse: the promise fulfilled when we extend and expand the circle of opportunity, generation by generation, ensuring that uniquely American journeys like ours remain possible. From this history, we draw hope — hope that we will overcome this moment of turbulence, as Americans have during periods of challenge before; hope that we will rediscover the fundamental values that belong to all of us, as our common birthright. The ultimate measure of American strength is our proven ability to become more perfect through our history, not the misguided power to rewrite it.

Scottish leader Nicola Sturgeon's push for gender self-identification blamed for exit

The Washington Times, 15th February 2023, by Valerie Richardson

President Biden and Democrats championing the Equality Act may want to keep an eye on the transgender rights debate fueling a political upheaval in Scotland. Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon announced her resignation Wednesday amid a backlash over her support for a gender self-identification measure that came back to haunt her when a twice-convicted rapist who now identifies as female was housed in a women's prison.

5 Ms. Sturgeon, Scotland's first female head of government, cited the "physical and mental impact" of leading the nation and the Scottish National Party since taking over in 2014, adding that she will remain in office until the party chooses a successor. "The nature and form of modern political discourse means that there is a much greater intensity, dare I say it, brutality, to life as a politician than in years gone by," said Ms. Sturgeon. "All in all, and actually for a long time without it being apparent, it takes its toll on you and on those around you."

10 Her decision to step down was promptly linked to the Gender Recognition Reform Bill, a measure making it easier to obtain a "gender recognition certificate" that was passed in December by the Scottish Parliament. The British government effectively vetoed the bill on Jan. 16 in an unprecedented intervention under section 35 of the 1998 Scotland Act, a move blasted by Ms. Sturgeon as a "full frontal attack" on the Scottish Parliament. Then the Isla Bryson case erupted.

15 Isla Bryson was convicted on Jan. 24 of raping two women as Adam Graham in 2016 and 2019 before transitioning to female. While awaiting sentencing, Bryson was sent first to a women's lock-up, then reassigned to a men's prison following a public outcry. Ms. Sturgeon struggled with the issue earlier this month in public appearances, agreeing with one of the victims who accused Bryson of "faking it" to gain access to a women's prison, but also referring to Bryson as "her" and skirting questions about whether she believes Bryson is a woman.

20 At her resignation press conference, Ms. Sturgeon denied that criticism over her support for gender self-identification was the "final straw," telling reports that "there are difficult issues confronting the government just now, but when is that ever not the case?" As far as her critics were concerned, however, Ms. Sturgeon doomed her political career by refusing to reverse course on the bill allowing biological males into women's schools, restrooms and prisons based on a few months of self-identification.

25 "Although, in her resignation announcement, Nicola Sturgeon sought to deny the impact of what she euphemistically called 'short-term pressures', it cannot be denied that the SNP handling of the Gender Recognition Reform Bill under her leadership has been hugely damaging," said the Women's Place UK in a Wednesday statement. The bill lowers the time frame in which a person must live according to their preferred gender from two years to three months; eliminates the requirement for a diagnosis of gender dysphoria, and lowers the transition age from 18 to 16.

30 The group noted that "Sturgeon listed a number of achievements during her tenure including legislative protections for those subject to domestic abuse, such as Domestic Abuse Protection Scotland Act." "Yet the GRR effectively removes women's rights to single-sex spaces and thus is a huge step backwards," said the statement. Shonna Graham, Isla Bryson's estranged spouse, said Wednesday she was "delighted" with Ms. Sturgeon's exit. "She shot herself in the foot over and over again, and I'm delighted she's gone," Ms. Graham told the [U.K.] *Daily Mail*. "I'm all in favour of transgender rights, but this policy went too far and ended up putting a rapist, who still had all his bits, in a woman's prison." Former President Donald Trump declared "good riddance" and called Ms. Sturgeon a "failed woke extremist."

40 "Sturgeon thought it was OK to put a biological man in a women's prison, and if that wasn't bad enough, Sturgeon fought for a 'Gender Recognition Reform Bill' that would have allowed 16-year-old children to change their gender without medical advice," Mr. Trump said in a statement.

45 Sonia Sodha, a columnist at the [U.K.] *Observer*, said that "Nicola Sturgeon made a big political mistake in pushing gender self-ID reforms that posed a risk to the safety of Scottish women and girls, which were opposed by Scottish voters." "It's played an important role in her political downfall," she tweeted.

Across the pond, the House passed in 2021 the Equality Act, an anti-discrimination act that prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity in public accommodations, fueling concerns about biological males in women's prisons, locker rooms and other facilities.

50 Several states, including California and Maine, have passed laws or enacted administrative policies requiring inmates to be housed in state prisons according to their gender identity.

Low-income communities need affordable energy, not Biden’s ‘environmental justice’

Daren Bakst and Donna Jackson, *Washington Examiner*, June 4, 2023

Daren Bakst is deputy director of the Competitive Enterprise Institute’s Center for Energy and Environment, and Donna Jackson is director of membership development for the Project 21 black leadership network

Union jobs, sports fields, and tree cover. What do they have in common? President Joe Biden wants to promote them through his new executive order on environmental justice. He is using the “environmental justice” rallying cry as a pretext to push a much broader agenda, such as undermining conventional energy sources and overhauling the federal regulatory system to ramp up costly, intrusive regulations. Biden apparently thinks that low-income communities are clamoring for such things as trees and ponds. Meanwhile, he is ignoring how his energy policies are directly hurting these communities by making it more difficult for them to meet basic needs. This starts with policies such as canceling the Keystone XL pipeline, which will reduce the supply of oil and natural gas and drive up energy prices.

While many factors go into prices, current regular retail gas prices are almost 50% higher than when Biden took office. And the high prices have been persistent. Since June 2021, the average monthly price has been above \$3 per gallon, with 12 months above \$3.50 per gallon, including the month of May. Prior to this recent spike in prices, there had not been a month above \$3 per gallon since 2014.

High gas prices impose disproportionate harm on the lowest-income households because, when compared to higher-income households, they spend a greater share of their after-tax income on meeting basic needs, including purchasing gas. Rural households are also disproportionately harmed, in part due to traveling further distances than urban households. Based on data from a recent Iowa State University study, rural households spent 20% more than urban households on gasoline and diesel.

Yet for all its rhetoric on environmental justice, the administration isn’t changing course on its climate agenda. And akin to a “let them eat cake” moment, Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg touted expensive electric vehicles (EVs) as a “solution” to high gas prices. The Biden administration’s new tailpipe emissions rule is a means to reduce the availability of gas-powered vehicles, along with the administration-backed Inflation Reduction Act giving costly handouts to promote EVs. These policies might please environmental pressure groups and other special interests, but they won’t help low-income communities.

Americans rely on driving cars to get from point A to point B, as evidenced by the fact that 92% of U.S. households have access to at least one vehicle, with most households having access to two or more. So making it more difficult for people to purchase cars will soon affect everyday mobility, from getting to work to going to the doctor. But limiting mobility is exactly what these EV policies would do. EVs still cost about \$18,000 more than gas-powered vehicles, making them too costly for many people, especially low-income households. Even at a lower price point, there are other problems with EVs, such as long charging times and limited range, that make them more suitable as a wealthy person’s second car than a working family’s only car. It will also likely hurt black commuters in particular who, according to a recent paper published by the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia, already face longer average commute times than white commuters. The good news is this time gap is closing in large part due to increased car usage by black commuters, but the bad news is these new EV policies threaten to reverse that progress.

Low-income communities have bigger concerns than putting up solar panels and helping out labor unions. They are unlikely to think the administration’s climate agenda is more important than being able to afford turning on the lights and driving their children to school. Yet the harsh reality is that these communities will carry the heaviest burden from climate change policies. This goes beyond higher gas prices and reduced mobility. Higher energy costs across the economy will drive up prices for a wide range of goods and services, including housing. When it becomes more difficult to purchase homes, people are denied the ability to create multi-generational wealth through homeownership. This is especially problematic now. Not since the 1960s have housing segregation and homeownership rates been this bad, in large part due to environmental policies that restrict housing development and drive up housing prices.

Congress needs to push back against these climate policies. Whatever “environmental justice” might mean to the Biden administration, there’s hardly justice when the federal government’s own environmental policies make it more difficult for low-income families and all Americans to access affordable energy while limiting the personal choices available to meet basic needs.