The INDEPENDENT

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PUTIN ATTACKS NATO 'AGGRESSION' OVER UKRAINE AT RED SQUARE PARADE



Lydia Spencer-Elliott How AI enhanced my face to be in 'the most attractive tier'



Former prime minister Gordon Brown is welcomed back to Downing Street yesterday in an advisory role

LOCAL ELECTIONS FALLOUT

Challenge Starmer by Monday or I will, warns Labour MP

London MP Catherine West issues ultimatum to the cabinet to move against Keir Starmer's leadership or risk 'Prime Minister Farage' – as Gordon Brown is brought back in bid to calm anger in party after disastrous local election results

DAVID MADDOX AND KATE DEVLIN

A Labour MP has dramatically warned would-be leaders in the cabinet to challenge the PM by tomorrow – or she will. Catherine West, the MP for Hornsey and Friern Barnet, who was sacked by Sir Keir as a junior minister in the Foreign Office, said the cabinet should "reorganise themselves" and put forward their "best communicator" to replace Sir Keir, avoiding a leadership contest. If that did not happen she would seek the 80 names needed to trigger a contest, she warned. Speaking to *The Independent* last night, Ms West said: "I am terrified that [the country] will end up with Prime Minister Farage."



Editorials

Reckless plot to unseat Starmer will unleash chaos

Catherine West, the former minister who is launching a stalking-horse campaign to try to force Sir Keir Starmer out of office, does not know who she wants as prime minister. She just wants a change.

This is no way to carry out the serious business of deciding who should lead the nation. “I don’t have a candidate, and that’s part of the problem,” she told the BBC. Her way of resolving that problem is to issue an ultimatum to the cabinet, demanding that its members choose one of their number to replace Sir Keir – or she will try to trigger a leadership election on Monday by gathering the nominations of 80 fellow Labour MPs.

Ms West’s assault on the prime minister may fizzle out if she cannot secure the support needed, or it may succeed in forcing other more credible candidates to put themselves forward. Either way, it seems reckless to go ahead with a venture of this kind without having an alternative prime minister in mind.

This is a precipitous moment in the life of this government and of the country. Sir Keir had responded to the message delivered by the electorate on Thursday by drafting into 10 Downing Street two respected figures of the party’s recent past.

Gordon Brown’s authority as a former prime minister and long-serving chancellor ought to be reassuring. At a time when the world economy is in a fragile state, waiting for the effect of higher oil prices to hit these shores, it makes sense to have someone with the intellectual heft and confidence of Mr Brown to help reinforce the defences.

It was also wise to divert Harriet Harman back into the fold from her second career as a podcaster. She can lend the credibility of a lifelong contribution to the advance of women’s equality to the government’s drive to protect women and girls from violence.

But above all it was a sign of weakness that Sir Keir felt he had to bring in figures from outside the Commons in advisory roles instead of promoting new talent from within. It is not as if the current cabinet is the strongest selection possible from the available field, but Sir Keir obviously feels that a reshuffle risks destabilising his position.

Ms West’s intervention may now render that calculation redundant, but the prime minister has no choice but to press on.

He is right not to step down voluntarily, at a time when the most likely winner of a Labour leadership election is Angela Rayner, his former deputy. She is a characterful personality and an interesting politician, but her policies of ever-higher public spending, ever more market regulation and yet higher taxes are not the right ones to meet the coming economic storm. They point in the wrong direction for the markets that set the interest rates that decide the cost of maintaining the national debt.

A lurch to the left is the likely consequence of an early Labour leadership contest and Sir Keir was right, in the article he wrote yesterday in response to the election losses, to declare that he would not be "tacking right or left".

Sir Keir should stay in post – at least until someone comes along with a better plan that does not involve the risk of a market meltdown. It makes sense to keep Rachel Reeves at the Treasury too, and to reinforce her with the great clunking fist of her predecessor. Ms Reeves may be the co-author with Sir Keir of many of this government's most serious mistakes, but most of the pressure from within the Labour Party is to replace her with someone who would be less fiscally responsible. The most alarming consequence of a new prime minister might be that they would choose Ed Miliband, the energy secretary, as chancellor.

If Ms West's misguided plan to install A.N. Other in No 10 fails, Sir Keir probably has one last chance over the next year or so to demonstrate that he is protecting people from the worst of the instability threatening the world. As he attempts to do so, Mr Brown is a good person to have by his side.

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Labour MP: If none of you challenge Starmer, I will

Catherine West warns that party must replace Keir Starmer because of ‘terrifying’ risk of Nigel Farage becoming PM



West says Labour MPs need to act now after dire local election results (Labour Party)

DAVID MADDOX
KATE DEVLIN

A Labour MP has urged would-be leaders in the cabinet to challenge Sir Keir Starmer by tomorrow, or she will – following the party’s disastrous local election results.

Catherine West, the MP for Hornsey and Friern Barnet, who was sacked by Sir Keir as a junior minister in the Foreign Office, said the cabinet should "reorganise themselves" and, to avoid a contest, put forward their "best communicator" to replace the prime minister. If that did not happen, she would seek the 80 names needed to trigger a contest, she said.

Speaking to *The Independent*, Ms West said: "We had cataclysmic election results last week and our response so far does not match the emergency that faces us. I am terrified we will end up with Prime Minister Farage."

Her intervention came after Sir Keir recruited party veterans Gordon Brown and Harriet Harman to help secure his flagging premiership.

As the scale of Labour's failures at the local elections ballot box emerged, *The Independent* also learnt that some senior ministers were trying to prevent a leadership election but feared that the former deputy prime minister Angela Rayner could launch a challenge as early as next week. Meanwhile, support is growing for energy secretary Ed Miliband, health secretary Wes Streeting and the defence minister Al Carns.

Ms West's move follows speculation by Labour MPs that the serious candidates to replace Sir Keir, including Ms Rayner and Mr Streeting, were awaiting "a stalking horse" to "allow them to swoop in". Speaking to *The Independent*, she said she would welcome Mr Streeting, Mr Miliband, Ms Rayner or education secretary Bridget Phillipson taking over as leader and prime minister. But she warned that time was running out for Labour with an election two to three years away.

"We need to tool up for this, because it's going to be the fight of our life. We need to take on Reform and put forward a centrist vision of the country that people can really get behind."

Ms West, who grew up in Australia, said the urgency of the task meant it was no longer possible to wait for the Greater Manchester mayor, Andy Burnham, who would need to win a by-election to become an MP before he could mount a takeover bid.



Sources close to Angela Rayner deny she will launch a leadership bid next week (PA)

Ms West has been in contact with the party leadership over her intentions, including party chair Anna Turley and Ms Phillipson, who will be on the morning media round with her today.

She said: “Basically, the cabinet needs to get into the room, close the door and sort it out between themselves. Give Keir a role of some sort. He’s very good on the international relations. I think there’s so many good people, not just in the cabinet... Dust off your CV, get yourself in there.”

Downing Street has not commented on Ms West’s challenge but in a bid to win back the party faithful the prime minister appointed Mr Brown – once described by Tony Blair as “the big clunking fist” – as his special envoy on global finance and brought in former deputy leader Baroness Harman as his adviser on violence against women and girls.

Sir Keir greeted both on the steps of Downing Street yesterday, ignoring questions about his future, but an attempt on Friday night to get his cabinet to wheel in behind him backfired after several senior figures notably remained silent.

One ally of Mr Streeting’s claimed that he was “waiting for another candidate to go first before entering the fray”. Others who failed to publicly endorse the prime minister included home secretary Shabana Mahmood, energy secretary Ed

Miliband, foreign secretary Yvette Cooper and Greater Manchester mayor Andy Burnham, who have all been identified as possible leadership contenders.

Mr Carns, a former Royal Marines commander who has growing support within the parliamentary party, also notably avoided offering his support. An ally of Mr Carns added: “Al’s problem is if he jumped he could just be seen as a stalking horse. Wes [Streeting] and others want him to go so they can swoop in.”

With at least eight Labour MPs now publicly demanding that Sir Keir set a timetable for his departure, pressure was mounting on the prime minister as others said privately that he could not lead them into the next election.

The latest to speak out was Hartlepool MP Jonathan Brash, who saw Reform sweep his area. He said: “I’d prefer by party conference [in September], but setting the timetable is the critical thing.”



Wes Streeting is ready to ‘swoop in’ if a stalking horse stands, according to an ally of defence minister Al Carns (PA)

Another told *The Independent* that “it is not just MPs on the left who want him to go”, and a former loyalist said: “The mood is generally awful, as you can imagine. I’m not saying anything publicly right now but clearly we can’t go into the election with him as leader.”

A second minister said: “The fear at the moment is we will end up with Angela as our version of Liz Truss.”

A source close to Ms Rayner denied speculation that she could launch a bid as early as next week, but talks of getting Mr Burnham in as an MP as a “unifying figure” to lead the party appeared to have united ministers with left-wing rebels.

There was speculation that MPs were being told they would get a peerage if they stepped aside for Mr Burnham. However, one MP warned: “Given what just happened, I am not sure where Andy Burnham could stand and win a seat even if someone was willing to step down to give him an opportunity.”

Labour’s poor polling meant Reform won most of the council seats in northwest England, including all 22 available in Wigan and 16 out of 17 in the Tameside Council area, which includes Ms Rayner’s constituency.

Sir Keir continued his fightback yesterday with a video put out on social media in which he admitted that the party needed to do more to convince voters. He said: “It’s important that we reflect and respond to these results. We haven’t done enough to offer people hope for the future.”

With a major speech planned for tomorrow, he added: “In the coming days I’ll be setting out the path ahead.”

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PM pins hopes on Brown and Harman saving him



Keir Starmer welcomes Gordon Brown back to No 10 yesterday (Simon Dawson)

With a growing number of his own MPs publicly saying he should set a timetable to quit as leader and even more saying it privately, it is clear that if Keir Starmer hopes to stay in Downing Street, he has to do something to turn his fortunes around.

As he entered the weekend, the question was what he can possibly do following this week's historically awful election results for Labour.

His answer: to act like an ageing rocker and revive two of his party's greatest hits from years back to appeal to the core membership who have been tempted by the political melodies of other parties, particularly Zack Polanski's Greens.

And so it was that the cameras duly picked up first the former deputy leader Harriet Harman and then former prime minister Gordon Brown walking up Downing Street to be given jobs by Starmer. Both have been handed roles to shore up significant problems for this prime minister.



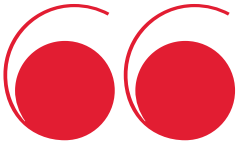
Starmer has invited the former deputy leader Harriet Harman to help him tackle violence against women and girls

The really big catch is Brown. He has been given the role of special envoy for global finance. A man who was seen as a genuinely great chancellor, it is hoped that he can start to deal with the total failure of Starmer's economic policy under the current chancellor, Rachel Reeves.

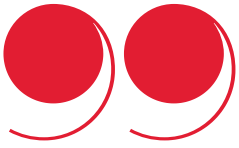
The promise of "economic growth being the number one mission" is a distant memory that has barely materialised. But Brown's arrival also has echoes of Rishi Sunak appointing David Cameron as foreign secretary when he needed to shore up support for his failing government in 2023. Starmer brings in a man who was critical of the appointment of Peter Mandelson as ambassador to the US, and who commands respect and

reverence in the Labour Party despite losing the 2010 general election.

The other former prime minister Starmer could have looked to was Tony Blair, who won three elections, but this would have inflamed the left of the party.



Bringing in big beasts from the past underlines the concerns that this prime minister and his current crop of cabinet ministers are just not up to the task



Harman, meanwhile, the former mother of the House of Commons, is another figure from Labour's recent past who commands respect. Her role as the new adviser on women and girls deals with another live problem for the prime minister. Ever since his failure to tackle the rows over Asian grooming gangs targeting young white girls, and the Mandelson appointment appeared to suggest he cared little for the victims of the paedophile Jeffrey Epstein, Starmer has struggled to convince people he is serious about violence against women and girls (VAWG). This is slightly ironic given that tackling VAWG is an issue he has been personally invested in since he was director of public prosecutions.

The PM's inability to do politics well and communicate successfully has left him exposed on the issue, but bringing in big beasts from the past also reveals another weakness with this prime minister. It underlines the concerns that he and his current crop of cabinet ministers are just not up to the task.

More than that, it appears to be an alternative strategy to his hopes of having a proper reset with a major reshuffle.

The speculated reshuffle may still happen after his speech on Monday, but most Labour MPs think Starmer is now too weakened to make a serious change and, for example, replace his chancellor or sack his ambitious health secretary, Wes Streeting.

He may, though, need to find a way to bring back former deputy prime minister Angela Rayner to prevent a challenge from her. But for now, he is hoping that the reflected glory of two of the party's most respected grandees will be enough to prevent a move against him by his own MPs.

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News

Brick by brick, Farage tears apart a crumbling red wall

Bruising local election losses across Labour's northern heartlands set Nigel Farage on a victory lap in Merseyside. Does the party have any strongholds left, asks **Dan Haygarth**



Reform UK leader Nigel Farage speaks to the media at The Dam Bar and Grill in St Helens, Merseyside, on Friday (Getty)

A nightmarish set of local elections for Labour saw voters abandon the party for Reform UK in their droves across its northern heartlands, as it lost control of councils it had run for decades.

Nigel Farage's party made gains around the country as hundreds of Labour councillors lost their seats, ramping up the pressure on Sir Keir Starmer, who has vowed not to walk away but will be unable to ignore the reality of these results.

The overnight results on Friday were felt sharply in the north of England, a bedrock in the party's electoral coalition.

The first council to complete its counts on Friday was Halton in the Liverpool City Region, where Labour has always been in power. It lost 15 councillors while Mr Farage's party gained 16, seeing more than a 50 per cent vote swing in some wards. Labour held onto control of the local authority, found just outside the city, by virtue of there simply not being enough seats up for election this year for anyone else to gain a majority.

A similar situation was seen in Greater Manchester's Wigan, with Reform winning 24 of 25 seats up for grabs in a borough where Labour has been the ruling party since it was created in 1974. Twenty-two of the 24 seats won by Reform were taken from Labour.

As in Halton, it has held onto control of the council for now. But next year, when another 25 seats will be contested, Reform will have a route to power.



Prime minister Keir Starmer said he would not walk away despite the 'tough' night (PA Wire)

Also in Greater Manchester, Tameside – which includes Angela Rayner's constituency – changed from Labour to no overall control, as Reform gained 18 councillors and Labour lost 16.

Before the elections, Mr Farage told the BBC: "What I will say is the map of local government will look very different after 7 May across the North West." After the early results on Friday proved him right, the Reform leader hailed a "historic shift in British politics".

In the North East, Reform won all 12 seats up for grabs in Hartlepool, with Labour losing seven and relinquishing control of the council. Hartlepool MP Jonathan Brash, who watched his wife lose her council seat, called for Sir Keir to resign.

"It's clear to me that the prime minister should take this opportunity to set out a timetable for his own departure, and then allow for the widest possible leadership election that includes all the talents of our party", he said.

A further seismic blow arrived on Friday afternoon as Sunderland – a council that had a consistent red majority for more than half a century – was won by Reform. It was the first Labour-run local authority to fall into Nigel Farage's hands in these elections.

It is an unprecedented position for Labour to find itself in. Now losing areas which held firm even when Boris Johnson swept parts of the red wall in the 2019 general election, but it is not a surprise if you listen to voters in the north of England.



Reform UK councillors react after winning seats in all of the 12 contested wards in the Hartlepool local election (Getty)

There is no love lost for Sir Keir among them, and it has left the party facing the prospect that it might no longer have safe seats in the region.

It was apparent in February, in the run-up to the Gorton and Denton by-election, when voters told *The Independent* they no longer felt represented by a party they then abandoned to the Greens and Reform as Labour finished third.

As expected in Greater Manchester, Andy Burnham was suggested by many as an alternative who would win them back to the party. Voters believe the very popular mayor, dubbed the "King of the North" for a reason, understands them and the places they are from.

Though Labour has suffered heavy losses in Mr Burnham's city region, there is an argument to be made that this was largely driven by voters' responses to the government and the man who leads it. As such, the prospect of Mr Burnham returning to Westminster is seen by many in the parliamentary party as the only way for it to recover from these dismal results.

Deputy Labour leader Lucy Powell said yesterday she did not want to see a leadership election but added that Mr Burnham has a "huge amount to offer".

“He’s very popular and he’s a great asset to the Labour Party,” she said. “And I want to see us using all of the talents that we have.”



Keir Starmer and Andy Burnham visit a primary school in Greater Manchester in April (Getty)

The view on parts of the Labour left is that the Merseyside-born mayor can reconnect with lifelong voters the party has now lost.

Before these elections, when *The Independent* spoke to the electorate in St Helens – another Liverpool City Region council that had long been a Labour stronghold – the disdain for the current party was palpable.

“It’s not the old Labour we had,” voter Janet Wylde told *The Independent*. Thousands of her fellow voters in the post-industrial town agreed as Reform took control of the local authority on Friday evening.

It meant Mr Farage took a victory lap in Merseyside – a prospect that would have been inconceivable before now – as he said Reform had “absolutely torn the most massive historic chunk out of the Labour vote in the north of England.”

Before the elections, Liverpool City Region mayor Steve Rotheram told *The Independent* that Labour would find more success if it focused on local issues rather than the man in Downing Street.

“Once we break beyond the people who are not supporting the likes of Keir Starmer, when we get beyond that and explain the type of town hall that Labour are proposing, then we get a much fairer hearing,” he said.

Though it was not a complete wipeout, with the vote holding up just enough to keep control of councils like Sefton in Merseyside, it is apparent that the majority of voters in Labour’s most loyal regions have rejected a party led by Sir Keir.



Labour must ‘adapt or die’, Liverpool city region mayor Steve Rotheram said (PA)

Its general election win in 2024 was meant to provide hope – none of which is being felt in cities and towns across the North. Speak to people in traditionally Labour areas like St Helens, Bradford and Halton and they will tell you they have been forgotten about.

Barnsley, run by Labour for more than 50 years, fell to Reform on Friday afternoon. Sir Stephen Houghton, who had led the local authority, said the result was a consequence of Reform turning these local elections “into a Keir Starmer referendum”.

Phil Riley, who lost the leadership of Lancashire’s Blackburn with Darwen council as Reform gained nine seats and Labour lost 11, went further as he called for the prime minister to resign.

“Keir Starmer has a very poor reputation with people out there,” he said as Labour lost control of a council it has run since 2011. “Getting back from that position, I think, is virtually impossible.”

The party now finds itself at a crucial juncture. As results came in on Friday, Mr Rotheram said it had to be a “wake-up call” for Labour. The mayor said his party must “adapt or die”, calling on it to be “rooted in working people’s lives, hopes and concerns.”

Whether the party can reconnect with those values and provide hope to areas which feel forgotten will determine whether it can ever call the north of England its heartlands again.

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Lost the working class? It's much worse than that, Keir

David Aaronovitch warns that with an electorate fractured beyond all recognition, we may well end up with a Reform UK government the majority of the country didn't vote for



Keir Starmer's Labour Party is currently polling on 19 per cent of the vote compared with 34 per cent at the 2024 general election (Getty)

Such times! In England now we will have no fewer than five parties that have more than 500 councillors. Labour will have lost 60 per cent of its seats compared with 2021; the Tories 40 per cent. The big victor, of course, is Reform UK. Lots of people

will now have Reform councils where previously there were no Reform councillors. And best of luck to them: judging by the performance of the Reform councils elected a year ago, they are going to need it.

What does it all mean? Forget “Labour has lost the working class”. You might just as well say that the Tories have lost the middle class. Both things may be true, but they are but a fragment of the complete picture.

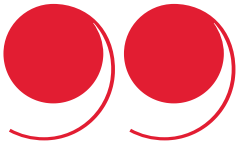
In fact, there hasn’t been a realignment in British politics but a total dealignment in which the only safe bet is that almost everyone hates the government of the day. Except in Scotland, where the government also blames the government. There are working-class people in London, but they don’t vote Reform. There are middle-class people in Newcastle, but they don’t vote Tory.

The farther away you feel yourself to be from the big cities and from London, the more likely you are to vote Reform, whatever your class. Unless you are young, in which case you will be more likely to vote Green. The data suggests that if you’re university educated and suburban you’ll give Farage a miss, as you may also do if you are a woman.

In the Western Isles, against the trend, they gave Labour a handsome victory in Scottish parliamentary elections in which otherwise the SNP swept the board. The reason? Ferries apparently. In Suffolk County Council, recently Tory-ruled, the opposition to the new Reform leadership will be the Greens. Meanwhile, there’s not a single Reform councillor in Reading, no one at all in Richmond-upon-Thames except 50-plus Liberal Democrats. There are no Tories in Labour Lincoln, and no Greens in Sunderland, where Reform all but wiped Labour out.



On the continent, the great, stifling coalitions of the Anglosphere world are not the usual way for electoral politics to be expressed. In this country would it be so fanciful to imagine a Party of the North? A London Party?



The great psephologists of Britain (oh, OK, John Curtice) have looked at the national vote shares indicated by the results and have not come up with a Reform victory at the next general election, as prematurely claimed by an increasingly bronzed Nigel Farage. Polling at 32 per cent last year, his party, despite its gains, is now on 26 per cent, Labour and the Tories on 19 per cent each, the Lib Dems (who journalists fall over themselves not to talk about) on around 18 per cent and the Greens on 16 per cent.

You can look for precedents in the last century and find two, perhaps: the great SNP capture of Scotland and Labour's astounding defeat in the London local elections in 1968 – two years after their general election landslide of 1966. But they don't quite map onto what we're seeing now.

Almost no one on the continent would be surprised by this. In France over the last 20 years, the two great parties of the postwar era – the Socialists and the Gaullists – have both more or less disappeared to be replaced by a patchwork of political affiliations. In the last German federal elections five parties won more than 40 seats, and three won more than 100. The shares of the votes for the top three parties in Sweden were 30 per cent,

20 per cent, 20 cent; in the Netherlands no party received over 24 per cent; in Belgium the leading party won just under 17 per cent.

In some of those countries the divisions are regional, some linguistic, others urban vs rural, or culturally conservative versus liberal and very rarely expressed in terms of class. But the point is that the great, stifling coalitions of the Anglosphere world are not the usual way for electoral politics to be expressed. In this country would it be so fanciful to imagine a Party of the North? A London Party?

Is that so bad? With our system, yes. The problem for us is that just as we elected a Labour government with 63 per cent of the seats on a vote share of less than 34 per cent, we could conceivably end up with a 28 per cent Reform administration, currently committed to spending billions on tearing around a country that didn't vote for them, looking for illegals to put in detention centres and then deport.

It's a prospectus we know the majority of people in this country wouldn't sign up to, but which they could conceivably get anyway as a consequence of the electoral system. And if you think you're unhappy now…

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News

Does the Plaid win herald a breakaway bid by Wales?

Only 32 per cent of the country's electorate supports the prospect of an independence referendum, writes **Holly Evans**



Plaid Cymru leader Rhun ap Iorwerth did not campaign promising a vote on independence (PA)

HOLLY EVANS

"As the National Party of Wales, the party's aims shall be: to secure independence for Wales in Europe."

Since its founding in 1925, independence has remained a core principle of Plaid Cymru – the above quote even forms the second line of its constitution. For the first time, Plaid secured the most seats in the next Welsh parliament as Labour lost control of the Senedd for the first time since devolution in 1999, with even first minister Eluned Morgan a casualty of Labour's catastrophic losses. Yet in a change of tone from previous decades, Plaid's leader, Rhun ap Iorwerth, has not led with an independence campaign. In fact, more talk of a referendum has come from his political rivals, who have tried to warn voters that the party will introduce it through the "back door" once in power.

At Plaid's annual conference in Newport in February, the topic was not raised once in ap Iorwerth's speech, nor was it mentioned at the manifesto launch in Wrexham. At the last Senedd elections in 2021, the party promised to hold a referendum if it won a majority – a pledge that was quietly dropped from this year's campaign.

Yet for the first time in history, Westminster is faced with the prospect of having a nationalist party running each of the devolved nations, all pushing for greater powers – so what are Plaid Cymru's plans for independence?

Professor Laura McAllister, of the Wales Governance Centre, said: "Given that independence is the primary aim of Plaid Cymru, it is inconceivable that the party internally has not considered a longer-term strategy for advancing that goal. Having said that, the party leader, Rhun ap Iorwerth, has been categorical that the first term of a Plaid-led government would not be focused on independence."

Instead, ap Iorwerth has prioritised the cost of living crisis; the state of the NHS, which has failed to meet targets to cut waiting lists; housing and a better deal for Wales under the current constitution. Their next steps do include a national commission, which would cost half a million pounds of the annual £27bn Welsh budget, which it says would "lay the foundation" for any future independence plans.



Nigel Farage described Welsh people as 'foreign speakers' (Getty)

Recent polls have not shown much support for Welsh independence, with only 32 per cent in favour and 52 per cent against. While he remains a personal believer in the cause, ap Iorwerth admitted during his campaign: "I do not think now is the time to have that referendum, because the people of Wales are not telling us that it's that time." However, Prof McAllister noted that this tactic "is very much out of the SNP playbook from 2007", and that polling support for independence is similar to the position in Scotland two years before the 2014 referendum that rejected independence.

With Labour suffering a humiliating defeat on Thursday, slipping to third place in its former red heartlands, Plaid Cymru had pinned the election as a "two-horse race" between itself and Reform UK, which is staunchly opposed to further devolved powers.

Many have viewed it as an election between those who view themselves as more Welsh-aligned, and others who view themselves as more British – with Nigel Farage even describing the Welsh language as "foreign".

"In terms of voters motivated against independence, at present I think those will already be captured by Reform UK," Prof McAllister said. "It's harder to predict in the future as we do not

know what a Plaid-led government might do and when. But were independence to become a defining issue in Welsh politics, as it is in Scottish politics, then I think we would see a fundamental realignment that cuts across left-right lines."

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Reform candidate hits out at ‘mass deportation’ pitch

London mayoral hopeful warns that her party’s language on immigration has allowed its opponents to ‘label us as racist’



Laila Cunningham and Romford MP Andrew Rosindell after Reform took Havering (PA)

DAVID MADDOX
POLITICAL EDITOR

Nigel Farage has been warned that Reform UK’s language on migration was responsible for the party not making the gains it

had hoped for in London.

Speaking to *The Independent*, Laila Cunningham, Reform's candidate for London mayor, was critical of the way that talk of "mass deportations" played into the hands of her party's opponents in the capital.

Ms Cunningham, a Westminster councillor, said: "When we talk about mass deportation, it's illegal migrants and perhaps we have to be more clear about that because mass deportation does have some connotation, doesn't it? I think the opposition parties [Labour and the Greens] have done very well in not arguing our substantive policy, but just labeling us as racist or divisive. That has landed, sadly."

While Reform made sweeping gains across England, was a strong runner-up in Wales and joint second with Labour in Scotland, its expected gains in London largely failed to materialise.

Ahead of the elections on Thursday, Mr Farage boasted that Reform had a "very real chance" of winning "half a dozen" of the 32 London boroughs. But while the party took control of Havering, on the edge of Essex, early on, it then failed in other targets including Bexley, Barking and Dagenham, and Bromley. Meanwhile, Waltham Forest went Green, Labour held on to Redbridge and Reform had very poor results in west, north and central London.

The Independent revealed that in Bexley and Waltham Forest the party's hopes were further dampened by fielding candidates who had made racist and Islamophobic comments on social media.

Victories in London were supposed to set Ms Cunningham up as the main contender to Labour's Sir Sadiq Khan for the mayoral election of 2028. But Ms Cunningham reflected that Labour and the Greens had managed to capitalise on the immigration debate by describing Reform as "racist".

Shortly before the elections Reform's home affairs spokesman, Zia Yusuf, unveiled a policy of "mass deportations" which appeared to spook voters in the capital.

Ms Cunningham, who is the daughter of immigrants, described how she had been forced to deal with Voters' concerns about Reform's language as she knocked on doors during the campaign.

"So I knock on someone's door and they're like, 'Your mom's Egyptian, how come you're running for Reform? You're a sellout.' And then I explain, actually, it's not about that. It's about fairness. It's about illegal migration. You know, my parents came to contribute, integrate and assimilate, and that's all we want. And then that message lands.

"Now, what Labour and the Greens have done is they've divided it up along religious and ethnic lines, and they've told all these different ethnic groups, 'You're a victim. You've been oppressed by this country. The country failed you. Only Labour or the Greens can save you.' They fostered support by almost instilling hate in the country.

"There's nuance in politics."

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News

Over 200,000 have arrived on small boats since 2018



An inflatable boat crossing the Channel from northern France last month (Getty)

ATHENA STAVROU

The total number of migrants and refugees that have arrived in the UK by small boats has surpassed 200,000 since records began in 2018. New Home Office figures showed that 70 people crossed the English Channel in small boats on Friday.

The figures will deal a blow to Sir Keir Starmer's government, which has repeatedly promised to take strong action to tackle people-smuggling gangs and reduce the number of people making the dangerous crossing since coming to office.

Despite its efforts, crossings of the Channel have been rising, with 41,472 people arriving in the UK by small boat in 2025. This was up from 36,816 in 2024, and 29,437 in 2023. The most crossings occurred in 2022, when around 46,000 made the journey to the UK.

Two women died trying to cross the Channel last Sunday, following six fatalities in April.

A Home Office spokesperson said: "This government is bearing down on small boat crossings. The home secretary has signed a landmark new deal with France to boost enforcement action on beaches and put people smugglers behind bars. This builds on joint work that has stopped over 42,000 illegal migrants attempting to cross the channel since the election.

"We have removed or deported almost 60,000 people who were here illegally and are going further to remove the incentives that draw illegal migrants to this country."



Home secretary Shabana Mahmood signed a £662m beach patrol deal with France last month (PA)

Shabana Mahmood is the latest home secretary to look at overhauling the asylum system in a bid to deter crossings and make it easier to deport migrants. Last month, she signed a three-year deal with France to pay £662m to boost beach patrols in an effort to curb crossings.

Shadow home secretary Chris Philp said the immigration system was “totally broken”, adding: “Labour are failing to remove illegal immigrants, so it is no wonder they keep flooding in, as they know they will almost certainly get to stay. Among them are many who go on to commit serious crimes, including murder, rape and the sexual assault of young girls. This situation is a disgrace.”

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Killer Huntley cremated in a £265 eco-friendly coffin



Ian Huntley died after a blow to the head from a metal bar in a high-security prison (Photos PA)

ALEX ROSS

The Soham killer Ian Huntley was cremated in a £265 eco-friendly coffin at a service attended by no mourners and paid for by the taxpayer, *The Independent* can reveal.

The Ministry of Justice (MoJ) spent almost £2,000 on funeral services for Huntley, who died in hospital after being attacked at HMP Frankland in February.

An inquest last month heard how Huntley, 52, who murdered 10-year-olds Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman in 2002, suffered a fatal injury to the head from a metal bar in the high-security prison, before his death days later at Royal Victoria Infirmary in Newcastle.

Soon after, a petition signed by 64,000 people was launched calling for the MoJ not to use taxpayer funds to pay for his funeral, after it was revealed that it offers up to £3,000 towards prisoners' funeral costs.

Now, the MoJ has confirmed that it spent £1,915 on Huntley's cremation. That included £625 for "professional services", £275 for the transfer of his body from hospital, £65 for a cremation casket and £265 for a "jute natural coffin". £100 was also paid for staff attendance and supervision.



Holly Wells (left) and Jessica Chapman, murdered by Huntley in 2002

A jute coffin is made from natural, biodegradable materials to minimise environmental impact. The fee for the "direct

unattended" cremation was £585, the MoJ said.

Under MoJ standard practice for covering basic funeral expenses, money is paid directly to the funeral director and does not cover the cost of wakes, headstones or burial plots. *The Independent* understands that the coffin was selected because it was the most cost-effective option.

Previous prisoners who have had their costs paid for by the state include Yorkshire Ripper Peter Sutcliffe in 2020 and child killer Raymond Morris in 2014.

Huntley's ashes are due to be returned to his mother, Lynda Richards, next month. It was reported that Ms Richards visited her son in hospital, where he was said to be in a vegetative state after his life support machine was switched off.

An MoJ spokesperson said: "The murders of Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman remain one of the most shocking and devastating cases in our nation's history, and our thoughts are with their families."

Huntley, a former school caretaker, was serving a life sentence for the 2002 murders when he was killed. He attacked the best friends after they left a family barbecue to buy sweets in Soham, Cambridgeshire, on 4 August 2002. Later, he dumped their bodies in a ditch 10 miles away. He denied their murder but was convicted in a trial at the Old Bailey in 2003. He was jailed for life with a recommended minimum term of 40 years.

Following Huntley's death, a prisoner, Anthony Russell, 43, was charged with his murder.

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Pictures of the Day



All arms and legs

Castres' Remy Baget is tackled by Pau's Jack Maddocks during a French Top14 rugby union match at Hameau Stadium in Pau, France. *AFP/Getty*



Fighting spirit

A visitor examines the sculptures at the National Museum of the History of Ukraine in World War II, in Kyiv. *AFP/Getty*



Foul play?

Bournemouth's James Hill in action with Fulham's Rodrigo Muniz. *Reuters*



Blast from the past

People set off firecrackers on the rooftop of a building in Islamabad to mark one year since the India-Pakistan conflict. *AFP/Getty*



Close to the edge

Spanish rider Jorge Martin corners as he leads the Moto GP Grand Prix of France Sprint race at Le Mans. *AFP/Getty*

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Home news in brief



Ian McKellen says his advocacy for gay rights made Alec Guinness uneasy (Getty/Shutterstock)

McKellen: Guinness told me to ditch gay rights activism

Sir Ian McKellen has revealed that Alec Guinness once "pleaded" with him not to actively campaign for gay rights.

Sir Ian publicly came out as gay in 1988, and a year later was one of the co-founders of Stonewall. But his role in public campaigning for gay rights was met with disdain by Guinness, he has claimed.

In a new interview, the *Lord of the Rings* actor said that he was taken to lunch by Guinness around the same time, where the

screen great expressed his unease with Sir Ian's immersion in politics.

"He took me for an Italian lunch in Pimlico, where we chatted about this and that until he brought up the real reason for his invitation," McKellen told *The Guardian*. "He thought it somewhat unseemly for an actor to dabble in public or political affairs and advised me, sort of pleaded with me, to withdraw. Advice from an older generation, which I didn't follow."

In 2001, two biographies on Guinness stated that while the actor was married to Merula Silvia Salaman from 1938 until his death in 2000, he was privately bisexual.

Religious leaders unite to 'fix' antisemitism crisis

Religious leaders from across Britain have united with prominent figures from business, sport and media to declare antisemitism "a problem for all of us to fix", ahead of a major rally in support of the Jewish community outside Downing Street today.

The open letter, coordinated by the Together Coalition, follows a series of attacks on Jewish individuals, including the stabbing of two men in Golders Green last month.

The letter says: "The spectre of Jewish people being stabbed at random in the street, killed defending their synagogues and Jewish infrastructure being firebombed feels like a nightmare from another time. A throwback to grainy images of somewhere else, not delivered in technicolour from the streets of London in 2026."

It asserts that this is not an issue solely for the Jewish community to address, but a collective responsibility.

Among the diverse signatories are the Football Association, the Premier League, faith leaders from the Church of England, Muslim, Hindu, Sikh and Zoroastrian communities, the National Lottery Community Fund, and the Women's Institute, alongside numerous media, sport, and charity organisations.

Murder arrest over body found in roof garden

A man has been arrested on suspicion of murder after a body was discovered in a roof garden in Bristol, police said.

Anthony Clemmings, 54, was found by a member of the public in the roof garden of a block of flats in Redcliff Street shortly before 8.20am on Tuesday. Avon and Somerset Police confirmed yesterday that a 50-year-old man had been held on suspicion of murder in the West Midlands area.

Detective chief inspector Laura Miller said: “We have updated Tony’s family of this significant development and specially-trained officers are still supporting them. His family continue to ask for privacy at this immensely upsetting time and we would ask people are respectful of their wishes.”

Parents cave to junk food requests, study finds

Children are increasingly dictating household food purchases, with new research revealing that parents frequently succumb to demands for junk food.

A study presented at the European Congress on Obesity in Istanbul highlights the significant pester power parents in England face during their weekly food shop.

More than half (58 per cent) of 1,050 parents surveyed admitted their children or teenagers frequently pester them to buy products high in fat, salt, or sugar. Consequently, nearly three-quarters (72 per cent) of parents reported often purchasing the requested items.

Many parents (59 per cent) also confessed to being swayed by price promotions and in-store offers, leading to unplanned food purchases, while 52 per cent attributed these buys to shopping with children.

Lead researcher Emma Boyland, a professor of food marketing and child health at the University of Liverpool, stated: "While children might not be paying the bill at the checkout, their

influence over their parents' purchasing decisions is very real."
PA

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Fear behind the fanfare at Victory Day celebrations

A series of assassinations of top Russian figures has left Vladimir Putin fearing for his life, but experts warn that the real threat could be far closer to home, writes **Maira Butt**



The Russian president attends a ceremony to lay flowers at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Moscow yesterday (AP)

Vladimir Putin used his Victory Day speech to claim confidence in Russia's triumphs, as he presided over a dramatically scaled-back parade in Moscow yesterday.

Addressing the crowd at the annual parade, which marks the defeat of Nazi Germany in the Second World War, the Russian leader voiced that he was confident of victory in Ukraine.

“Victory has always been and will be ours,” Putin said, as columns of troops lined up on Red Square. “The key to success is our moral strength, courage and valour, our unity and ability to endure anything and overcome any challenge.”

Volodymyr Zelensky issued a decree “permitting” Russia to hold the military parade and said his forces wouldn’t target Red Square, after Donald Trump announced a three-day ceasefire.

Putin attempted to use his speech, which lasted less than 10 minutes, to project strength, claiming Russia would succeed in the Ukraine war thanks to its “moral strength, courage and valour”. But the parade was a far cry from past years, when it had been used to show off Russia’s vast military, including its nuclear-capable intercontinental ballistic missiles.

Four years ago, Putin had stood grandly at a podium, surveying a legion of armoured military vehicles. Weeks earlier, he’d invaded neighbouring Ukraine, sparking a conflict that has dragged on ever since. During a defiant speech on that day, the Russian president launched an attack on Nato, Ukraine and a host of Western countries. Surrounded by military hardware, he insisted that Russia was “fighting for the motherland, for her future, and so that nobody forgets the lessons of World War II”.

But this year things are different. For the first time in nearly two decades, those celebrations went ahead without any showy and heavy military hardware, amid new fears of long-range Ukrainian drone strikes that have been hitting deep inside Russia.



Last week, it was reported that Putin's approval rating among the general public had dropped for the seventh consecutive week (AP)

Volodymyr Zelensky has been unequivocal about the fact that Ukraine's "victory plan" entails hitting targets deep within Russia, and his country's technological and military capabilities are advancing rapidly. His strategy will be helped by a new €90bn loan from the EU, recently released after Hungary's prime minister Viktor Orban was ousted from office, unblocking the funds.

For Russia, a country that prides itself on its demonstrations of military might, the lack of fanfare at the parade was out of character.

This year, Putin remains more paranoid and isolated than ever before. Security has been tightened across the capital of Moscow, with unprecedented military presence including checkpoints, snipers and machine-gun crews.

It comes amid a leaked European intelligence report claiming that Putin's increasing paranoia over his personal safety has led him to spend weeks in underground bunkers, screening staff and banning cell phones for personal cooks and bodyguards.

On top of that, internet shutdowns have been reported across the country, and social media channels have been replaced by the state's own intelligence-monitored versions.

“Within the wider context, it shouldn’t come as a surprise,” says Jaroslava Barbieri, a research fellow at the Ukraine Forum at Chatham House. “That’s how dictators usually end up feeling when they feel like power is slipping away. There is an interesting dynamic there, with the slipping image of Russia as a military superpower and the slipping image of Putin as a strong man.”



Russian servicemen march in Red Square yesterday (AP)

She says this is also reflected in Putin’s drop in opinion polls, even those which have been traditionally pro-Kremlin, as the economic effects of sanctions and general fatigue with the war take hold. “These are signs that he’s kind of losing his grasp,” she explains.

Last week, it was reported that his approval rating among the general public had dropped for the seventh consecutive week, according to Russian state-owned polling institution All-Russian Public Opinion Research Centre (VTsIOM).

While Putin’s paranoia is not new – he is widely known to be a germaphobe who hunkered down hard following the Covid pandemic, taking some extreme measures to avoid catching the illness – there have been a number of events in recent months that are believed to have contributed to his sense of vulnerability.

In December 2025, the head of the general staff's operational training directorate, Lieutenant General Fanil Sarvarov, was killed after a bomb planted under his car detonated as he drove out of a Moscow car park at around 7am in the morning. The 56-year-old was rushed to hospital with multiple shrapnel wounds, severe leg injuries, a facial fracture and concussion, but did not survive. Seven other vehicles were reported to be damaged in the blast.

In February this year, Lt Gen Vladimir Alexeyev was shot and injured in an alleged assassination attempt. Several other senior officials have been killed since Russia launched its invasion in 2022.

Last year, unverified claims surfaced that Ukraine had attempted to target the Russian president at his personal residence in the Novgorod region. US intelligence found the claims not to be true, and Kyiv denied the allegations.



The damaged Kia Sorento lies at the scene where Lt Gen Fanil Sarvarov was killed by a car bomb last December (Reuters)

But Putin does not want to be seen as weak – and the need to appear powerful is compounded by the 9 May celebrations, which Barbieri says is crucial to Russia's understanding of itself as a country.

"It has been a hallmark of Russia's identity-building and nation-building processes under Putin, and underlying this image is

always this sense that they liberated Europe from fascism, that they're unbeatable and always on the right side of history. He had a kind of distorted understanding of the reality on the ground, but inevitably, he feels pressure to try and sell domestically an image of victory."

But cracks are widening in the perception of Putin's administration as a unified bloc, with elite bureaucrats and middle-class businesspeople growing uneasy with restrictions and the economic effects of the war, which continues to take up 70 per cent of Putin's time and has become his "obsession".

Barbieri explains that within the Russian elite, there are figures such as Sergey Kiriyenko who are more akin to bureaucrats, who are increasingly concerned "that the current total investment in the war effort is creating a number of economic problems for the country".

Then there is the security and military bloc, which is more passionate about the country's war aims but has also become increasingly critical, including the Siloviki ("men of force" that include Russian officials from security, military, and law enforcement agencies such as the FSB, defence ministry and National Guard) as well as Z-bloggers.

Putin thought the war would be over in weeks, and the fact that it has continued for nearly half a decade is a shock to him and the establishment, says Barbieri. "As it has lasted longer, it has started to become more difficult to isolate the country from information about casualties and the impact of sanctions. They're trying to control the narrative, but it's becoming harder to isolate the population from a conversation about the actual failures."



Belarusian president Alexander Lukashenko attends the Victory Day military parade (AP)

Internet outages have affected businesses, leaving customers unable to contact their clients, causing more frustration. Russians are also feeling shaken by military strikes that have hit them hundreds of miles beyond their border. On Friday, Mr Zelensky said a Ukrainian drone strike hit one of Russia's largest oil refineries in Yaroslavl, a city situated more than 700km from its border.

Despite these attacks, Russia was determined to continue with the Victory Day commemorations. "It's quite unusual for a country to be having these parades," says Christina Hayward at the Institute for the Study of War. "Ukraine does not have these kind of events, and they haven't for years because of the risk of Russian strikes attacking concentrations of people.

"It's interesting to see that Russia is now feeling that same wartime fear. It's showing the effect that the increased Ukrainian strikes are having on Russian planning and that they aren't confident in their ability to have enough air defences to protect these events should they choose to have them."

Despite Putin's fear of being attacked, experts say that Russia's history shows a far more sobering and terrifying reality. "Regime consolidation has put in place an authoritarian system that operates like a police state," she says. "Russia's history shows

that if it were changed, it would most likely be through a violent and sudden way rather than a gradual decline.

“The cracks within the regime are widening, but the big question now is what is going to happen. Once these cracks become too wide to be covered, historically, change in Russia has always happened suddenly and violently. Among the expert community, the expectation is that if such a change were to happen, most likely it’s going to come from inside.”

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Inside complex operation to evacuate hantavirus vessel

The plan to offload 147 passengers and crew on board MV Hondius, travelling from Cape Verde to Tenerife, is racing against the weather, reports **Renée Boskaljon** in Las Palmas



Members of the Guardia Civil begin setting up a tent at an expected reception point for passengers, at Puerto de Granadilla, Tenerife, yesterday (Getty)

In the early hours of this morning, the most reviled cruise ship in the world will dock off the waters of Tenerife.

The release of 147 passengers and crew on board MV *Hondius*, which has sailed from Cape Verde to the Spanish island, has

proved deeply contentious after an outbreak of hantavirus has left three people dead.

The ship was initially refused access in Cape Verde, and its arrival in the Canary Islands this weekend has caused uproar among residents, who fear the virus will spread to their shores.

The authorities have been met by protesters as they make last-minute preparations to receive the controversial boat and process those on board. The ship is expected to enter Canarian waters between 3am and 5am in the early hours of this morning and anchor just outside Puerto de Granadilla, which sits on the island's southeastern coast.

The industrial harbour is 13 minutes drive from Tenerife South airport, where the repatriation flights will depart and 20 minutes drive away from the iconic tourist town of Granadilla de Abona.

"We all want passengers to return safely, but we are worried how this is going to impact our health, and our businesses, which depend on tourism," says Patricia Fernández Bueno, 44, a holiday rental owner who lives in the town.



The Hondius was described as 'a biological risk' by a Gran Canaria union spokesperson (Reuters)

The Port of Granadilla was agreed on Thursday after days of disagreement between Madrid and the regional government.

The *Hondius* will anchor – not dock – and small vessels will ferry passengers ashore in groups of five into a restricted port area, where health-protected vehicles will drive them directly to Tenerife South. Spanish nationals will be flown to Madrid and referred to the Gómez Ulla military hospital.

“Operations would begin from dawn, once there is enough daylight to start working,” Alfonso Cabello, regional spokesperson, told reporters. “We estimate, though this is a calculation that depends on flight availability and on anchoring a cruise ship of over 100 metres in length, that operations could begin around noon. We need to guarantee that the ship leaves the port by Monday.”

Mr Cabello stressed that weather conditions will make any manoeuvre impossible from tomorrow onwards – and with conditions not expected to improve until the end of May, there would be no second chance. That tight window is when authorities plan to disembark, process, and repatriate passengers from 22 nationalities.

Thirty crew members will remain on board to continue the voyage to the Netherlands, and Dutch authorities will then be responsible for disinfecting the vessel at a Dutch port. The body of a passenger who died on the ship will remain on board throughout the journey to the Netherlands.



Dockers protest against the arrival of the Hondius in Santa Cruz de Tenerife on 8 May (AFP/Getty)

If the weather deteriorates before all passengers have disembarked, the *Hondius* would continue with its remaining passengers to the Netherlands, said Cabello.

Tensions rose sharply as the ship approached the Canaries. The regional government, led by Fernando Clavijo, criticised the lack of prior medical reports and communication from the central government.

Dozens protested on Thursday in Gran Canaria, the neighbouring island, while others gathered in Tenerife on Friday and yesterday.

Elena Ruiz, spokesperson for the Tenerife port workers' union TPT, told *The Independent* that around 55 union workers at Granadilla would not turn up to work over the weekend, and islanders will also be gathering at the port in protest.

She said: "What's coming is a biological risk. There is an established protocol for smaller arrivals of migrant boats, but this is on a much larger scale, and there are not sufficient protocols to ensure the safety of those handling the arrival. Even the Civil Guard itself is worried and scared, and I believe they simply don't have sufficient resources."



Workers set pole tents prior to the arrival of the Hondius at the port of Granadilla yesterday (AFP/Getty)

She clarified that the workers' absence will not affect the ship's arrival itself, explaining that the port police and Civil Guard will handle the operation, but that the impact will be felt on the industrial side of the port. "We are a second-class port when it comes to work – put in second place when it comes to the jobs, and first place when it comes to the risk," says Ruiz.

Several countries that have nationals on board the *Hondius* were sending aircraft to Tenerife to arrive last night or this morning.

The 22 British passengers on board are expected to be flown back to the UK today. It is understood they will be tested on the ship before they disembark and will then be taken directly from the ship to the plane. They will then self-isolate for 45 days.

For passengers whose countries have not arranged transport, European Union flights will be employed. The Netherlands has confirmed it will also take responsibility for non-essential crew members.

Mr Cabello insisted that every worker involved, from bus drivers and maritime personnel to national police officers and health staff, has been assigned a specific protocol, PPE level, and distance requirement. Passengers will be transported directly to the aeroplane without entering terminals.



Canary Islands government spokesperson Alfonso Cabello (left), with Jose Manuel Bermudez, mayor of Santa Cruz de Tenerife (AFP/Getty)

A separate meeting involving the Granadilla City Council, the Civil Guard, the Port Authority, and Policía Canaria was held on Friday afternoon to coordinate traffic management and ensure priority passage along the road corridor between the port and the airport.

“The reports received stated that in principle there are no passengers nor crew who show any symptoms since 28 April,” Mr Cabello said.

If a passenger tests positive but does not require urgent care, they will still be repatriated, the spokesperson confirmed. But the island is prepared if someone falls seriously ill, he said, adding that resources are available on the island to provide care if needed.

Once passengers are back in their home countries, quarantine procedures will need to be determined. Pedro Gullón, general director of public health at the Spanish Ministry of Health, said authorities are studying how long the Spanish passengers will need to remain in isolation.

“We have to assess this based on the virus’s incubation period, when symptoms are most likely to appear, so as not to prolong

the quarantine beyond what is necessary from a public health perspective," he said.

Hantavirus can incubate for up to 45 days, though the Andes variant – the only strain transmitted between humans, and the one detected on the *Hondius* – typically has a contagion window of around 48 hours before and after the onset of symptoms.

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World

Their classrooms destroyed, pupils sit exams on the sand

Ezz Al Din Abu Eisha reports from Gaza where the seashore has been transformed into a makeshift examination hall



Lines in the sand: more than 20,000 school and university students have died in Israel's assault on Gaza, where academic institutions have been reduced to rubble (Independent Arabia)

This article first appeared on our partner site, Independent Arabia

Under an April sun already holding the sharp heat of summer, Iyad, a fourth-year engineering student, dragged his feet across the sand of Gaza's shoreline. There was no fishing rod in his hand nor a beach towel over his shoulder; instead, he clutched a

worn-out plastic folder under his arm containing pages of his coursework on reinforced concrete.

Exam Hall: 'Seashore'

A few metres from the crashing waves stood a sign reading: "Exam Hall: Seashore". Beside it, a long row of plastic chairs had been neatly arranged on the sand, without desks, for university students to sit their exams.

"Before the war, I would walk onto campus well dressed, sit my exams in an air-conditioned classroom, and then visit the main conference hall," Iyad recounted to *Independent Arabia*.

He took his place on chair number 14, resting his folder on his knees as a makeshift desk. Beside him, his classmate Omar wiped sweat from his brow with the collar of his shirt. In front of them stood Hamid, the lecturer who had lost both his home and his university but not his authority. He moved with quiet dignity across the sand, silently handing out the exam papers.

"Begin in the name of God. You have two hours. And do not forget that your names are the most important thing you will write today, so your rights are not lost in this chaos," he said, his voice blending with the sound of the waves. At once, the students began reading the final exam questions that stood between them and graduation.

A battle for focus

Iyad began reading the first question as strong sea winds tried to snatch the paper from his hands. He placed a bottle of water on top of it as a weight, anchoring his dream to the page. A strange mix of sounds filled his ears: the relentless roar of the waves, the cry of a child in a nearby displacement tent and the distant hum of a surveillance drone on the horizon.

He closed his eyes for a moment, inhaled the sharp scent of iodine, and imagined himself back in that old lecture hall with its wooden seats. Then he began writing quickly, solving complex mathematical equations as though his pen were his only means of striking back against the reality of displacement.

As the exam reached its midpoint, the sun grew harsher, the sea breeze offering the only relief. For a brief moment, Iyad looked towards the horizon, catching sight of a child running along the water's edge before returning his gaze to his equation. In that instant, he realised that passing this exam was not just a mark on an academic record, but a declaration that the engineer within him had not been buried beneath the rubble of the university buildings destroyed by Israel.

As time ran out, Iyad stood up, brushing the sand from his trousers. He looked at the rows of chairs beginning to empty, then handed in his paper. The scene was not merely a university exam; it was a silent epic, written in the ink of determination across the soft sands of Gaza's shore.

He returned to his tent carrying his folder, filled with hope that the person who solved reinforced concrete equations under the blazing sun would one day be capable of rebuilding all that had been destroyed.

'Educational genocide'

Gaza's education system has lost irreplaceable human capital. More than 20,000 students from schools and universities have been killed. The sector has also lost more than 1,000 teachers and administrative staff in addition to more than 220 university professors and scientists, many of whom were internationally recognised authorities in specialised academic fields.

Academic institutions have been reduced to rubble or overcrowded shelters, while Gaza's main university buildings have been fully or partially destroyed. This includes advanced laboratories, smart lecture halls and research centres.

Avichay Adraee, a spokesperson for the Israeli army, said: "Universities were transformed from educational institutions into centres for developing combat capabilities, training military intelligence personnel and factories for producing explosive materials. Physics and chemistry laboratories in universities were used to develop the range of rockets and the technical capabilities [of Hamas]."

However, the Palestinian ministry of higher education described the attacks on universities as “educational genocide”. Its spokesperson, Saad Khaddour, said: “Israel has carried out systematic acts aimed at eliminating education and the academic elite. The targeting of schools and universities constitutes a war crime. We have called on the International Criminal Court and Unesco to launch urgent investigations into the destruction of educational facilities and the targeting of scientists, academics and students.”

‘University exists wherever there is a teacher, a student, a book’

The academic Nasser Al-Ghussein told *Independent Arabia*: “When the world sees students sitting exams over the rubble, in front of the sea, just days after the guns fell silent, it understands that this society possesses immense energy for rebuilding.”

The Palestinian deputy minister of education, Basri Saleh, said: “This scene carries profound meanings that go beyond the act of studying itself. It encapsulates a reality filled with contradictions and determination. Sitting before the crashing waves is not a recreational choice but a declaration of survival.”

Mr Saleh added that the scene was “a cry to the world that these young people are holding on to their right to education, even if classrooms, laboratories and libraries have been taken from them. It is a message that the destruction of buildings has not succeeded in destroying minds, and that the university exists wherever there is a teacher, a student and a book.”

Resistance through knowledge

The Palestinian ministry of higher education views the sight of students sitting their exams on the seafront as a document of indictment to the world and a testament to an unbreakable will.

The minister of higher education, Professor Amjad Barham, sent images of the students to international organisations, saying: “Our students in Gaza are giving an exam in resilience as well as in their subjects. Sitting the exam on the sand is a sovereign decision of the Palestinian academic authority. The students who have spread out on the sand to sit their exams are the

guardians of the Palestinian dream. This scene is part of the Education Everywhere strategy launched by the ministry in 2026, which aims to utilise open spaces as alternatives to destroyed buildings.

“This is resistance through knowledge. Every exam paper completed on the beach is a nail in the coffin of policies of ignorance, and a confirmation that Palestinian identity is inseparable from education as a tool for liberation and survival.”

Translated by Dalia Mohamed; Reviewed by Tooba Khokhar and Celine Assaf

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World news in brief



Péter Magyar arrives at parliament in Budapest to be sworn in as Hungary's prime minister (Getty)

Hungary's new PM sworn in

Péter Magyar took his oath of office yesterday to become Hungary's new prime minister, kicking off a fresh political era after 16 years of Viktor Orbán's autocratic rule.

Mr Magyar's center-right Tisza party defeated Mr Orbán's nationalist-populist Fidesz last month, gaining more votes and seats in parliament than any other party in Hungary's post-Communist history.

The win, which gave Tisza a two-thirds parliamentary majority, will allow it to roll back many of the policies that gave Mr Orbán a reputation among his critics as a far-right authoritarian.

In a speech to tens of thousands of supporters in a square outside the parliament building in Budapest, Mr Magyar, 45, told the crowd, to roaring applause: "Today, every freedom-loving person in the world wants to be a little Hungarian. You have taught the country and the world that it is the most ordinary, flesh-and-blood people that can defeat the most vicious tyranny."

He has promised to restore democratic institutions and governmental checks and balances that were heavily eroded during Mr Orbán's rule, and to clamp down on corruption.

AP

Hundreds held and four dead after West Bengal polls

Hundreds of people have been arrested in the Indian border state of West Bengal after at least four people were killed in post-election violence.

State-wide violence and vandalism ensued on 4 March after prime minister Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) tore through the liberal wall of Bengal to secure a historic victory.

The BJP defeated the incumbent chief minister, Mamata Banerjee, in a victory that further consolidated the saffron party's power ahead of the next general elections. Ms Banerjee, a fierce critic of Mr Modi, had been chief minister of the state since 2011.

Suvendu Adhikari, a former confidant of Ms Banerjee, was sworn in as the new chief minister on Saturday in the presence of Mr Modi in the state capital, Kolkata. One of Mr Adhikari's aides, Chandranath Rath, was among those killed earlier this week, shot dead by a gunman on a motorcycle.

Clashes between Ms Banerjee's Trinamool Congress (TMC) and BJP supporters erupted in Kolkata and elsewhere in the state shortly after the results were declared on Monday. The TMC denied any involvement in the killings and accused the BJP of vandalising its party offices.

Pedestrian killed by plane taking off at Denver

A passenger airliner hit and killed a pedestrian on the runway of Denver international airport during takeoff, airport authorities said, sparking an engine fire and forcing passengers to evacuate.

The Frontier Airlines plane, en route to Los Angeles, "reported striking a pedestrian during takeoff… at approximately 11.19pm on Friday", according to a post on the airport's X account.

An airport spokesperson said the unidentified pedestrian, who had jumped a perimeter fence, was hit two minutes after entering the airport. They were not believed to be an airport employee.

"We're stopping on the runway," the pilot told the control tower, according to ATC.com, an air traffic control website. "We just hit somebody. We have an engine fire."

A Frontier Airlines statement identified flight 4345 as the one involved in the collision, adding that "smoke was reported in the cabin and the pilots aborted take-off." It was not clear whether the smoke was linked to the collision with the pedestrian.

The airline said the plane was carrying 224 passengers and seven crew members. Passengers were evacuated via slides and emergency crew bused them to the terminal. Twelve passengers suffered minor injuries and five were taken to local hospitals.

AP

Trump Media down $405m in 3 months

The parent company of President Trump's Truth Social network reported more than $405m in first-quarter net losses this year,

in the latest sign of trouble after it replaced its CEO last month.

In the same period, Trump Media and Technology Group posted net sales of $871,000, according to the financial results.

The company attributed the losses to “unrealized losses on digital assets, digital assets pledged and equity securities ($368.7m), accreted interest ($11.5mn) and stock-based compensation ($11.8m).” In a press release, the company touted figures including its $2.2bn in total assets and its fourth consecutive quarter of positive operating cash flow.

The quarterly results are the latest poor showing for the president’s media company, of which his family owns a near-majority stake. In the last three years, net losses have accelerated, growing from $58.2m in 2023 to $400.9m in 2024 to more than $712m in 2025.

Last month, Trump Media replaced its longtime CEO, Devin Nunes, a former Republican congressman. In December, it agreed on an all-stock deal of more than $6bn to merge with TAE Technologies, a nuclear fusion company, citing the demand for energy to power AI. Scientists have yet to build nuclear fusion systems that reliably produce more energy than they consume.

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Voices

Labour is waiting for Godot as Rayner misses her chance



Keir Starmer's premiership is teetering on the brink... but rivals such as Angela Rayner and Wes Streeting cannot give him the final push (PA)

JOHN RENTOUL

In the wake of terrible election results for Labour, the word of the weekend is "timetable". Instead of nominating Angela Rayner for a leadership election, MPs are queuing up to call for Keir Starmer to set a timetable for his departure, which is code for "Andy Burnham but not yet".

This means that Rayner has missed her chance. Instead of striking with the ruthless efficiency required to change leader, the Labour Party talks about procedure. A “timetable for an orderly transition” is exactly the form of words it used to conceal its embarrassment at getting rid of its most successful ever leader 20 years ago.

Today, it is used to conceal its embarrassment at failing to get rid of an unsuccessful leader.

It means that Labour MPs have decided that they can live with losing 1,400 councillors, going from being in government to having one-tenth of the seats in the new Welsh Senedd and failing to beat Reform UK in Scotland, because things are not as bad as they could have been. It means that they have looked hard at the alternative candidates for prime minister, and the only MPs who have gone public have said, “I’ll have that one, please,” pointing to a candidate who is not actually available.

The moment is slipping away from Rayner. It has been reported that Ed Miliband, the energy secretary, suggested to Starmer two weeks ago that he should consider setting out a timetable for his departure. Miliband’s spokesperson said, “We do not accept this account,” which is spokesperson-speak for, “It’s basically true.”

The significance of Miliband’s intervention, though, is that he supports Burnham’s return to parliament, which means that he is opposed to Rayner taking over.

The doubts about Rayner just won’t go away. Her tax affairs, which she thought were definitely going to be sorted out – and in her favour – before the elections, are still being investigated.

Other Labour MPs who might have been expected to join the Rayner campaign have drifted to Burnham instead. Or rather, to demanding a timetable, by which they mean that Starmer should set a date for his departure and lift his veto on Burnham returning to the Commons in a by-election.

I have heard of one sympathetic MP who came away from an hour-long phone call with Burnham of such inconsistency that they were determined he should never have the top job



Neither of those is going to happen soon, which means that they are essentially calling for Starmer to go, safe in the knowledge that he will stay for the time being. It is not, to put it mildly, the optimum strategy for a Labour Party needing to communicate confidence and a bright future.

Just as in 2006, calling for a timetable is a way of waving away awkward questions about the candidate implied by that timetable. In Burnham's case, it is also a means of putting pressure on Labour's national executive to let him stand as a by-election candidate. This seems naive. The rules preventing mayors from jumping ship are there for a reason, which Emma Reynolds, a cabinet minister, made unexpectedly clear yesterday. "If Andy Burnham does come back as an MP in parliament, we would have to have a by-election of the greatest magnitude [in Manchester]," she said, "and there's a possibility we could lose that by-election for Manchester mayor."

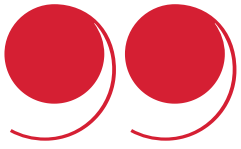
Handing over Greater Manchester to Reform would hardly be a great way to launch Labour's all-new, totally different prime minister. That prospect ought to prompt other doubts to creep into the Westminster game of calling for a timetable. Namely, what is it that Burnham would bring to the job that would turn things round for Labour? I have heard of one sympathetic MP who came away from an hour-long phone call with him of such inconsistency that they were determined he should never have the top job.

By playing for time, Labour MPs might be preparing the ground for Burnham to miss his moment too. The longer they have to

think about him, the less they might think there is to him. So far, his policy pitches are aimed at the party's activist base, thus highlighting a structural problem with British politics that might be called "the Liz Truss trap". If unrepresentative party members get to decide who should be prime minister, it makes changing prime minister in the middle of a parliament a hazardous business.

Of all Starmer's inept responses to the election losses, the only one that made any sense was his declaration that Labour shouldn't be "tacking right or left".

It may be that the party will take his advice so literally that it decides to do nothing at all. That is better than choosing Labour's equivalent of Truss to replace him, but it is not as good as finding someone who has the qualities needed to lead the country out of the doldrums and away from the prospect of Nigel Farage as prime minister in 2029.



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True colours? Why Nigel's glow-up is cause for alarm



The Reform leader looked noticeably slicker during his post-election media rounds (PA)

VICTORIA RICHARDS

Meet the man with the slick, new haircut, trendy glasses, a healthy complexion and a deceptively inclusive-looking rainbow tie: it's... Nigel Farage – as you've never seen him before.

The Reform UK leader's striking "glow-up" – what I'd call one part Tony Blair, three parts Austin Powers – is no accident,

believe you me. He wants us to know he's serious. One day, he could lead this country – into darkness… – and we had better get used to it. Donald Trump once called Boris Johnson "Britain Trump". Well, here comes another one.

Reform UK has already copied many of the pages out of the Trump playbook, such as attempts to launch Doge-style schemes to examine council spending (though the Reform version of Elon Musk's Doge has predictably achieved nothing). Farage – who's always idolised Trump – has mimicked him in waging a war on diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) policies and has said employees areas at Reform-run councils "better be seeking alternative careers very, very quickly".

He's called for the Bank of England to "embrace" crypto, another $TRUMP classic. Farage also wants to abolish the BBC licence fee – coincidentally as Trump wages a $10bn lawsuit against the BBC in a defamation case which could effectively bankrupt the broadcaster, anyway.

The list goes on. It bears repeating, not least because half the country actively wants Nigel Farage to become our next prime minister, and the other half are only just waking up to the fact he might.

And, in all likelihood, just as Trump is alienating his Maga base with his divisive and deeply unpopular attacks on Iran, a Reform party in power seems destined to spiral into ugly infighting. We've already seen former frontrunners like Rupert Lowe split from the party to launch his own, following allegations of bullying and threatening the party chair, which he denies (Lowe claims he was "forced out" for being a "tall poppy" who was a direct risk to Farage).

Even the remaining members of the party don't agree on key ideological issues: "30p Lee" Anderson has advocated for a return to the death penalty, as has current party chair David Bull – who says he supports it for "extreme cases" – but Farage has insisted it will not be official party policy. And on, and on.

Every single pledge Reform makes feels like a wrong turn in a circus funhouse, or a wobbly step that turns out to be a trapdoor



Does anyone know what a “Reformed” Britain would look like? That’s the thing about Reform, you see – they’re the living embodiment of all mouth and no trousers. For all the dog whistle politics, there’s little substance. No rigorous breakdown of how it would work, how it would be funded, how they would deliver a single policy pledge.

That’s precisely what makes them so dangerous. If Britain has already reached a point of crisis and collapse, just imagine what it could be like with Reform in charge in a few years. Farage has vowed to keep healthcare in Britain “free at the time of delivery”... but also wants to move to an insurance-based model for funding the NHS. Confused? Me too.

We’ll probably see a pricey reinstatement of the Tory government’s botched Rwanda plan – and a possible introduction of Trump’s ICE programme in Britain, too.

After all, we’ve already heard Farage’s grim plans for mass deportations and the building of “concentration camp-style” internment centres in areas that aren’t under Reform control.

Yet for all their crowing about tackling immigration (the wedge issue which has won them power this week), the logistics are slippery. Reform have no chance of lowering the numbers substantially – and probably no intention to, either. They just want to move the goalposts (or *look* like they are). They know their power lies in uniting their supporters around a common enemy: migrants.

Every single pledge Reform makes feels like a wrong turn in a circus funhouse, or a wobbly step that turns out to be a trapdoor.

Take their promise to halve crime and introduce “harsher sentences for prisoners”. The party has committed to creating 30,000 new prison places – but *hasn’t* explained how it will pay for them, let alone address the problem of overcrowding and the backlog in the criminal justice system.

Still, Britain certainly looks to be heading for a Trump 2.0 – or, say, a Trump 1.75 – if the Reform swell continues to surge. This week, the Scottish Greens co-leader Ross Greer said that Reform were taking their campaigning tactics “straight out of Donald Trump’s playbook”. None of this is helped by our current state of isolation, either: we’re already adrift from Europe, and Farage, the chief architect-cum-liar of Brexit, is more powerful than ever.

It’s deeply depressing. As Reform continues to sweep our lost, fractured nation, and as local councils bounce from red and blue, the colour that’s really emerging triumphant isn’t just turquoise, but orange.



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Voices

The ‘master’ of the deal has never looked more ridiculous



Donald Trump continues to assure everyone that a peace deal is around the corner – though Iran still seems to have the advantage in the Strait of Hormuz and over Gulf neighbours (Getty)

JON SOPEL

There was a news anchor on Fox News the other day, and he was trying to explain why Project Freedom had been brought to such an abrupt end by Donald Trump, seemingly only minutes after it had been put in place. The presenter was trying to find a rational explanation for the latest policy whiplash, and he was left saying,

“the president must know what he’s doing [mustn’t he?]. There will be a rational explanation for it [won’t there?]”

The bits in brackets weren’t said out loud, but you could just sense the nagging doubt in his mind.

So, if it has all passed you by in a blur, a quick refresher on Project Freedom, whose lifespan is so short, I bet even Wikipedia will struggle to remember it. It has had the longevity of a terminally ill mayfly, that dance over our rivers for all too brief a period at this time of year. If it’s passed you by, Project Freedom was announced by Trump, pushed by frat boy Pete Hegseth and briefed out extensively by Little Marco Rubio.

It was the red, white and blue dome that was put in place over the Strait of Hormuz, which would allow the 1,500 or so tankers, bulk carriers, container ships and other vessels to pass freely and safely, thanks to America’s military might and generosity. It was problem solved.

And then, no sooner had Secretary Rubio appeared at the White House lectern to announce that everyone was safe now, than a French cargo ship was hit, injuring several crew members. Cue Truth Social post from Donald Trump saying – err – Project Freedom was being put on ice.

Now we don’t need to detain ourselves with the fact that this made both Hegseth and Rubio look like right chumps. But let’s delve a little deeper into what is going on. The president explained by saying that Iran was close to accepting a deal to reopen the strait, with talks to take place in the future on the future of its nuclear programme.

At the time of writing, there is no peace deal, and I hope for everyone’s sake that Donald Trump is right: negotiations are close to conclusion; a one-page memorandum of understanding is just around the corner; Iran is about to commit to reopening this vital economic artery; and the regime will commit to halting the enrichment of nuclear material.

But. But. But.

We keep being told that a peace deal is around the corner, that Iran has been defeated, that they are begging for a deal. And then you see the evidence in front of your eyes that the regime is still functioning, that the strait is still firmly shut and under their control, and that it still has the capacity to strike Gulf states with missiles and drones.

The Saudis had not been consulted. They feared it would be a major provocation to Iran, and they said they would stop the US from using their air bases for this operation. Where's the strategic genius in that?



If this is what victory looks like, I'd hate to see defeat.

And remember this: a few days ago, the US announced that the war was over without having achieved regime change or ending Iran's nuclear programme or eliminating its missile production. All of this means the focus is now on solving a problem that didn't even exist before the hostilities started – namely, the firmly locked Strait of Hormuz.

The messaging from Donald Trump has been – well – perplexing (it is the most neutral word I can find). One minute he's telling us the Iranians are begging him for a deal, the next he's saying he's going to get very, very cross if they don't obey his instructions. Then we get the rinse-and-repeat cycle. "If Iran doesn't obey, I'm going to kill a whole civilisation in one night." And up and up the ante goes with ever more preposterous hyperbole.

I love that the Fox presenter still wants to cling to the belief that what we are privileged to be watching is the tactical and strategic genius of the three-dimensional chess grand master. But with each passing day, it looks like he shouldn't be left unaccompanied with a tiddlywinks board.

Back to the ill-fated Project Freedom, it looks like what did for it was the Saudis. They had not been consulted. They feared it would be a major provocation to Iran, and they said they would stop the US from using their air bases for this operation. Where's the strategic genius in that?

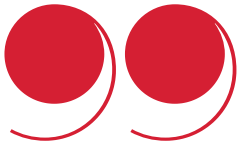
Watching all this reminds me of my worst moments of parenting. "Unless you do your homework, I will suspend your pocket money. No, I will take away your phone. No, I will wipe out everyone in your school. And as I grow increasingly puce-coloured, my son contorts himself into one giant eyeroll emoji.

And yet. It's certainly true that Donald Trump's popularity is sliding and that the Iran war doesn't enjoy much support in the US. The price of fuel is now way higher than it was before hostilities started. America has no immunity from this.

But the president's grip on the Republican Party is still iron-like. There was a small but important test of this in Indiana this week. A group of Republicans in the state senate had defied him over a bit of election gerrymandering. Trump ordered an all-out war against these Rinos (Republican in name only). Five of the seven holdout Republicans saw their careers ended this week, as Trump allies piled in with millions of dollars to restore the Maga orthodoxy.

It was a harsh lesson on the price of defying this president. It was a warning to others who might think about turning on him.

The war of obedience, he is still winning, if not the one in the Gulf.



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Inspired Doku helps City close gap on title rivals

Manchester City Doku (60), Haaland (75), Marmoush (90+2)	3
Brentford	0



Jeremy Doku's fine curling shot broke the deadlock on the hour (Photos Reuters)

ANDY HAMPSON

Jeremy Doku struck again as Manchester City kept their title hopes alive with a vital 3-0 win over Brentford in the Premier League on Saturday.

The winger scored his fifth goal in six games before Erling Haaland and Omar Marmoush wrapped up a victory at the Etihad Stadium that cut Arsenal's advantage at the top to two points. Both contenders now have three games to play, with Arsenal the next in action at relegation-threatened West Ham today.

After Monday's frustrating draw at Everton, City needed to win to keep any pressure on the Gunners and – as at Hill Dickinson Stadium, where they were facing defeat until the final moments, Doku came to their rescue.

The Belgian struck in now trademark style to break the deadlock on the hour with a fine curling shot before Haaland and substitute Marmoush made the points certain.

Victory was not without controversy, however, as European hopefuls Brentford had two penalty appeals turned down and City captain Bernardo Silva might have been sent off on another day for lashing out. But ultimately City, who were again missing the influential Rodri, did what they needed to do.

Doku repeatedly troubled Brentford cutting in from the left and he threatened in the opening minutes when he shot straight at Caoimhin Kelleher. Silva and Tijjani Reijnders both shot over and Haaland headed tamely at Kelleher. Haaland had another opportunity from a Doku cutback but his shot was blocked by Kristoffer Ajer and Kelleher smothered Nathan Ake's follow-up.



Erling Haaland scrambled a back heel into the net for City's second

Despite City's dominance, they looked vulnerable at times and they had a scare when Gianluigi Donnarumma missed Michael Kayode's long throw-in and Matheus Nunes cleared off the line.

Nunes was also involved in some of the game's main talking points, the first coming after the dangerous Kevin Schade raced onto a long ball.

The Portuguese chased back and Schade went down as the pair made contact on the edge of the area but nothing was given by referee Michael Salisbury.

There was further controversy when Silva escaped with a yellow card after striking the back of Nathan Collins' leg with his arm in frustration following a tangle in the area.



Late show: Omar Marmoush added a third in injury time

Rayan Cherki drove wide as City tried to step up the urgency after the break but manager Pep Guardiola felt the need to make changes on the hour, sending on Phil Foden and Marmoush.

Within seconds the game changed, although it had nothing to do with the substitutes as Doku again ran at the Brentford defence. The Belgian got lucky when an attempted pass was cut out by Mikkel Damsgaard and rolled straight back to him, but there was nothing fortunate about his sublime finish.

Brentford appealed again for a spot-kick following another incident involving Schade and Nunes but it was cleared.

Haaland made sure of victory when he backheeled in amid a goalmouth scramble 15 minutes from time and Kelleher produced a fine save to deny Foden before Marmoush completed the scoring in stoppage time.

PA

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Anfield left frustrated by frantic, incoherent draw

Liverpool Gravenberch (6)	1
Chelsea Fernandez (35)	1



Arne Slot has struggled to get the best out of Liverpool this season and an inconsistent performance against Chelsea shows why they've struggled (Getty)

RICHARD JOLLY

There was a moment in the first half when the Liverpool supporters revived a chant from the Anfield songbook a couple of decades ago. Chelsea , they chorused, “ain’t got no history”. Yet when Chelsea avoided making it, it was an achievement for Calum McFarlane but an indictment of Arne Slot.

When Ryan Gravenberch gave Liverpool the lead, Chelsea were on course to equal a club record of seven straight league defeats, set in 1952. They avoided that ignominy. A first point in more than two months came courtesy of Enzo Fernandez, but also due to Liverpool’s failings.

Clubs who have had some epic battles shared a draw that was instead error-strewn and, at times, insipid. These are rivals who contested twin Champions League semi-finals. Now Chelsea almost certainly will not return to the European elite and Liverpool missed the chance to all but book their place in the Champions League. In a season of missed opportunities, this was another.

Perhaps it was a microcosm of their campaign: a flying start, a struggle and an outcome that may prove to be just about satisfactory. Yet too much of the manner of it felt familiar. Liverpool lost their way even before losing a lead. For the 18th time in the Premier League, they conceded from a set piece, albeit in a different fashion.



Ryan Gravenberch's curling effort sent Liverpool into the lead (Getty)

In the second half, Liverpool were frantic and incoherent. In the first, there was a lack of urgency and intensity. Liverpool were too slow, soporific in the sunshine. Anfield was angsty, anxious, annoyed. Frustration is becoming apparent.

Slot had said that even finishing the campaign with three good results and good performances would not be enough to silence the criticism. Liverpool got neither here anyway. There were loud boos when Rio Ngumoha was substituted; more in dissent at Slot's decision to remove the teenager, who had begun brightly, than at the introduction of Alexander Isak, who was duly anonymous. "There were a lot that didn't agree with the change, which is completely understandable," said Slot, revealing Ngumoha had been suffering from cramp. And yet he knows the climate at the club now, that jeers would follow. "I knew the moment his number went up that would be the reaction," he said. It continued, and further boos greeted the final whistle.

"This club should not be happy with a 1-1 against Chelsea," said Slot. It was not. The mitigating factors came in the sense of another makeshift team. When Liverpool spent £450m in the summer, the plan was not to field a front three including a full-back, in Jeremie Frimpong, and a 17-year-old, in Ngumoha. In between them, Cody Gakpo completed the first 40 minutes

without touching the ball. The ill Florian Wirtz was absent; Isak's comeback was only as a replacement.



Enzo Fernandez scored from a direct free kick to give Chelsea the equaliser (Reuters)

Liverpool looked short of scorers. Not for the first time, they got a spectacular strike from a midfielder, albeit a different one, with Gravenberch curling in from 20 yards. A Chelsea team packed with defensive personnel did too little to stop him. Filip Jorgensen, deputising for the concussed Robert Sanchez in goal, seemed to get his positioning wrong.

Chelsea extended their run without a clean sheet to 14 league games, their worst since 1991. For the ninth time this season, they conceded in the opening 10 minutes. Given the crisis enveloping the visitors, they seemed there for the taking. Liverpool did not take advantage. An unmarked Virgil van Dijk shot wide. But Liverpool surrendered the initiative as Chelsea discovered some resolve.

"I am probably being a bit biased; we could have won the game," said McFarlane. It helped that he got his tactics right. Lacking wingers, the interim manager used Marc Cucurella on the left of midfield. "Cucurella is not a winger, though he told me he has played there before, but his movement off the ball is of a real high standard," said McFarlane. It proved a real asset. The Spaniard provided drive, verve and a goal threat. He drew the

first save from a fit-again Giorgi Mamardashvili with a low drive. The goalkeeper prevented Fernandez from putting Chelsea ahead. But not from equalising.



Cole Palmer had a goal disallowed for Chelsea and Curtis Jones had one ruled out for Liverpool (Getty)

Just Chelsea's second goal in seven league games came when Fernandez's low free kick evaded everyone, a motionless Mamardashvili included, to go in. Wesley Fofana nevertheless claimed it. "Everyone has told me that I touched the ball," he said. Regardless of the scorer, Slot was unhappy. "Such a sloppy goal," he said.

Each side found the net for a second time: Cole Palmer, after Cucurella was marginally offside, and Curtis Jones, when Gakpo had strayed beyond the Chelsea defence. Neither goal counted. Liverpool were twice inches from a winner. Dominik Szoboszlai powered a long-range shot against the foot of the near post. Van Dijk headed the Hungarian's corner onto the bar. This, however, was not a day when Szoboszlai could rescue them from mediocrity.

Chelsea found a modicum of redemption, even if it invited questions as to why they have been so poor in other games. This was a reminder that they can turn up on the bigger occasions. Wretched against Nottingham Forest on Monday, they were far better here. There was almost an apologetic air as their players went to the fans at the final whistle. "This club needs to win

games of football and we haven't done that," said McFarlane. Liverpool have not done it often enough, either.

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It’s up for grabs now... at both extremes of the table

Miguel Delaney on why West Ham vs Arsenal this afternoon could be the most decisive game in Premier League history



Arsenal will be on the brink of the title when they visit the London Stadium (AP)

It’s funny how momentum in football can work, how swiftly the feeling at clubs can change. You only have to look at Arsenal. There’s been that shift in mood over the remarkable last few weeks, but also a shift in focus over the last few days.

On Tuesday, on the day of a Champions League semi-final, most people – including in the dressing room – were barely talking about it. They were almost exclusively discussing Manchester City's 3-3 slip at Everton and especially what it meant.

By Wednesday, after that victory over Atletico Madrid, there was none of that. It was all about the giddiness of qualifying for the Champions League final.

Mikel Arteta has obviously been conscious of that, so is aware he has to let his players enjoy the moment and feel what it means… but that they also need to be fully focused for this afternoon.

It's all that West Ham have been thinking about, after all. Nuno Espirito Santo's side have had no distractions like the Champions League. Everything builds up to this. And in so many ways.

Arsenal's visit to West Ham has the potential to be the most decisive Premier League game of the season, and maybe in the competition's history, given the potential direct consequences. It could go some way to deciding the title, but also the final relegation spot.



The Gunners have enjoyed a week of giddy highs after reaching the Champions League final (Getty)

Consider the cascading stakes. If Arsenal win, they will be able to see the trophy. It would leave fixtures against a relegated

Burnley and a Crystal Palace preparing for a Europa Conference final three days later. There's also the possibility of City being affected by a sense of the title drifting away.

On the other side, a West Ham defeat would mathematically secure Leeds United's survival, the day before Daniel Farke's side travel to Tottenham Hotspur. It's impossible not to think Leeds's intensity would be affected, and Spurs could secure another crucial win. That could be fatal for West Ham. It only ratchets up that pressure.

Conversely, if Arsenal fail to win, the immediate consequences aren't as pronounced, but there is the potential of that doom and gloom returning to the club as West Ham enjoy a new lease of life. There'd be yet another swing; a twist.

One of the most remarkable things about all of this, given the richness of Premier League history, is how rarely there's been a fixture like it. The comparable examples are few.

In 1994-95, a badly stuttering Blackburn Rovers beat Crystal Palace 2-1 four games from the end of a campaign that saw Rovers win the title by a point and Palace go down by three. In 1998-99, Blackburn were on the other end of that as a 0-0 draw at Ewood Park relegated them, but proved just enough for Manchester United to win the title by a point. In 2002-03, Bolton Wanderers' shock 2-2 comeback against Arsenal gave them a point crucial to staying up over West Ham United, while just affording Man United crucial distance to Arsenal with three games left.



West Ham may need more than a point today to keep their Premier League survival hopes alive (Getty)

In 2011-12, maybe the closest parallel to this Sunday, but with more games to go, Wigan Athletic beat United 2-0 to recharge their own survival surge while starting a stunning fall by Sir Alex Ferguson's side. There was a similar situation in 2013-14, when Sunderland surprisingly beat Chelsea 2-1 at Stamford Bridge to turn the tide at both ends.

Important as these and a handful of other games were, none of them involved direct consequences quite as acute as what today might allow. The stakes may even have an overt effect on the very game state.

In normal circumstances, you would think that West Ham's best possibility of a result would be to sit tight and frustrate Arsenal. It's worked well for Nuno so many times this season. It's been proven to work well in some key games against Arsenal.

And that would be fine if West Ham had enough fixtures left for a point to feel really valuable. But they don't. They need wins, especially when faced with a resurgent Spurs. At some point, West Ham have to go for it.

And that's against an Arsenal who look more willing to go for it than at any point over the past four months. How couldn't they

when you consider the boosts that Arteta's side have enjoyed over the past week alone? There was first the revitalising nature of the sweeping 3-0 win over Fulham. There was then City's draw at Everton. And then there was qualification for the greatest game in club football, and all the euphoria arising from that.



Bukayo Saka's penalty ensured Arsenal beat West Ham 2-0 when the sides met in north London (PA)

That is a lot of good feeling in the space of five days, after weeks of angst. Arsenal will surely be on a wave.

It helps that Myles Lewis-Skelly has restored badly needed positive energy in what might be an inspired return. The teenager only adds to Arsenal's multiple options, with so many injured players returning. There's even the psychological security – incredible though it may sound – of having club football's greatest prize, the Champions League, as a "bonus".

It all looks so good for them. But that can also be precisely the moment when it goes bad, where teams get too settled.

That wave can break. If West Ham do dig in, can the old frustration quickly return? Can Nuno exploit that? Can the very meaning of the title take over again?

There's so much at play here because there's so much on the line. Even the Premier League has seen little like it.

West Ham United vs Arsenal, kick-off 4.30pm, is on Sky Sports

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Sport

Sports news in brief



Marlie Packer scored four tries in England's big win over Italy in Parma (Shutterstock)

Packer stars as England thrash Italy in Women's Six Nations

A four-try haul by Marlie Packer helped England hammer Italy 61-33 in their latest Women's Six Nations thrashing to record a 37th consecutive Test victory. England secured a bonus point inside 14 minutes at Parma's Stadio Sergio Lanfranchi, but John Mitchell's world champions were pushed afterwards and only held a 40-19 lead at the break. Packer added to her first-half brace with two more scores after the interval in a superb individual display.

The home side needed only four minutes to break the deadlock when Packer touched down Zoe Harrison's kick. Amy Cokayne grabbed the first of a double five minutes later before Helena Rowland spotted a gap and raced over. When Mia Venner grabbed a fourth try for the visitors in the 14th minute to put England 26-0 up, Italy looked set for a long afternoon, but they responded with aplomb. Vittoria Vecchini got Italy on the board three minutes later before a penalty try for the hosts was followed by an Alissa Ranuccini score.

Packer had grabbed her second by this point, and Burton got England off the mark after half time. It was followed by two more Packer tries, with Harrison able to add the extras in a 16-point haul, but Italy replacement Francesca Sgorbini went over in the 56th minute before she grabbed another on the stroke of full-time to help the hosts win the final quarter

France ran in 11 tries in a 69-28 defeat of Scotland at Hive Stadium, Edinburgh, earning the bonus-point win that sets up next Sunday's grand slam showdown between the competition's two unbeaten teams in Bordeaux. A brace of tries from No 8 Aoife Wafer helped Ireland leapfrog Italy into third place, thanks to a 33-12 win over Wales at Affidea Stadium, Belfast. *PA*

Rayan boosts Cherries' Champions League dreams

Bournemouth took a giant stride towards qualifying for Europe for the first time as Rayan's second-half strike earned a 1-0 win against Fulham that extended their unbeaten Premier League run to an incredible 16 games. An otherwise unremarkable match took a turn for the bizarre late in the first half when both teams had a player sent off for violent conduct a few minutes apart. Ryan Christie was first to be dismissed for landing his studs on the ankle of Timothy Castagne, and before Fulham had a chance to make their advantage pay, Joachim Andersen launched into a similarly reckless challenge on Adrien Truffert and saw red.

Brazilian teenager Rayan's fifth goal for Bournemouth, hammered home in the 53rd minute, sealed it, and Andoni

Iraola's side know victories in their final two games will guarantee at least a place in the Europa League, with the Champions League still a possibility.

Brighton also got their European push back on track by flying out of the blocks en route to beating relegated Wolves 3-0. Jack Hinshelwood headed home inside 35 seconds to register Albion's fastest Premier League goal, before captain Lewis Dunk marked his return to the starting XI by nodding in the second just four minutes later. Yankuba Minteh completed the scoring late on as Seagulls head coach Fabian Hurzeler celebrated his new three-year contract in style with a comfortable win.

Meanwhile, Manchester United and Sunderland shared the spoils in a goalless stalemate at the Stadium of Light. Lutsharel Geertruida hit the post for the Black Cats and United went close at the death when Matheus Cunha's strike was saved, but the game fizzled out into a draw that at least keeps Michael Carrick's side unbeaten in their last four league outings, having already secured Champions League football for next season.

Eckert storms out of press conference after 'spygate' grilling

Southampton manager Tonda Eckert abruptly ended his post-match press conference, walking out after repeatedly refusing to address questions regarding the "spygate" controversy that has overshadowed the Championship play-off semi-final. The incident followed a tense 0-0 draw against Middlesbrough in the first leg, leaving the tie finely poised for Tuesday's decisive second leg at St Mary's.

The Saints were formally charged with breaching EFL regulations on the eve of the match, after Middlesbrough accused a member of Southampton's staff of illicitly observing their training session before making a swift departure. This furore appeared to galvanise Middlesbrough, who started with intensity at a vibrant Riverside Stadium, creating 17 first-half chances, the best falling to Tommy Conway. Southampton eventually found their footing and came close to breaking the deadlock when Taylor Harwood-Bellis hit the crossbar late on.

Reflecting on the match, Eckert stated: “We are at half time now. I think especially if you go away on the first leg, you know that there are some energy that you need to come up against, especially at the beginning of the game. I think the boys have done that in an outstanding manner and then we have two big [chances] towards the end to win it, so, yeah, we’re half time now and take it into Tuesday.”

Despite the match analysis, reporters persistently pressed Eckert on the pre-match controversy. After seven minutes of continued questioning, and an intervention from Southampton’s communications director, the German ultimately departed the conference.

Pope blesses Serie A champions Inter

Newly crowned Serie A champion Inter Milan received a blessing from Pope Leo XIV yesterday. The players, staff and directors had a private audience with Leo at the Vatican before Inter’s 3-0 win over Lazio in Rome. Inter secured the Italian title last Sunday with a 2-0 victory over visiting Parma with three rounds remaining.

“This is undoubtedly a moment of great joy for you all, and I am delighted to share in it,” the pontiff said. “While I congratulate you, I invite you to reflect on the experience you have had, so that in this moment of success you may become bearers of a message that is particularly useful for the growth of young people.”

Leo reminded the players that many youngsters look to them as their “heroes” and urged them to keep that responsibility in mind. “I would like to emphasize this, because young people today truly need role models, and what you do has an impact, which can be positive or negative, on the life of the young,” Leo added. “And so, I would really like to leave you with this thought of the great responsibility you bear.” Inter president Giuseppe Marotta presented Leo with a personalised No 10 Inter shirt bearing the name LEONE XIV. *AP*

Cirstea stuns top seed Sabalenka at Italian Open

Sorana Cirstea shocked top seed Aryna Sabalenka, beating her 2-6, 6-3, 7-5 in their third-round clash at the Italian Open. The 36-year-old Romanian, who will retire later this year, beat a world No 1 for the first time. “I’m very happy with the win. I thought I played really well today. I’m working really, really hard. It’s nice to have this result as payoff. Maybe if I win the tournament, I promise I will think about [not retiring],” joked Cirstea, who has won four singles WTA titles.

Four-time grand slam winner Sabalenka seemed to be struggling with an injury as the match progressed, and took a medical timeout when Cirstea was leading the third set 4-3. Cirstea won the next game, but Sabalenka fought back to make it 5-5. But Cirstea broke again to serve for the match. It was Cirstea’s second victory over Sabalenka in four meetings, having also prevailed in Miami in 2023, the first time they played each other. *AP*

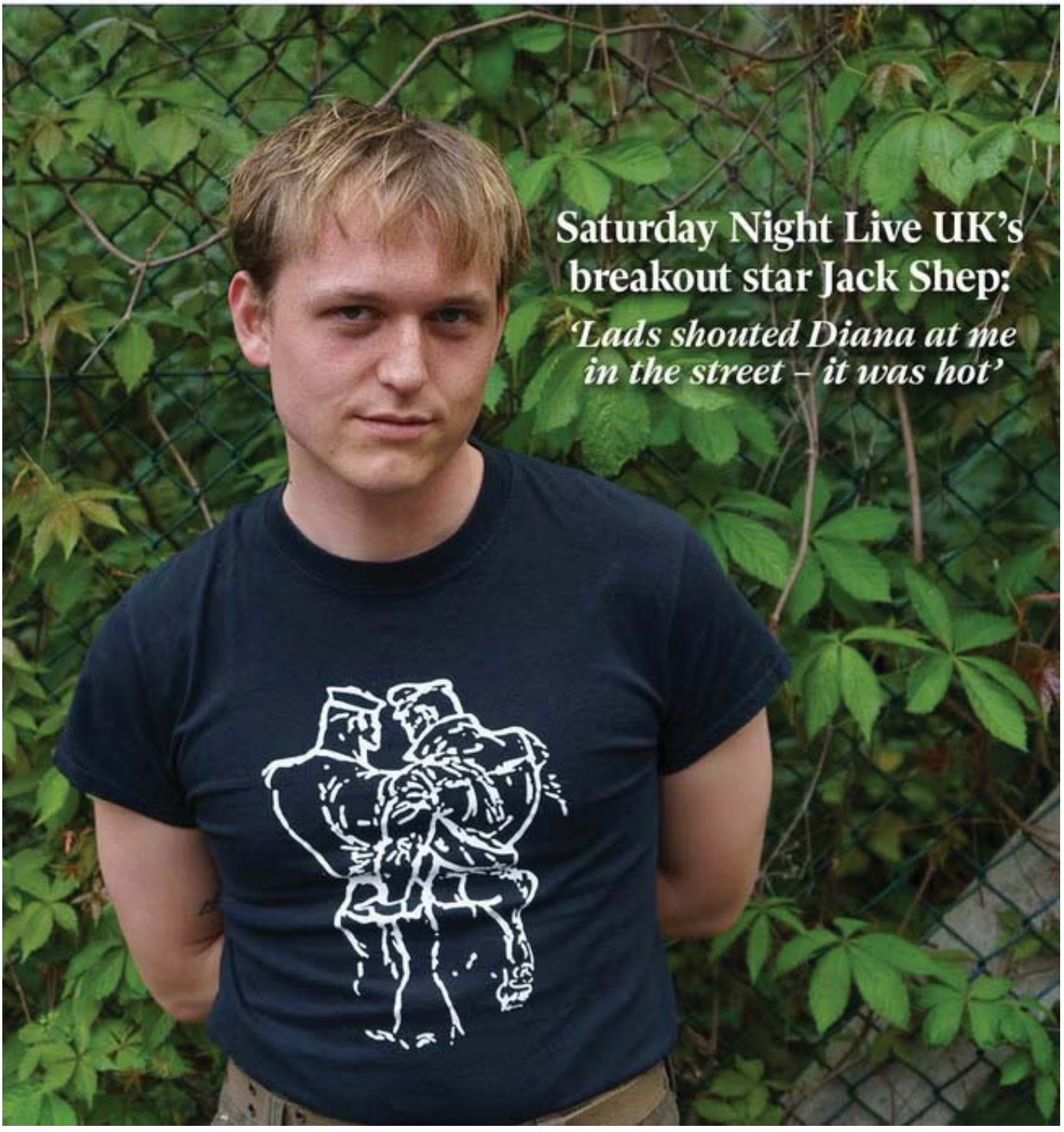
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INDEPENDENT

10 MAY 2026

THE NEW REVIEW

SUNDAY'S NEWS FEATURES, INTERVIEWS, CULTURE AND TELEVISION



Saturday Night Live UK's breakout star Jack Shep:

'Lads shouted Diana at me in the street – it was hot'

‘Di would 100 per cent be doing the reality TV circuit’

Jack Shep, the breakout comic on ‘Saturday Night Live UK’, tells **Lauren Morris** about royal-inspired newfound fame, his football coaching career, and his thoughts on Keir Starmer



To Di for: ‘I had mentioned that I could do Princess Diana but in a silly, non-committal way’ (Photos Sky UK)

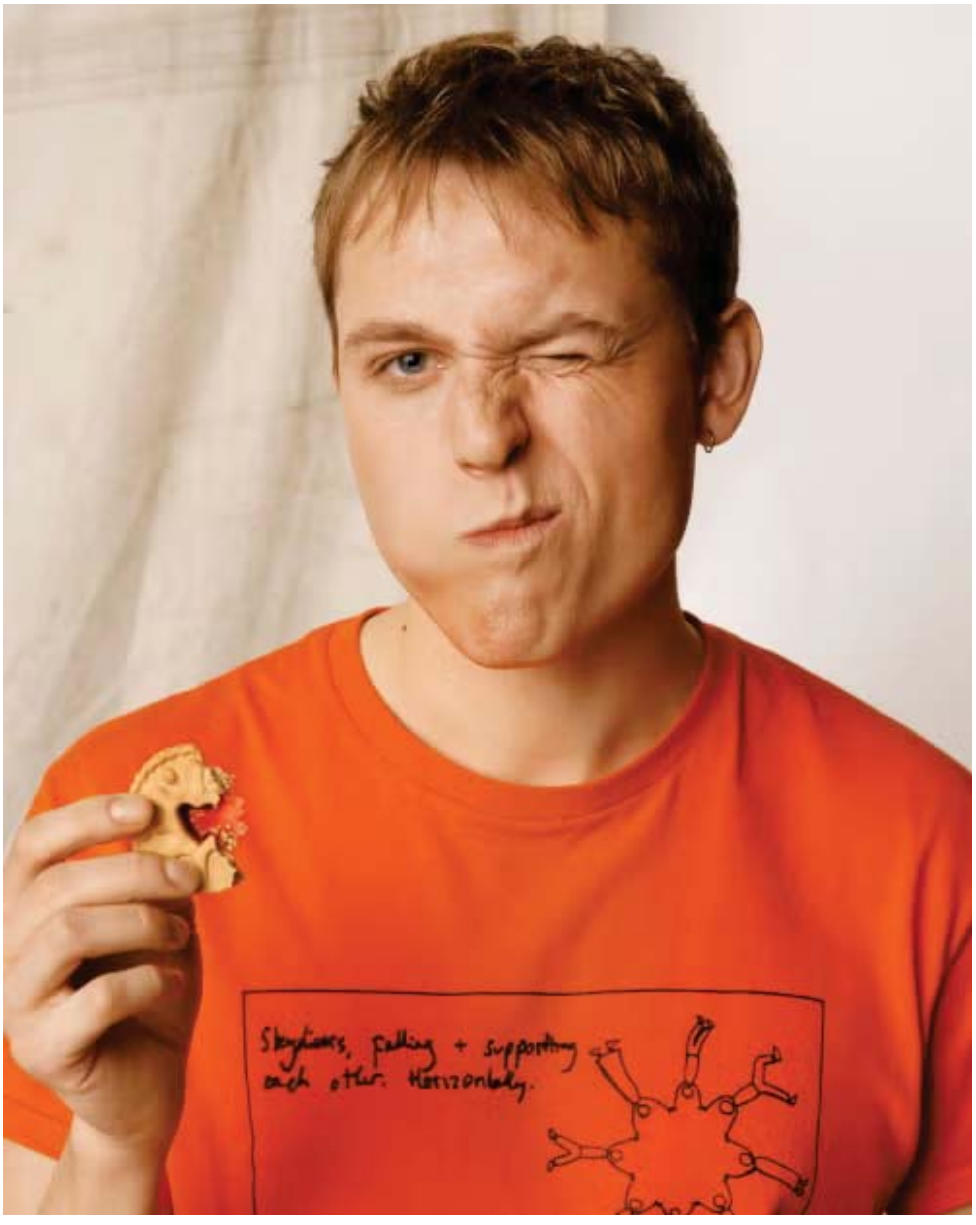
Shortly after Jack Shep made his debut as one of the first ever cast members on *Saturday Night Live UK*, his face – albeit in full Princess Diana drag – was everywhere.

Shep's coquettish take on the late royal, complete with blonde bouffant and uncanny head tilt, became the show's first viral meme, his doe-eyed look down the barrel of the camera quickly becoming *the* image of the burgeoning *SNL UK*. Sky even capitalised on Shep's moment by rolling out promotional posters of the moment across London Tube stations. In the days after the premiere, he quite literally became the people's princess.

"A group of lads shouted 'Diana!' at me in the street. They were like, 'Wheyyy, Dianaaa!'" Shep tells me, slipping into a blokeish imitation of these unlikely fans before going back to speaking with his distinctive London-esque vocal fry. "I was tucking my hair behind my ear. That was fun – and hot."

Shep was one of the lesser-known cast members within its lineup of up-and-comers – finding TikTok success with his observational, Gen Z-focused sketches and bit parts on *One Day* and *Big Boys*. That immediately changed after the first episode. With his infectious grin, giddy energy and Zoomer-esque mannerisms, Shep is a true scene-stealer and a certified *SNL* breakout star.

Aside from Diana, we've seen the 26-year-old play a blood-splattered waiter, a rowdy Brit abroad, a giant dormouse and the royal formerly known as Prince Andrew on the Sky show, but on the mild Wednesday morning in April we meet, he's just Jack Shep – effortlessly and intimidatingly cool, funny (obviously) and surprisingly more reserved than his cheeky onscreen persona.



‘We were so nervous about how the show would be received because we wanted people to like it, and obviously, people were very sceptical’

Wearing a sky-blue jumper and a small hoop earring in his left ear, Shep is exhausted after several weeks of relentless sketch-making. Having watched them myself at a dress rehearsal in April – frantically dashing between stages, glueing wigs, and assembling sets just seconds before a sketch – I can attest that the hiatus is well deserved.

“I’m really loving it,” Shep smiles, iced latte in hand, as we chat in a busy coffee shop by London Bridge. “It’s obviously mental and really exhausting, but I think we’re all having the best time. It’s so amazing to get to do sketch comedy at all – but on this scale, it’s a ridiculous honour.”

With a format borrowed from its American original – which has become the ultimate comedian-to-Hollywood-star pipeline over the past five decades, launching the careers of Will Ferrell, Eddie Murphy and Amy Poehler, among others – *SNL UK* is arguably the biggest sketch show that Britain has ever seen. Each episode reportedly costs £2m to make, with the cast and crew given just six days to create a live 75-minute show, tailor-made to that week's celebrity host (so far they've had Nicola Coughlan, Jamie Dornan, Aimee Lou Wood, Riz Ahmed, Jack Whitehall and US star Tina Fey).

Considering all of that – plus the US show's legacy and the British public's default cynicism – Shep admits they were all feeling the pressure ahead of that first show. "Obviously, it goes without saying, we were so nervous," he says. "Nervous about how the show would be received because we wanted people to like it and obviously, people were very sceptical. Our best-case scenario was just that people enjoyed it.

"Our expectations were low about the reaction and the idea that people would engage with an impression or a particular sketch – we had to walk before we could run in that regard."



Shep as 'an adorable little dormouse' on 'SNL UK'

As sketch shows go, *SNL UK* has received a warm reception. Much like a karaoke night out, not every performance is a banger, and some definitely go on too long, but everyone

watching is pleased it's finally happening and having a lot of fun – which was also the general consensus from critics.

Shep's breakout moment as the shifty-eyed princess was a last-minute addition to the first show – with producers knowing he had it in his impressions arsenal.

"I had mentioned that I could do Princess Diana but in a silly, non-committal way," Shep says. "In my audition tape, I did her as if she was a guest judge on a reality TV show – because my theory is that if she were alive, God rest her soul, she would 100 per cent be doing the reality TV circuit.

"I'm sorry, but her ass would 1,000 per cent be a guest judge on *Drag Race*. She would be doing *Bake Off*, *Celebrity Traitors*. She'd be hosting a segment of *Comic Relief*. You know that ON brand that Zendaya works with? She'd be doing something with them."

Since the show's premiere in March, Shep has been enjoying the perks of rising stardom. He stopped by Nick Grimshaw's 6 Music breakfast show with co-star Ania Magliano ("A dream come true, I love Radio 6 more than anything in my life") and picked up a few celebrity followers ("I got followed by Harry Hill on Instagram the other day – he's a legend in my house").

It also meant that he ended up being shared to Donald Trump's 12.6 million followers on Truth Social, with the US president reposting *SNL UK's* first sketch parodying Starmer after it aired. In the skit, Starmer (played as a limb-flailing, muppet-like wimp by the impressive George Fouracres) frets over telling Trump he won't be sending ships to the Strait of Hormuz and brings in a Gen Z adviser (Shep) to help him.

It never stops being difficult in comedy. You can have an amazing five years and then never work again. That's just how the industry goes

How did he feel about the sketch having been seen and liked by such a controversial world leader? Shep pauses, having just been picking at a dauntingly large acai bowl. "Obviously, I'm really not a fan of him but I suppose it says a lot about our current administration that my gay ass and Donald damn Trump both think Keir Starmer is a wet fish," he responds. "Yeah, it was definitely really, really surreal. Like, what the fuck was that about? It still doesn't really feel like it's real."

Strange moments like this are the reason Shep spends his Sundays – the cast and crew's one day off – away from his phone. "We were talking about it at work and it's a thing where, to quote [singer and social media star] Addison Rae, 'Fame Is A Gun'," he says in his trademark ironic way, with pursed lips and raised eyebrows. "Your phone really feels like a loaded gun because you want to hold it and make sure it's not going to go off, but also, it might go off?

"So on Sundays, I typically get coffee with friends, then get a pint with friends and then have a Chinese with friends. I put my phone in a bin and I drink beer, then coffee, and I yo-yo between.

"My fear of putting the phone in the bin is if there's a family emergency or like, if a famous, incredibly powerful politician reshares something you're in, for example – and you're not on

your phone to process that and deal with that in the moment," he says in his characteristically deadpan manner.

While Shep can't wait to get off the internet these days, he has it to thank for his comedy career taking off. Born and raised in Bedfordshire, Shep always knew he wanted to do something creative in life, having been "quite annoying" and a "funny dweeb" at school. After being "deeply closeted for a hilariously long time", Shep came out in his late teens, went to King's College London for a film studies degree and started doing "this horrible little thing called improv comedy for a laugh". During the pandemic, the comic was convinced to start uploading TikToks by a friend, and his videos took off; he's since racked up 7.5 million likes and nearly 89,000 followers.



Make 'em laugh: the cast of 'Saturday Night Live UK' pull it together

"That was basically how I 'made a name for myself', in air quotes, because people knew who I was from the odd video," he explains. "For a lot of people, that's their way in now – which is slightly depressing but maybe also really good and democratic?" Shep says, his voice going up. "You decide. #YouDecide. #ReadersOfTheIndyYouDecide."

A stand-up comedian by night, Shep had a very different job during the day – a football coach for kids under five. "That was my job, and then I would do the odd acting job, the odd comedy gig, the odd writing job. For the past two years, 60 per cent of

my income and life was football coaching, and the other 40 per cent was comedy stuff.

“These were massively dinky kids. It was more like, ‘Don’t eat the ball’ and ‘it’s football, not handball’, that kind of thing. I really loved it and I miss it, but five years is a long time to be coaching football.”

One hundred per cent of Shep’s income may be coming from comedy now, thanks to *SNL UK*, but he’s not resting on his laurels. He’s yet to have job offers roll off the back of the sketch show – although he’ll be appearing in Channel 4 sitcom *Break Clause* with Lara Ricote and Samuel Bottomley later this year. “I really just want to work,” he says sincerely. “We’ll see what happens with this show and after. It’s a wet answer, I know, but I think it’s true that it never stops being difficult in comedy.

“You can have an amazing five years and then never work again. That’s just how the industry goes.”

But with *SNL UK* officially returning for a second series and the comedy industry seemingly booming with shows like *Last One Laughing UK* becoming word-of-mouth hits, there’s a lot to feel optimistic about. “It never fails to amaze me how much people love comedy,” he grins. “People really have such an appetite for it, especially stuff that’s quite light. People love to laugh. It’s nice to see that people are realising that again, and to see more comedy that feels quite surreal and fringe and more minority voices being championed.”



Comic relief: Shep with Annabel Marlow on the sketch show

On the other side of the spectrum, “anti-woke” comics are also on the rise, decrying cancellation by the left while also riding high on Netflix’s streaming charts. In April, Stewart Lee suggested that “there’s a positive financial value” to comedians being politically incorrect, adding: “If they create offence, it creates interest.”

For Shep, nothing is “off limits” – but it has to be funny. “I think that women and people of colour and queer people are really patronised by a lot of edge lords and vitriolic male comedians, but actually marginalised people have a massive capacity for satire and dark humour,” he says. “There just has to be a joke. No one’s saying you can’t make jokes about gay people. There just has to actually be a joke, and there never is. If there is, I’ll laugh! We have a conversation on our show a lot in regards to what to make sketches about, like topical things, and there just has to be a joke.

“That’s how I feel about that kind of you-can’t-say-anything-these-days comics. You can, but what you’re saying isn’t comedy. People are so defensive of their ability to just say random shit. Say it, girl! No one cares, but in the same way that you’re allowed to say that, people should be allowed to hold discourse and criticism about the things they say.”

SNL UK will be back next week, with Ncuti Gatwa hosting the final episode in the series, and we'll have to stay tuned to see whether Shep resurrects Diana. "We'll have to have a reason," he says coyly. "I'll see if one comes up." But after his star turn on the Sky series, there's no doubt that Shep's comedy reign is only just beginning.

The 'Saturday Night Live UK' finale will take place on Saturday 16 May at 10pm on Sky and Now TV

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A drama written ‘in a state of almost perpetual anger’

Katie Rosseinsky speaks to the writer of ‘Believe Me’, the TV series exploring the shameful way John Worboys’s victims have been treated, among them a teenage Carrie Johnson



Johnson is thought to have lobbied to overturn the decision on Worboys’s release (PA)

On a summer evening in 2007, 19-year-old student Carrie Symonds was waiting for a night bus after going out with friends on the King’s Road in Chelsea. A black cab pulled up, and its driver offered to take her home to East Sheen; he lived round there too, he claimed, and would accept just £5 for the fare.

Once she was in the car, the driver told her that he'd just won big at the casino and invited her to raise a glass of champagne to celebrate. When he wasn't looking, she poured it onto the floor, fearing it might be spiked. Later, he persuaded her to drink a shot of vodka; feeling indebted for the cheap cab ride, she agreed.

From that point on, she couldn't remember much, but according to her mum, she could barely walk when she arrived home. Months later, she would read about the case of John Worboys, the "black cab rapist" accused of drugging female passengers with spiked champagne then attacking them.

"I will never truly know for sure what happened after he drugged me," Symonds, who is now known as Carrie Johnson, the wife of former prime minister Boris, wrote of her ordeal in 2018, having waived her anonymity as a victim. It's a sentence that will send a chill down any woman's spine.

Carrie's story – and the eerily similar experiences of more than 100 women who Worboys is believed to have targeted – is yet another horrifying reminder that for women, the simple act of trying to get home at night remains fraught with danger. "I had always been told that minicabs were dangerous but black cabs were safe," Johnson later recalled. "I'm sure that's the only reason Worboys ever became a cabbie."



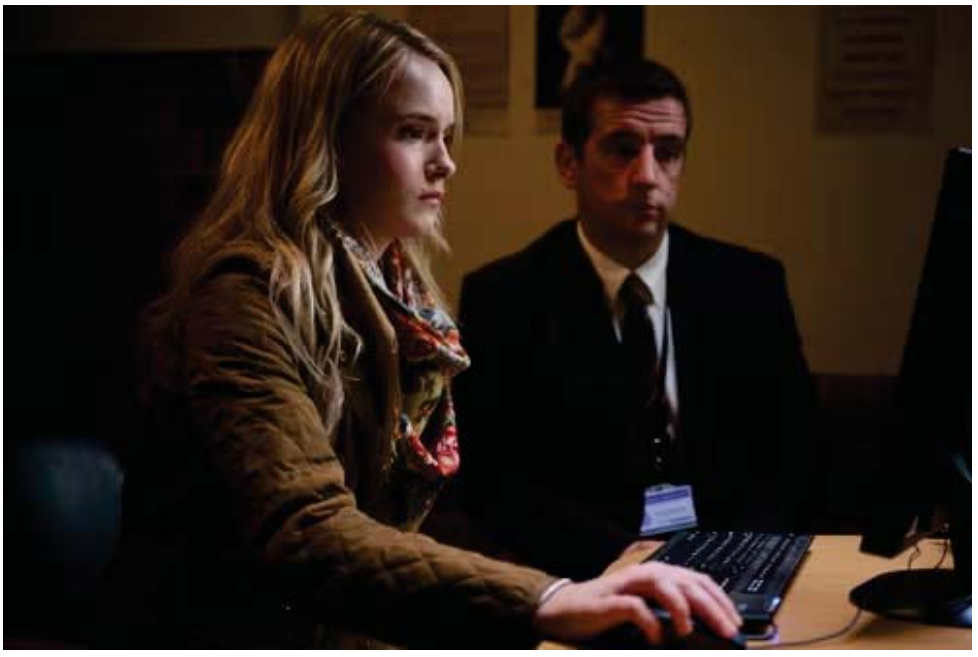
Worboys, known as the ‘black cab rapist’, is serving a life sentence (Metropolitan Police)

About 10 years after the incident, with Johnson now a high-flier in the Conservative Party’s press team, she would go on to play a crucial role in the successful campaign to overturn the Parole Board’s decision to release Worboys from jail, as the initial verdict sparked major outcry from the public.

“I think her story is: watch out what you do to the girl, because the woman will come back and haunt you,” says Jeff Pope, the Bafta-winning screenwriter whose new ITV show *Believe Me* tells the story of how Worboys’s victims struggled to be taken seriously by the police. “A number of years later, she’s a powerful woman who knows exactly how to marshal the forces needed to keep him in prison.”

Pope’s drama is deeply frustrating but necessary viewing. He did not want to turn this story into “some kind of dark thriller about whether the police will catch [Worboys]”, who is played on screen by Daniel Mays. Instead, he focused on how the victims were failed at almost every turn by the systems that were supposed to protect them.

As well as telling Carrie’s story, with *Industry*’s Miriam Petche playing her, it also focuses on two victims, Sarah (played by *Slow Horses* star Aimée-Ffion Edwards) and Laila (Aasiya Shah). The victims’ names – and elements of their stories – have been changed to protect their identities, but the judgement and dismissal that these characters receive from the police are based on real testimonies and Pope’s extensive discussions with the women themselves. “I spent many months writing it in a state of almost perpetual anger,” he says.



Miriam Petche as Carrie Symonds in the new drama (ITV)

It was when the campaign to prevent Worboys's early release kicked off in 2018 that Pope first began to believe that the story could work as a drama. He spoke to Symonds back then – "this was pre-Boris, that's how long ago it was". And when he picked up the project years later, he visited her at the Johnsons' home in Oxfordshire. "She gave me as much time as she could, and we've had lots of sessions thereafter," Pope says. "She's been incredibly supportive."

When the first look at the series was released earlier this year, Johnson said that she hopes it will serve as "a wake-up call to the police, the Crown Prosecution Service and the parole board", noting that "far too often, women and girls are failed by the very institutions meant to protect them". The way Worboys's victims were treated, she added, "was truly shameful". *The Independent* has contacted Johnson for further comment.

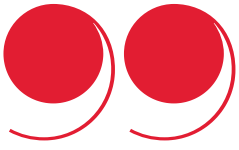
The first reports of attacks and odd behaviour later linked to Worboys were made as early as 2002. As time went on, the stories piled up, each following a similar pattern. A woman would be picked up by Worboys in his taxi; he would claim to have just won some money at the casino or on the lottery, and invite his passenger to have a drink to celebrate. The drink, though, would be laced with the insomnia medication temazepam to try to incapacitate the victim.

It took years for the police to notice a pattern. Worboys was initially arrested in 2007, but was released without being charged; the victim later told *The Guardian* that she was "not believed" and had been "talked down to" by police officers, "as if it was my fault, as if I was the criminal, and I just felt they didn't take me seriously".



She didn't realise that could happen, that's how naive she was – then she became head of communications for the Conservative Party

Jeff Pope



The following year, he was charged, and 85 women came forward to share their experiences with the police. Johnson was among them, and she later became one of 14 victims selected to give evidence at the trial. "I was representing a lot of girls who were not going to stand in court," she later told the BBC. "I felt happy with how it went in court. I broke down afterwards."

At the age of just 20, Johnson was also asked to become one of a handful of women impacted who would speak to the press about the case. "I think she had quite a moral imperative," Pope suggests. "She's a very moral person. And so when she was asked, 'would you stand up, put yourself out there and be a face to encourage and inspire more women to come forward?' she said yes."

She made it "very clear", Pope says, that "she thought, 'well, if I don't do it, who will do it?'" But, he adds, "there's no question" that doing so "did put her out there as 'that' girl', connected with

that story". She was inexperienced as to how the media works, and that the quotes she gave to one paper might then be picked up in another magazine. "She didn't realise that could happen, that's how naive she was – then she became head of communications for the Conservative Party".

Worboys pleaded not guilty to all 23 charges brought against him, and his defence argued that he was simply an "oddball" and a "socially inadequate individual"; his interaction with his passengers was played down as "banter". It was an argument that Johnson vehemently disagreed with. "I hate that it's been played down... that he is just a weirdo," she told the BBC. "He is more than a weirdo; he is very, very dangerous."



'Incredibly supportive': Jeff Pope was appreciative of Carrie Johnson's input (Getty)

On 13 March 2009, he was eventually convicted of one count of rape, five sexual assaults, one attempted assault and 12 charges of drugging, receiving a sentence of imprisonment for public protection with the minimum term set at eight years. The following year, the Independent Police Complaints Commission said that lives had been ruined because the police had not taken the case seriously, and the Met admitted that its officers had let victims down.

After the trial, Worboys's victims received written assurances that his indeterminate sentence would "to all intents and

purposes" amount to "a sentence of life imprisonment". But in January 2018, it was revealed that the Parole Board had decided to release him from jail subject to "stringent" licence conditions, following a hearing. Some of his victims learnt of this update from reports in the news, a truly shocking oversight that Pope dramatises in *Believe Me*.

Two victims challenged the decision, and the High Court eventually overturned the board's ruling. In September of that year, Johnson allowed *The Sunday Times* to reprint an anonymous account of her experience with Worboys that had previously been published in January, this time using her name. In it, she spoke of her fear at the prospect of the attacker being freed. "I am genuinely terrified that he is going to come after me," she wrote. "He knows where so many of his victims live. Why should we think he won't?"

Reports suggested that Johnson, by this point the youngest ever director of communications for the Conservative Party, had used her influence with ministers to lobby for a U-turn on the decision. Michael Gove, then the environment secretary as well as a friend and ally of hers, was among those to urge the then justice secretary David Gauke to "do the right thing" regarding the Worboys case.



Daniel Mays portrays Worboys, who was handed two additional life sentences in 2019 (ITV)

Her actions provoked criticism within the party, which seemingly contributed to her decision to step down from her position later that year. “The way she was treated by Tory party bosses over her role in keeping Britain’s most prolific sex attacker behind bars was one reason she was keen to leave her job,” *The Times* alleged.

The media furore around Worboys’s proposed release also prompted four more women to come forward to the police with more allegations. In December 2019, he admitted two charges of administering a drug with the intent to commit rape or indecent assault, and two further charges of administering a substance with the intent to commit a sexual offence. He was then handed two additional life sentences; the court heard that he was “just as dangerous” as he had been when he was first sentenced.

Since then, Johnson has lent her support and profile to the campaign to keep Robert Brown, who killed his wife Joanna Simpson, behind bars, after he was due for automatic early release having served half his jail sentence for manslaughter. Simpson’s family and friends, she said, had described themselves as “feeling like sitting ducks, powerless to do anything”, something which she recognised “from [her] own experience”.

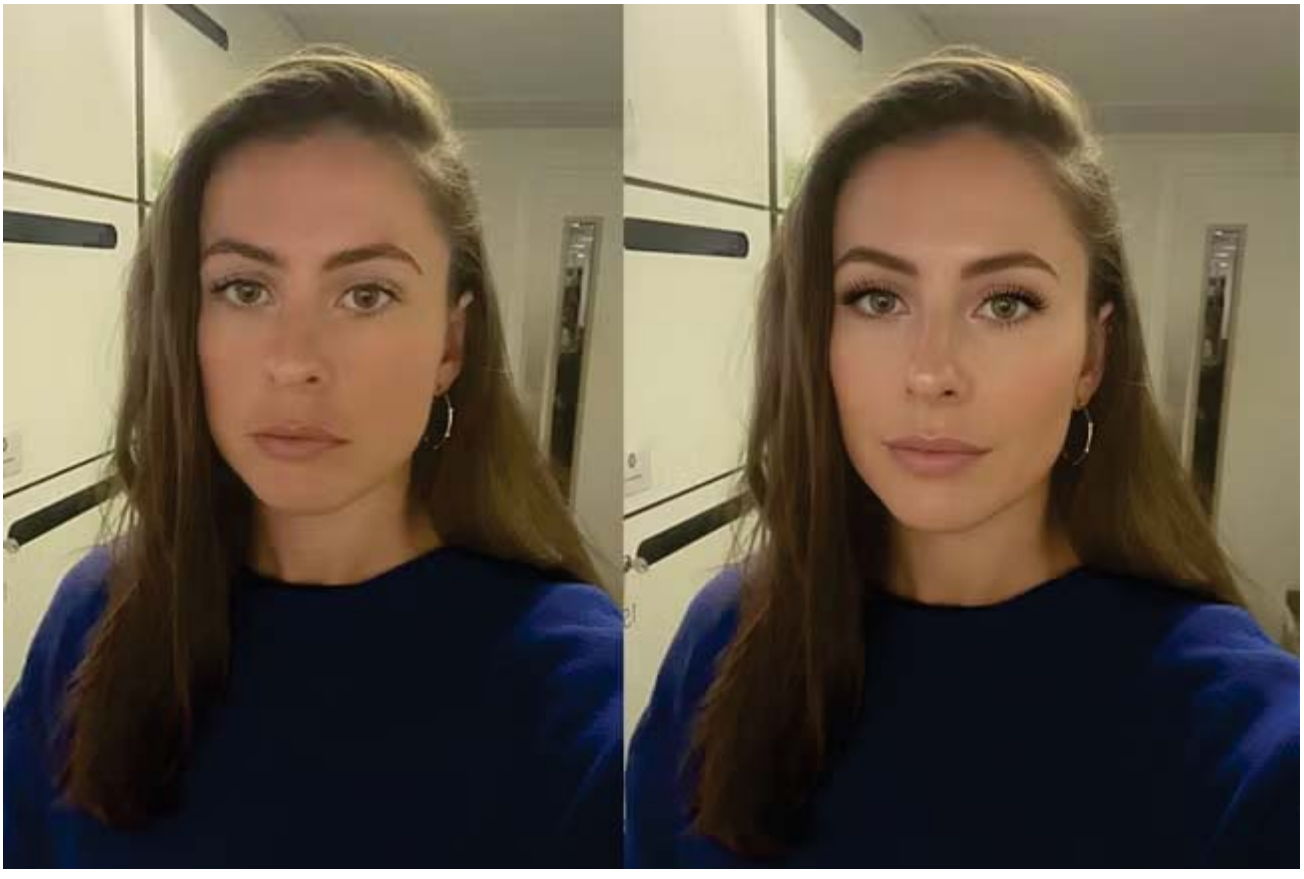
Campaigning against Worboys’s release, she added, had reminded her “that sometimes against all the odds, you can change things. Your voice doesn’t have to go unheard.”

‘Believe Me’ begins tonight at 9pm on ITV1 and ITVX

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How AI's 'Stacey face' is warping beauty standards

As manosphere trends proliferate online, a strict vision of the ideal woman is fast making its way from AI makeover apps into surgeons' offices, as **Lydia Spencer-Elliott** discovers



Before and after: Lydia's results after asking an AI for an 'enhancement' (Lydia Spencer-Elliott/X)

I'm staring at my face, but it doesn't look like me. There's an eerie smoothness to it – like a Barbie doll with human eyes installed. My nose is unnaturally narrow, my lips are puffy and pert. My cheeks are softly sunken, like I've spent weeks refusing to properly eat. If I saw this in the mirror tomorrow, I'd scream.

According to the internet, thanks to some AI enhancement at the hands of Elon Musk's Grok, I'm now a "Stacey" – or a "Stacy" if you're in the US – a term, which originated in manosphere communities online, that denotes the "most attractive" tier of woman with a strict set of attributes, including big eyes, high cheekbones, a low BMI, an upturned nose and full lips. Without those, you're an average "Becky".

Over the past two years or so, this language has trickled into the mainstream internet lexicon. Looksmaxxing hit headlines in relation to young men, like influencer Clavicular (Braden Peters), who promote bone smashing, extreme diets, and chin extensions to reach their maximally chiselled potential. But women are shapeshifting to become Staceys, too.

Eighteen-year-old influencer Alorah Ziva is the self-declared No 1 female looksmaxxer. She has 20 million TikTok likes, close to 250,000 Instagram followers, and offers to teach fans how to follow in her footsteps for $79 (£58) a month. Ziva first rose to fame when she was 16 and appeared on a livestream with Peters, whom she's since alleged to have assaulted her and injected her cheeks with the fat-dissolving drug Aqualyx.

Still, "I want to be considered a Stacey," one woman writes on a Looksmaxxing advice forum on Reddit. "Surgery advice is wanted as well!" she adds. "I wanted more out of life and I know pretty privilege exists. So I decided if I don't like what I got, I will upgrade myself then because I can change myself, I cannot change others."



No 1 female looksmaxxer Alorah Ziva offering fans her secrets – for $79 a month (Instagram @zahloria)

Advice ranges from extreme exercise to hairline-lowering surgery. “The fat is ruining everything,” one person says.

“[Looksmaxxing] in these cultures is seen as a very rational response to generating status and wealth,” reflects Ellen Atlanta, author of *Pixel Flesh: How Toxic Beauty Culture Harms Women*. “Influencers and celebrities have identified this singular face as a route to success,” says Atlanta. “And, clearly, it works. So, it’s quite hard to argue against that.”

Offering your image up to the piranhas of internet forums is, to me, totally terrifying. “The people that do it don’t have a solid, diverse sense of confidence,” says Thomas Midgley, psychotherapist and director of The Body Image Treatment Clinic. “There’s a deficit in their self-worth and they’re looking

for what's aspirational to fill that void. So, the individuals most likely to be affected or connected with this are those who are going to be most vulnerable."

Over on chatroom app Discord, girls as young as 13 and 14 are looking for advice to "ascend" into a Stacey. But even if they don't find it there, they can turn to apps and AI to offer them a glimpse of their "potential" – and a detailed, dangerous manual of how to transform.

For free or a small fee, apps including Umax and Glowdess will generate a 10/10 improved version of you, before linking to products to correct your flaws. But the most efficiently brutal guide I find through the looksmaxxing space is Elon Musk's Grok, which in under five seconds essentially laminates my face and tells me I'd benefit from a subtle nose job, tear-trough filler, mid-face filler and jaw refinement by chewing extra-firm gum daily for a year.



Optimisation: apps like Glowdess offer users a chance to see their 'potential' (Lydia Spencer-Elliott)

"You're a solid 7-7.5/10 naturally, with clear potential to reach an easy 8.5+ with smart, consistent effort," it says alongside the shiny new me.

"I feel like it's made you look older somehow," my housemate tells me when I share the photo. I feel older, wearier, just from consuming its laundry list of my flaws. By the time it's done with me, I need to improve: my acne, my thin lips, my "unsnatched" body, my flat hair, my uncontoured cheeks, my bad posture and my untinted brows. In the photo I submitted, I'm wearing a full face of makeup and recently had Botox.

But the thing with looksmaxxing is, you can never be maxed out. “It doesn’t matter how good you look today. It only works if you’re improving,” says Midgley. “That’s the crux of it.”

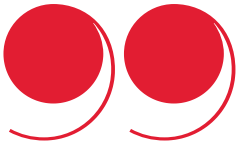
“The industry conquers a different part of you; it starts to find smaller and smaller pieces to break off for you to analyse and decide are wrong,” adds Atlanta. “Girls are worried about their underarms, their chins, their ears – and there is an industry to change those. But it will give you another insecurity to keep making money off of you. There is no end.”

While I close my laptop with a depressed sigh, others are taking these AI images into plastic surgeons’ offices and asking for the works. “It’s a slippery slope because it can turn into a disconnect between reality and AI,” says plastic surgeon Nora Nugent. “You can get pulled into chasing the impossible… we are definitely seeing an increase in those images.”



Research into looksmaxxing is still in its early stages. But we can predict that it will only increase appearance pressures further

Dr Helena Lewis-Smith



Nugent says one client arrived at her practice asking for implants in their chin, cheeks and jaw after an AI told them they needed the procedures. “You’d never give someone that many implants in their face,” she says. “You’d either look like a balloon or totally over-contoured with very exaggerated features. There’s a line where it stops being good and changes into weird.”

Research suggests that individuals who frequently take and post selfies and "self-objectify" by sharing them online report lower body satisfaction, higher levels of anxiety, and lower self-confidence than passive scrollers. "Research into looksmaxxing is still in its early stages," says Dr Helena Lewis-Smith. "But we can predict that it will only increase appearance pressures further."

"The issue that makes us particularly concerned is that these forum users are so young. Their bodies are changing. They're still developing, and so they're extremely vulnerable," she explains.

Not all feedback on looksmaxxing forums about how to become a Stacey is bad – but Lewis-Smith says that doesn't matter. "Even positive reinforcement increases appearance investment and body image concerns," she explains. "We encourage people to shift the focus away from appearance altogether, and rather to see and celebrate individuals for who they are, not what they look like."

This sagacity can, sometimes, develop with age. "A more nuanced wisdom grows later," Midgley reassures. "People don't want to just be known for their looks any more. They want to be more than that." On the cusp of 29, I feel as though I'm starting to feel that kick in, which is one small mercy, at least. There are few forum users over-30 asking for advice, I notice.



Lydia is one of many young people who've had Botox in their twenties (Lydia Spencer-Elliott/The Independent)

Nevertheless, Midgley worries about the lack of restrictions protecting teenagers in the meantime. Once you've lost your self-worth, it can be a long road of therapy to get back.

"Australia and the EU are putting in robust protective factors to manage kids' use of the internet, whereas our government has chosen to prioritise business and AI," he says. "It's a 'wait and see' mentality… are we harming our kids more with this approach? Probably."

Thirty or so years ago, we'd compare ourselves to the hottest person in our village – or, perhaps, the biggest film star. Now, we have several billion filtered faces at our fingertips to choose from. But as everyone clambers to achieve the same Stacey face, ironically, the best thing you can be for your own sanity is average. Or, if you want, a Becky.

Midgley says he most often works with people at either end of the beauty spectrum – either those who were labelled the "pretty" or "athletic" one throughout their life, or those who were labelled the opposite. "Being more average or plain is probably protective to some degree," he says, adding this simplicity probably makes people more likely to "identify and create worth" in character attributes such as humour or kindness.

And with that, I collect up the looksmaxxing apps and hit delete.

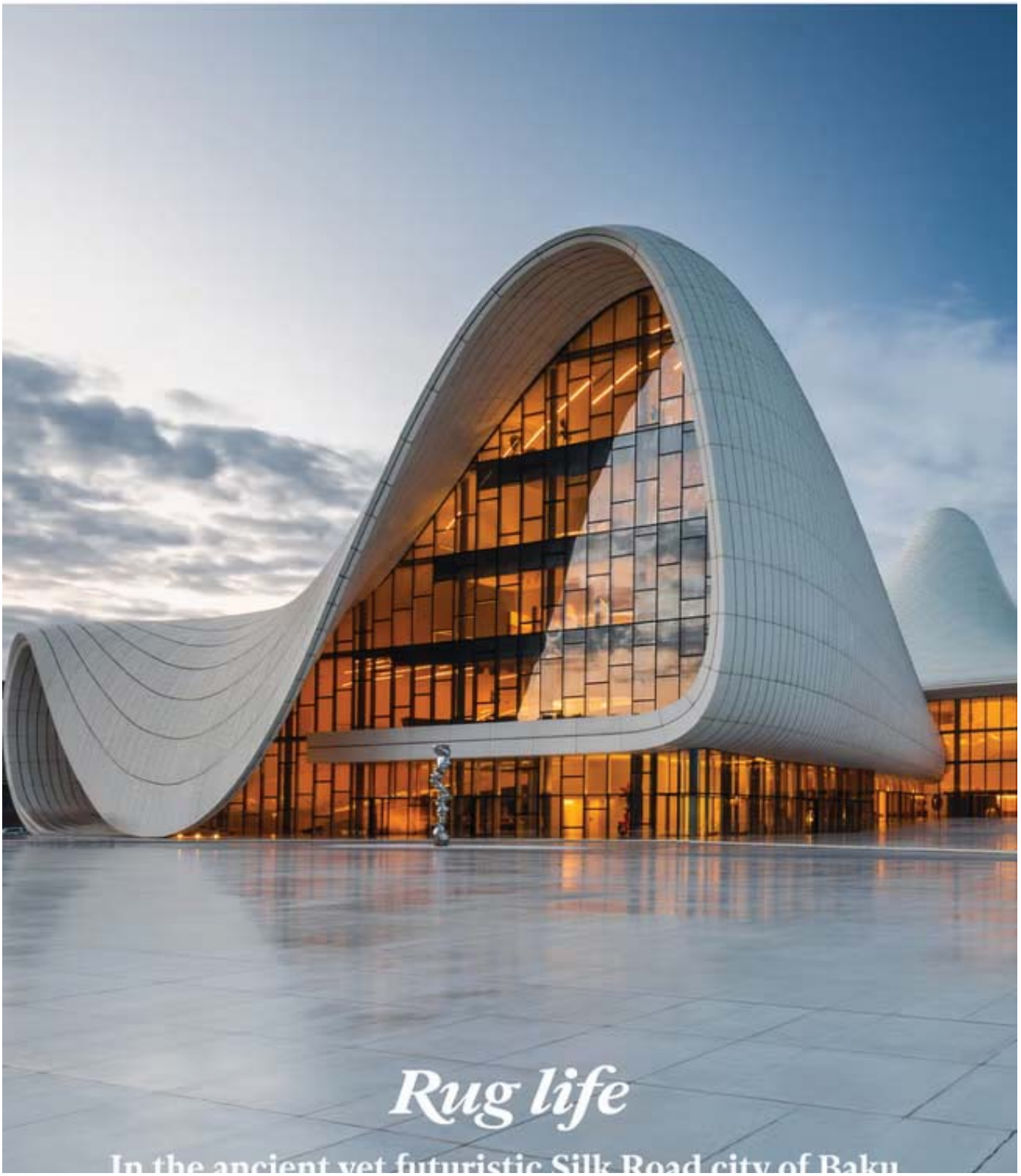
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INDEPENDENT

10 MAY 2026

TRAVELLER

THIS WEEK'S DIGEST OF EXCEPTIONAL JOURNEYS, UNDER-THE-RADAR DESTINATIONS AND THE HOTTEST HOTELS



Rug life

In the ancient yet futuristic Silk Road city of Baku



a celebration of carpets that leaves visitors floored

Why Paris CDG is still the worst airport in Europe

Simon Calder foolishly gave the French hub another chance



Distant dream: the plane waiting at Terminal 2E Zone E04 Gate L31 (Photos Simon Calder)

Three things impressed me about my Air France flight from Paris CDG to London Heathrow on Friday night. The first was the price: booking just five hours before departure, I paid £98. That was £15 cheaper than easyJet to Luton, with the added

bonus of a more generous free cabin baggage allowance and an onboard drink.

Second, checking out of the Schengen area at the airport was a breeze. All the EU entry-exit system kiosks for fingerprinting were switched off; I wonder if the French authorities are possibly anticipating a change of tack on the flawed digital borders scheme by Brussels? Instead, British, American and some other favoured "third-country nationals" are able to pass a quick face-check at the eGates and speed through.

Third, on board the Airbus A220 I was occupying an emergency exit row (which I regret to say did not entirely tally with my allocated seat). A member of cabin crew explained meticulously that I had an important role to play in the event of an emergency. He told me to check carefully it was safe to open the door and demonstrated how to wrestle with the equipment. Then he explained that a slide would pop out of the rear of the wing, which turns out to be an A220 special feature.

Everything else – from trying to reach the airport from central Paris to the unexplained delayed departure – was on a spectrum from disappointing to atrocious.



Would you like a good time, or would you like to be at Paris CDG?

The journey to the airport was at the atrocious end. Normally Charles de Gaulle airport is connected from the city centre every 15 minutes or so by the RER suburban railway from Gare du Nord, taking around half an hour. (The airport express train from Gare de l'Est that was supposed to be ready for the 2024 Olympics may finally open next year.)

But just like the British, the French like to close important railway lines over long weekends. The 8 May Liberation Day public holiday provided an opportunity to sever the main connection to continental Europe's busiest airport.

I got wind of the closure and came up with a plausible plan B: Metro line 5 to its northeastern terminus at the extravagantly named station of Bobigny Pablo Picasso. From here a superfast EX93 bus races along the motorway to the airport. Except when it is *hors service*, "out of service", as it was on Friday – just like the rail connection. Instead, an implausible number of passengers crowded aboard a local bus that crawled along for about half an hour to a stop where a second suburban bus took over for the final leg to the airport. Journey time from central Paris: 75 minutes. But my problems were only just beginning.

My departure terminal was 2E. From where the bus dropped off a squadron of by-now-agitated passengers, signs to terminals 2B, 2C and 2D filled the field of vision. Only with an exploratory mission into 2B did I discover that 2E was indeed part of the airport, and at a brisk walk I would be there in 15 minutes.

This was the location for the surprisingly swift border control. But once on the other side, a helpful airport official looked at my boarding pass with a touch of pity. Tracking down Terminal 2E was only the beginning. I was instructed to travel to "Area E04", which sounded like the European location for the stabling of UFOs. In fact, it is a gateway to two Pluto-like satellites, known as L and M, accessible only by a shuttle train. My flight was shown as L31. A driverless shuttle eventually appeared. From the distance covered, I imagined we had by now crossed into Belgium.



Escape route: AIrbus A220 finally airborne from the airport

The space-age sensation ended abruptly with first contact with the security queue. No shiny new machines here: strictly laptops and liquids out, and a sense of lethargy that doesn't work well in a location with thousands of time-pressed travellers.

No emergencies to deal with, a calm and pleasant flight towards the sunset – and Heathrow Terminal 4. By comparison, this "Cinderella" terminal – cut off from the main part of the airport by a live runway – was a pleasure. I made it from plane to Elizabeth line train in 10 minutes flat.

You may well wonder what sort of fool would put himself through such stress on a journey of 200 miles when less damaging trains are available: I give you the standard on-the-day fare of £215 on Eurostar, even on the unloved final train of the day that arrives at London St Pancras International at 10.30pm. Late-bookers must take their chances. But at least it proved a reminder that if the Air France/KLM organisation gives you a choice of changing planes at Amsterdam Schiphol or Paris CDG, go Dutch.

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I found old-time religion on an art pilgrimage in Spain

As an exhibition on Francisco de Zurbaran opens in London, **Michael Hodges** visits the Andalusia region to see where the Baroque painter's 17th-century masterworks were conceived



A monument to Zurbaran at Plaza de Pilatos in Seville (Getty/iStock)

The day before I arrive in Seville, a bronze decorative urn falls from the top of La Giralda, the famous tower – part 12th-century minaret and part Renaissance campanile, that looms over the city's huge Gothic cathedral. Dislodged by the storms that lashed Andalusia earlier in the year, the lily-shaped urn,

representing the purity of the Virgin Mary, fell 300ft and smashed into the Plaza Virgen de Los Reyes below.

Portentous? Perhaps, but such signs feel appropriate when you're on the trail, as I am, of an artist as devout, brilliant and downright strange as Francisco de Zurbaran. The 17th-century painter and adopted son of Seville, who specialised in visions of monks and martyrs floating out of spectral fog, has a major new show at London's National Gallery opening in May and, to mark it, I'm squeezing in a mini-pilgrimage through Spain's bottom left corner.

Happily, the falling urn didn't injure anyone, but when I arrive near the scene, conscious that there are three more up there, I hurry past the flamenco dancers who have gathered around the plaza's fountain and go into the cathedral. Here I find the chapel of San Pedro, where, above the altar, hangs one of Zurbaran's Immaculate Conceptions. The ascendant Virgin Mary, swathed in a glowing salmon pink robe and dark green cloak and surrounded by clouds of cherubim, floats over a cityscape of Seville as it was in 1630.

"Wow," seems to be the only suitable response.

There will be other enrapturing Zurbaran canvases at the National Gallery, but there is a giddy pleasure in encountering his works where they were conceived and executed.



The National Gallery exhibition of Zurbaran's work includes 'The Surrender of Seville', 1629 (The National Gallery)

Later, by the Guadalquivir River, I find one of the buildings portrayed in the cathedral's *Immaculate Conception*, the 13th-century Torre del Oro, built during the Almohad Caliphate. Then, at the Museum of Fine Arts on Seville's Plaza del Museo, I'm pulled up short by a Zurbaran crucifixion. The painter, whose father was a cloth merchant, seems as concerned with the folds of the white loincloth as Christ's suffering.

Four hundred years ago, this gallery was the mother house for the Mercedarian religious order, and now I am able to walk through cloisters where Zurbaran's paintings of their martyrs, now in the upstairs galleries, once hung on the walls. Packed with masterpieces and only €1.50 (£1.30) for entry, it is a calming, contemplative space in a city that has recently navigated deluges, super-heated summers and mass tourism.

Despite all this, Seville remains itself: there are still shellfish bars with a couple of beer pumps and an apparently unending supply of prawns, which is just what I find at the Cervicia la Mar de Fresquita on Calle San Eloy in the Casco Antiguo district to the east of the Guadalquivir.

Nearby in the bar of the historic and rather fabulous Hotel Colon they serve sherry Bloody Marys, a pokey twist on the region's famous fortified wine. The guest suites are themed around Spanish Golden Age painters though, rather than a Zurbaran, a dwarf from Velazquez's *Las Meninas* is reproduced on my door.

I breakfast under the hotel's 1920s stained-glass skylight featuring orange trees and then find the real thing in abundance at the monastery of Santa Maria de la Defension near Jerez de la Frontera. An hour's drive across the open Andalusian plain, this is where Zurbaran painted a series of works for one of the lost wonders of Spanish Baroque art, a floor-to-ceiling altarpiece of gold-gilded wood. Leaving the plain and coming up into rolling downland, the first sight of the monastery is an immense baroque facade of columns and pinnacles, studded with stone figures of Carthusian saints.



Santa Maria de la Defension near Jerez de la Frontera, where Zurbaran painted a series of works for a floor-to-ceiling altarpiece (Getty/iStock)

Inside, I walk through a succession of interlinked cloisters, hidden gardens and chapels that were used as barracks by Napoleon's troops during the Peninsula War, when at least one work on a panel by Zurbaran was burned as firewood.

Now all is quiet, apart from the cry of a hawk and the wind rustling the orange trees. The original altarpiece is lost to history, but the secret chapel behind it remains. No wider than a corridor, this is where monks would have come face-to-face in flickering candlelight with more of Zurbaran's portrayals of Carthusian saints. Today, lighting the way with my mobile, I have a skin-prickling intimation of unseen forces.

Most of Zurbaran's saints from this chapel survived and are in the Museo de Cadiz, half an hour's drive away. The city sits on a small section of land bound by water that was once approached by an isthmus, but I drive over at an elevation of 69 metres on the huge La Pepa suspension bridge. From up here, you look across docks and refineries, but come down to earth in the 19th century. The grid of terraces, townhouses and bars and small shops around the Plaza de Mina dates to the 1830s modernisation of the city.

Besides the tropically forested Plaza de Mina, I find the entrance to the Museo de Cadiz and a room full of Zurbaran saints inside. Some of these will be coming to the National Gallery but, wonderful though that establishment is, you can't, as I do, stand immediately outside in the shade of two Giant Indian Fig trees. Not forgetting, of course, to check for teetering urns above.

How to get there

British Airways operates daily flights to Seville from London Heathrow. Flight time is around three hours.

Where to stay

Hotel Colon, a Gran Melia Hotel is ideally located in Seville's Old Town with suites themed around Spanish Golden Age painters.

The Zurbaran show is at the National Gallery until 23 August

Michael's trip was hosted by the Spanish Tourist Board and the Seville Tourist Board

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A magic carpet experience on a weekend break to Baku

A trip to the capital of Azerbaijan allowed **Geordie Greig** to take in one of the Silk Road's most colourful festivals



For one weekend, almost all the streets in the medieval Old Town were covered by hand-woven carpets (International Carpet Festival)

The clinching argument for a long weekend to Baku, Azerbaijan's ancient capital on the Silk Road, was that for one weekend only, almost all the streets in the medieval Old Town would be covered by hand-woven carpets. There would be

hundreds of them, laid head-to-head in a magical mosaic of colour and artful designs.

I also fancifully conjectured that Shakespeare might have been considering the festival when, in *The Tempest,* he poetically extemporised how "the earth's a carpet laid before the sun". Well, Baku certainly took his word literally. The capital was transformed into a giant installation of colourful knots, threads and weaves covering its cobbled streets. Dealers, weavers, stitchers, collectors and historians gathered from 19 nations to debate and celebrate this ancient artistry, as some carpets, we learnt, were first woven more than 2,000 years ago.



The capital was transformed into a giant installation of colourful knots, threads and weaves (International Carpet Festival)

It was an academic forum alongside a place for thousands of visitors to enjoy the festival's dramatic street theatre, surreally coinciding with the Baku marathon, the country's first international race with the full 26-mile course. One artist painted serene faces onto rugs on an easel, next to a pop-up children's football pitch entirely composed of rugs. Earlier in the day, experts from Japan and Nepal pitched arguments about the carpet's role in aiding the GDP of their countries as well as defining their national identity.

This carpet fest was imaginative and startling, mirroring how Baku has redefined itself via its architecture: putting medieval

and modernist masterpieces side by side. This is a country that has deliberately placed art and culture at the centre of its development, latterly funded by its oil fortune. It has given Azerbaijan a standout national identity, distinct from its grey, Soviet-controlled existence before 1991, when Perestroika loosened Russian hegemony. But it is only in the last 25 years that its economy has taken off, combining taste, style and fiscal growth, aided by a formative partnership with BP.

Azerbaijan is certainly more present on the world stage. It straddled the world of petroeconomics and environmental policies when it hosted Cop 29 in 2024. It is now a fixture in the Formula One calendar and hosted the European winter sports championships this year.

Not exactly a magic carpet, but the overnight jet leaving Heathrow at 10pm allows you to arrive in Baku at 6am. Three nights is a perfect amount of time for a taster of the capital. Not only is the carpet museum in Baku the largest in the world, but it is even shaped like a folding rug. It shares the skyline with one of the great masterpieces of modernist architecture: Zaha Hadid's Heydar Aliyev Centre, also designed to look like a surface that has been lifted, folded, and frozen in motion – very similar to the ripples of a carpet, a comparison that is made often. While a carpet is flexible and soft, the building imitates its folds with rigid concrete and steel. It is impossible to overestimate how in Azerbaijan, carpets are a major traditional art form.



The Heydar Aliyev Centre is often compared to a carpet (Getty/iStock)

A weekend is the ideal length of time for walking around the safe and easy city. In Baku, you can go from exploring medieval stone walls straight to futuristic parametric design in under 20 minutes. This walled city is a dense mix of Islamic, Persian and local Shirvan styles, with caravanserais, mosques and narrow lanes. Among the key monuments is the 12th-century Maiden Tower, which is well worth the climb for a panoramic view of the Palace of the Shirvanshahs, a Unesco-listed masterpiece.

Reflecting the oil boom of the early 20th century are landmarks such as the Ismailiyya Palace, a Venetian Gothic revival building, the Azerbaijan State Philharmonic Hall with its Italian Renaissance influence and Baku City Hall, with its Beaux-Arts design. They are demonstrative of a time of optimism, when European architects reshaped the city into a kind of Paris of the East.

Back to the carpet festival, though, where Emin Mammadov was presiding over the affair. He is a dashing entrepreneur and chair of the carpet board, whose turbocharged ambition is to grow the festival, which is now in its third year. Surprise and quality are his watchwords, as modern and ancient swirl together like patterns on a traditional carpet, all contrasting and combining.



A woman weaves at the festival (International Carpet Festival)

“We are inviting the world to see that carpets are the key to understanding art and economies through symbolism and natural displays. We all connect through a vision of creativity and fellowship as we invite the world to join this beautiful celebration of art and artisans and prove the art of the possible,” he explained.

There is talk of expansion and more partnerships for next year’s festival. It might include carpets’ role in Hollywood films, in poetry (Shakespeare has no monopoly) and live debates about the role women play as skilled craft practitioners. There is also discussion of how artists from Holbein to Velasquez were transfixed by the woven wonder of wool and silk. Carpets – red, magic or even flying – have always transfixed the imagination.

In Disney’s *Aladdin*, the magic carpet is a central character, not just a prop. It becomes a symbol of freedom, imagination and movement beyond physical space. In *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, director Wes Anderson builds a world saturated with patterned interiors – especially carpets, wallpapers, and textiles – which reinforce the film’s obsession with design, memory and artificial perfection. There is even an entry into the horror film genre. In *The Shining,* the Overlook Hotel’s geometric carpets are iconic in their own right. Their impossible, maze-like patterns echo the film’s psychological disorientation and hidden spatial logic.

This year, the link between painting and carpets was a key theme. One of the most dramatic revelations was the work of Aida Mahmudova, an acclaimed artist in Baku as well as an alumna of London's Central St Martin's, whose eclectic works combine powerful abstraction and something similar to Frank Auerbach's encrusted, tactile, painted masterpieces.



Aida Mahmudova, an alumna of London's Central St Martin's (Geordie Greig/International Carpet Festival)

Her paintings have a softer palette of colours than Auerbach's, which ripple and engage with a passionate intensity. Her pictures have been made into carpets, cross-fertilising the art forms and spinning a modern twist to this ancient craft. Another highlight is the work of Assel Sabircangizi, or Assol, a Kazakh artist creating stunning portraits by brushing and spraying oil paint onto existing carpets. They make for epic pictures, which reinvent Mughal portraiture for the modern age.

The festival sets out to surprise and steers away from the stereotypical image of endless negotiations with sellers in the souk. This is the moment to see carpets as art and investment, but, most importantly, to alter cliched preconceptions by revealing national and regional identities in carpets.

In the Old City, with its echoes of Prague, it is delightful just to sit back and let the world go by in its maze of labyrinthine streets. Drinking the local wines and vodka in its tiny bars, or trying baklava in a tea room, is heavenly. Spinach and lamb pancakes and glassfuls of tea make enticing fare. Luxury shopping in the new town offers more brands than Bond Street, only cheaper. Value for money is a definite plus.

The advantage of a short visit is that the city is easy, and colourful, and the cultural diet offered ranges from high to low. The only frustration is that there is much more to do – locals will tell you to visit the snow-capped mountains for skiing, to chill

on the sandy beaches, to try the jazz, and lemon, and pomegranate festivals, and also take a road trip. The country boasts nine climate zones, from subtropical to desert to freezing mountain tops.



A modern transformation is taking place in Baku (Getty/iStock)

A modern cultural transformation is still taking place in Baku. One of the key figures is Anar Alakbarov, assistant to the president and executive director of the Heydar Aliyev Foundation.

“Art creates a space for us all to value the past, but to also re-evaluate and enhance the present, which invests in the future. Beauty and a celebration of art has been a way of life here with carpets and ceramics. We learn from that and continue that tradition,” he said, before heading for the coast to take part in the marathon.

Leaving Baku early in the morning, I gazed out from my taxi at the two 21st-century Flame Towers. Nearby are the stone palaces, more than 500 years old. Few would argue with Shakespeare when he celebrated the intrinsic combination of power and passion seen through a carpet – and the impressiveness of a trip to Baku is similarly irrefutable. Is there a more magnificent ice breaker when someone asks me what I got up to at the weekend?

How to do it

Flights to Baku from London Gatwick with Azerbaijan Airlines take around five-and-a-half hours, starting from £375.

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Lancs for the memories

Chris Moss, an expert on underrated Britain, explores the breathtaking landscapes and singular towns of his county



Red rose to the occasion: Chris on Pendle Hill, near Clitheroe (Photos Chris Moss)

Something strange happens when you catch the train from Preston to Barrow-in-Furness. Somewhere north of Carnforth, you start feeling a bit posher, more rural, even slightly twee or fey (no, it's not the *Brief Encounter* effect). You might also sense you're a shade less humorous, a tiny bit less working class perhaps. For, on crossing the River Kent, you enter what, since

1974, has been a twilight zone of geography and identity. Though the towns on the other side – including Grange-over-Sands and Stan Laurel's Ulverston – are still in the Historic County of Lancashire, they are, for many people, in a place called Cumbria, near the Lake District, "up there" where nothing is quite certain.

The borders of historic Lancashire started to really matter to me when I began to do research for a book about my home county. Writing a combined work of history, travelogue and memoir – I wanted a bit of all three – about this great territory, minus Liverpool and Manchester, especially, was unthinkable. Proper Lancashire has more than five million, mainly urban residents; the current county council area, which is largely rural, has less than a third of that. I couldn't give away all those readers – or those two amazing cities.

Moreover, the bit of Lancashire I come from – the village of Burtonwood – was hoofed, along with nearby Warrington, into a dubious, newly enlarged "Cheshire" in 1974. No way was I sacrificing my birthplace. So I set off to beat the bounds there first, walking the Sankey Canal – England's first true canal – from St Helens to Widnes, doing long hikes along the Mersey and Manchester Ship Canal (I am waiting anxiously for the cruises to restart), taking in the World of Glass and the Warrington Academy, which once made the town the "Athens of the North". Then I got busy re-exploring, from all angles, our two big cities.



Coastal charmer: the seaside at Walney Island, Barrow-in-Furness

Many of Liverpool's key heritage sites – and tourist sights – underline its symbiotic, synergistic relationship with Lancashire. The docks where coal and cotton were loaded and unloaded; the beginning of the Leeds-Liverpool Canal, which sweeps through Wigan and Burnley; the East Lancs road, in some respects the only truly new one built since Roman times. Ditto Manchester, which couldn't have become Cottonopolis, with its magnificent mills and warehouses, without the string of textile-manufacturing towns that zigzag up from the city through Bolton and Rochdale to Nelson, Colne and Blackburn; and which tapped the talents of Lancastrians to become the world's greatest post-punk music mecca. The original Station Agent's House, built beside the epoch-making Liverpool and Manchester railway – opened in 1830 – is now an upmarket holiday let. There are red roses, the symbol of the county, on the doorway of the Salford Lads Club, a pilgrimage destination for Smiths fans.

I live near Clitheroe, a town where there's never been a question of where it belongs – well, not since about the 12th century, when Scotland had an eye on it. But even close to here, frontiers become tenuous. The north side of the River Ribble was split between the West Riding (of Yorkshire) and Lancashire, and

after 1974, the latter was theoretically enlarged. In fact, the Forest of Bowland is shared by the neighbouring counties; when the Tour de France powers through next July, the most dramatic parts of the route will be along the famous glacial cleft known as the Trough. A late Victorian boundary marker called the Grey Stone of Trough marks the historic border.

But it's that southern slice of the Lakes that sometimes seems in danger of accepting it is now Westmorland rather than Lancashire. This is sad and wrong, as Coniston Water and the Old Man of Coniston, as well as the Esthwaite Water and the west bank of Lake Windermere, are historically in Lancashire. Counties should never have to give up their highest peaks or biggest bodies of water.



Country boy: Chris at home near the Forest of Bowland

Also, if you stay on that train from Preston all the way to Barrow, on alighting you are left in no doubt that this is a Lancashire town. There is industry, living as well as historical (the excellent Dock Museum recounts the gritty story of iron, shipbuilding and submarines) and leisure is sought mainly on the seaside rather than up on the fells. From Piel Island, I was looking back towards Morecambe's art deco Midland Hotel and Blackpool Tower, not to Wordsworthian pasturelands – though Lancashire has these, too.

What people call a place really matters. When I agreed to start my book tour at the community-owned Book Stop in St Helens, the manager – with no prompting from me – titled the event "Don't Call us Merseyside". A show of hands, from an audience made up of different ages, indicated Lancastrian identity was alive and well. All I can do is implore you to explore the fought-over fringes and blurred edges of Britain's greatest county.

How to do it

East Coast Main Line trains from Glasgow, Edinburgh and London stop in Preston, while trains to Manchester operate from across the country.

Where to stay

The Assheton Arms in quaint Downham has repeatedly been listed as one of the best gastropubs in the country. Aside from its remarkable food (and bucolic setting), it offers well-furnished rooms from £89 per night.

Chris Moss is the author of 'Lancashire: Exploring the Historic County that Made the Modern World'

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Can I get disruption cover for a Sardinia family break?



Our reader is worried that aviation fuel shortages may scupper his holiday (Getty/iStock)

Q My partner, our three children and I are off to Sardinia this summer. We have booked everything separately: flights with easyJet, car rental through Avis and the hotel direct. As a lawyer, I like to address potential problems before they arise. Therefore, with all the talk of disruption this summer, I have been searching for travel insurance that would protect us in the event that we can't reach the island and lose the money for the car and

hotel, or if we get stranded there and have to extend our stay and rental.

I imagined there would be plenty of companies offering such cover, but I can't find anything that matches my needs.

Jenny L

A Let me begin by reminding everyone that easyJet, like its rival airlines, has declared that it fully intends to fly its entire schedule this summer. The carriers say they have assurances from their aviation fuel suppliers that planned flights will be able to operate. But it is still reasonable to ask the question: what happens if our outbound or return flight is cancelled? After all, there is little visibility of the exact aviation fuel supply to the UK beyond June. And, as many thousands of passengers have discovered in recent summers, anything from French air traffic control strikes to severe storms can ground large numbers of aircraft.

Given this backdrop, you might expect travel insurers to be actively marketing cover that will protect you from financial loss in the event of a flight cancellation. They are not, because in such circumstances the airline is squarely responsible for solving the problem created. Outbound, that means finding you a replacement flight (on any carrier) to get you to your destination as close to the original schedule as possible: a routing via mainland Italy would be an obvious solution.

Some policies offer the right to cancel your trip and recoup spending on accommodation etc, if the delay is more than 12 hours – but only if strikes, bad weather or mechanical failure are responsible. Inbound, the airline must find a flight for you and also provide, if required, a hotel and meals. The aim of the air passengers' rights rules is that you should not be significantly financially disadvantaged. Depending on the cause of any cancellation, you could also be eligible for £350 in cash compensation.

Email your question to s@hols.tv or tweet @SimonCalder

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