

The Critical Mass Sunday Socialist

Sunday March 27th 2022

Welcome to the new look Critical Mass Sunday Socialist which will arrive every Sunday with a review of the week's news and our notes from the edge from our team of writers.

Critical Mass has been busy delivering commentary from the left on current events since August and the launch of the mini-magazine is going to provide a valuable addition to your Sunday reading. And the best bit? It's totally free, you don't even have to walk to the newsagents to get it. Just pop in to our website, via the link on Twitter, Facebook or in the email from Susie if you are a subscriber.

Did we mention that subscribers get an email every week from our very own Susie Granic which provides instant links to the magazine, to the Sunday Socialist and to the Socialist Hour podcast. And, like everything we do at Critical Mass, it is free at the point of use.

We are not paid to produce this output and have always regarded it as a way of bringing socialist voices from the edges into our own version of the mainstream. We welcome your input via comments or drop us a line to edgenotes@creatingsocialism.org.

We hope you enjoy issue 1 and that the Critical Mass Sunday Socialist will become essential reading on a Sunday.



I wish there was a socialist alternative to this establishment rubbish

inside this issue

**Rachael Swindon's Sunday threesome,
Notes from the edge starring Fiat Knox, Mike
Stanton and Luke Andreski
The week's biggest news stories in one place**

Sunak Does Nothing To Tackle Crisis

By Mike Stanton

Sunak's proposals yesterday do nothing to tackle the root causes of the cost of living crisis. Remember when the Tories and their media fanboys accused Corbyn of wanting to take us back to the 1970s? The Tories have taken us even further back with the highest tax burden since 1949 and the biggest drop in disposable income since records began in the 1950s.

A Crisis Of Capitalism

This crisis was not caused by Brexit. It was not caused by Covid and it was most definitely not caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Sanctions will drive up prices eventually. But the cost of living crisis began well before the invasion of Ukraine. It is rooted in a crisis of capitalism where profits and dividends have to be protected at all costs and those costs are passed on to us. Of course most of the media ignored this fundamental point in their coverage of the mini budget and focused on the details rather than the bigger picture.

Food

The biggest increase in prices has been in basic foods that figure heavily in the diets of the poor. Jack Monroe drew attention to this and to the reduction in the number of value items on sale in supermarkets. The outcry caused some reversals of this policy but did not stop the upward pressure on prices. Official inflation figures are meaningless for families on low incomes facing double digit percentage increases for their food bills.

Fuel

The hike in gas and oil prices this year is most obviously felt in the doubling of household energy costs. But it drives up all other costs as well. Nitrogen fertilisers are FIVE times more expensive now than last year. And once it's planted, getting a crop from field to plate requires fuel for tractors and other farm machinery, transport and processing costs. Either costs are passed to the consumer or farmers cannot afford to grow as much and shortages translate into higher prices. Either way we lose and the energy giants prosper.

Housing

The property market is broken. Housing benefit subsidises 'market' rents that would be unsustainable without this government handout to landlords. Yet the government insists on measuring inflation using the consumer price index (CPI), which does not include housing costs, instead of the retail price index (RPI). So today's headline rate of 6% should be 8%. This is important because the CPI is used to calculate benefit and pension increases rather than the RPI.

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Speculation

Fuel costs are rising so rapidly because speculators are driving up the price in anticipation of shortages that have not happened yet. Read the financial pages and they tell you that the markets have moved in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Translation: Billionaire investors, our very own oligarchs, see a chance to make massive profits if these shortages materialise. They are doing the same with wheat. They are speculating on crops that have not even been planted yet. So they are literally hedging their bets and gambling on disaster for the rest of us in order to make a killing.

The reality is that their actions are already killing people who cannot afford to pay for the necessities of life. And millions more will follow in the year ahead.

Even before the war the number of people at risk of starvation had risen from 87 million to 276 million. If this year's harvest is disrupted millions more could starve according to the United Nations.

Radical Solutions

I did not expect a Tory Chancellor and one of Britain's wealthy elite to tackle the structural failings of world capitalism. But he was expected to take action to mitigate the effects on UK citizens, especially the poorest.

He was in a good position to do so. Higher than expected tax revenues last year yielded an extra £20 billion for the Exchequer. And there is more to come. Changes to the terms and conditions of student loans should provide another £11 billion. And the doubling of energy prices doubles the government's tax take of VAT on our gas and electricity bills.

So he had plenty of leeway to make radical changes to secure the population against food and fuel poverty. At the very least we should expect energy price caps and food subsidies paid for by a windfall tax on the energy giants.

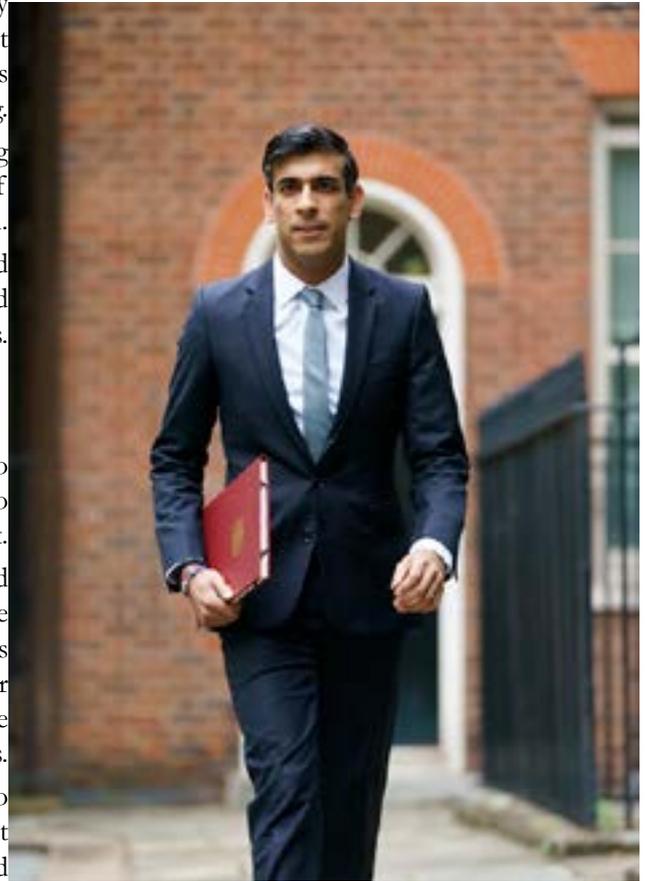
His tax changes do nothing for people on benefits who should have seen the cuts to universal benefit restored. They do nothing for low paid workers reliant on food banks. The cut in petrol duty barely covers the increases that have already happened. Sunak boasts about his NI surcharge paying for improvements to health and social care. The biggest improvement he could make would be to pay a genuine living wage to health and social care workers to lift them out of poverty, and uplift the government grant to local authorities that pays for social care costs.

Tinker, Tailor, Soldier . . . Thief?

But he chose to tinker with the system. Sunak has no understanding of most people's lives, our daily struggle to survive. His was a political decision, not one driven by economic necessity. The war in Ukraine provides the government with an alibi. We are told that we are all in it together. We have to sanction Russia and that will cost us all. The same reasoning will be used to justify increases in military expenditure. Meanwhile, Sunak claims to be a tax cutting chancellor while stealing from us with his NI increase, the graduate tax, and increased VAT returns from energy bills.

Crisis or Crime?

Are we all in it together? I have lived through a fair number of capitalist crises in my time. But this is the first time I can remember a crisis driving profits up. A crisis in which the rich not only do



Chancellor and multimillionaire Rishi Sunak who sees his job as robbing the poor to keep the rich rich

Photo courtesy of <https://www.flickr.com/photos/number10gov/>

not suffer, but are able to increase their wealth while the poor go cold and hungry, is not a crisis, it is a crime against humanity. They are stealing our livelihoods and, in the case of the most vulnerable, they are stealing our lives.



Hello Louise, can I ask, what did Wednesday's Spring Statement from Rishi Sunak mean to you?

As a historian, I used to genuinely fear that the ruthless plutocrats in government might bring back, in some guise, what the Victorian poor called 'Bastilles'- the dreaded workhouses even the starving would do anything to avoid the shame and horror of.

Then Rishi '5p' Sunak - married into one of the country's richest families (yet somehow unaware how or if that wealth connects to Putin) - introduced a budget that doesn't even pretend to help anyone but the rich.

On that same day a 14-year-old boy queueing at a food bank in Earlsfield, London, fainted, hitting his head. It turned out he hadn't eaten for days and the kitchen cupboards in his home were found to be completely bare.

That was when I realised - they aren't even going to bother with workhouses. Quicker to send us straight to the grave.

The only difference is that the Victorians at least had a fighting, socialist Labour Party to look forward to. This is a class war we didn't start, but we have to finish it, and soon.

Dr Louise Raw is an author, historian, activist and fearless anti-fascist.

My old mate Damo, what are you thinking of doing with the extra 5p that you'll save with every litre of fuel thanks to Rishi Sunak's anti-poor spring statement?

What to do with my massive cost of living diesel saving?

Well, for what goes in our motability car of a week it's almost enough for a cheeky Mars Bar, but I'm expecting it to be a one off!

I pass two fuel stations on the school run and this morning I noted that Tesco had reduced the price of diesel by 4p a litre,

denying me a full size choccy bar, forcing me to settle for fun size, which is never fun. However, Texaco had actually put their prices up by 5p a litre, denying me a sugar fix completely and in fact any saving I was promised, the only bonus my family, with 2 disabled people, actually got out of yesterday's statement.

Damien Wiley, better known as Cornish/Kernow Damo, is a presenter on Socialist Telly, a video maker, a political commentator, an unpaid carer, and a committed socialist.

Wren, the cost of living crisis, following Brexit, austerity and Covid, is having a devastating impact on our communities. What should've been in Sunak's spring statement to ease the pressure on millions of struggling households?

I think the most honest and plain answer here is rip it all up and start again. In a world on the tenterhooks of war, still reeling from both Covid and Brexit, it's once again the working class who will take the brunt of this crisis whilst every single catastrophe has been manipulated to ensure the rich get richer. Let's start with that.

During the pandemic we saw Britain's billionaire class grow by around thirty (I haven't checked the stats recently). So, instead of raising NI for millions of impoverished families, let's tax those. Tax wealth of over £100 million and instantly we create £69 billion to help mitigate this crisis. And if they won't nationalise energy in the UK then at least make them pay SOMETHING. Shell paid NOTHING in tax last year, yet boasts £12bn in profit.

Next, the solar panels. Bin. A standard installation is around £6,000, which is okay if you can afford it. Or you're not a renter. Those panels will save you around 15-25% on your bills, which is completely cancelled out by the recent hikes anyways.

Finally just the usual. More affordable social housing or rental controls. Increase benefits to protect the vulnerable. Invest in green energy because for years we have seen this crisis coming and have done nothing.

Wren Waters is a political activist from the North East, a socialist, a writer, a seasoned protestor, and a mother to Bee the cat.

Time to outlaw violence against children

Dave Middleton

This week Wales joined 60 other nations, including Scotland, in banning the physical punishment of children. The law was passed by the Welsh Senedd and is enforceable from Monday.

“The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child makes it clear that children have the right to be protected from harm and from being hurt and this includes physical punishment. That right is now enshrined in Welsh law. No more grey areas. No more ‘defence of reasonable punishment’. That is all in the past. There is no place for physical punishment in a modern Wales.”

First Minister Mark Drakeford

“It is sometimes necessary to smack a child”

Support for the new law has been fairly high, with objectors giving vent to their feelings on social media. In recent research 35% strongly disagreed with the statement ‘It is sometimes necessary to smack a child’, against 27% who strongly agreed. However, these figures hide significant differences amongst different sections of the population.

If we compare the views of carers and non-carers about smacking under 7s (the group most likely to receive physical punishment), some 44% of carers strongly disagreed with the statement compared to 28% of non-carers who strongly agreed. Whilst there are still those who believe it is their right to beat their children (though most would claim that a slap on the bottom hardly counts as beating), it is clear that they are more likely to be people who do not have caring responsibilities for young kids.

The numbers agreeing with physical punishment show a definite age relationship with over 55s far more likely to agree that it is sometimes necessary to smack a child, with 34% strongly agreeing compared to 19% of 16-34 year olds. This relationship is borne out by the comments on some of the news reports (though to be fair the posters aren’t required to give their age, or even their real name).

One poster said “Sad day for our children when you give them control over their parents. Watch out for all the invented tales of woe where the kids get wise to controlling their parents. ‘If I can’t do A B or C, I will report you to the police pretending you smacked me.’ Absolute disaster for families who will lose control of their children and have them removed (regardless of whether the smack took place) and handed over to non-parents, with all the faults in relationships that will bring.”

Out of touch Britain

That there is this kind of debate – and it is a debate which will continue in both England and the USA – reflects on the type of society some people want to live in. It is a society where everything is reduced to a possession. This includes young human beings. And,



Photo by
Tadeusz Lakota
on Unsplash

provided it is your possession, you can do with it as you please.

To realise how out of touch British society is we need to realise that Sweden outlawed physical punishment of children as long ago as 1979. I searched for evidence of children sending their parents to prison, but it appears that most adults there have simply accepted that hitting somebody who is half your size is not appropriate under any circumstances. Not only Sweden but also Germany, Spain, Brazil, Ukraine and New Zealand have full bans on all corporal punishment. According to a large study published in BMJ Open in 2018:

“Countries that prohibit corporal punishment at home and at school have rates of physical fighting among young men and women that are 42 to 69 per cent lower than in countries without any such bans in place...In countries where full bans were in force, the prevalence of physical fighting was 69 per cent lower among young men and 42

per cent lower among young women than it was in countries without any ban.”

British

Medical

Journal

We should not underestimate the scale of the problem. According to the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), almost 300 million, or three-quarters, of the world’s two- to four-year-old children are subjected to psychological abuse, physical punishment, or both by their caregivers at home.

Violence does not work

It is not just that violence begets violence, although it clearly does. This is something all those people calling for more violence in Ukraine might think about. But physical punishment is ineffective and likely to do long-term damage to the recipient. Psychological studies have tended to reach the conclusion that physical punishment of children “may create in the child the impression that he or she is an ‘undesirable person.’”

A YouGov survey published last year found that parents who were physically punished as children are twice as likely to do the same to their own children and that those parents physically punished as children are more likely to think physical punishments improve the behaviour of children.

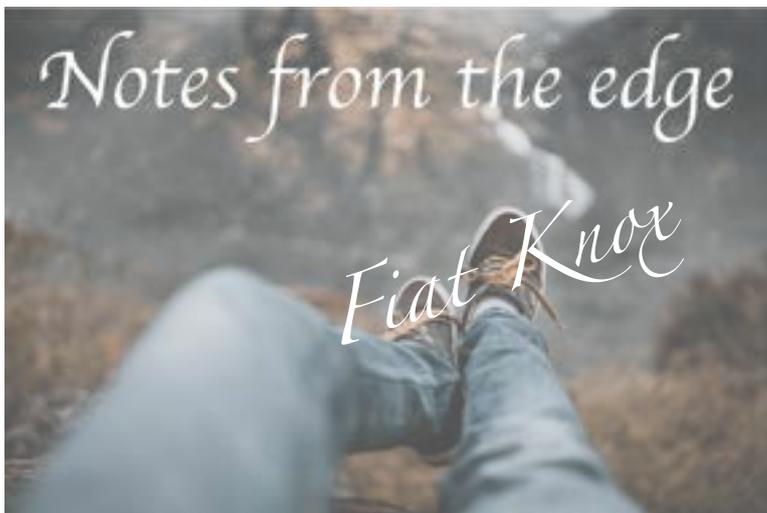
These beliefs fly in the face of the research reported in The

Lancet which concluded that physical punishments such as smacking actually led to increased behavioural issues, and no improvements in attention or cognitive ability. In other words, smacking children leads to worsening behaviour, lower self-esteem and a tendency to see violence as a legitimate response to disputes. It surely is time that the government in England followed the lead taken in Wales and Scotland and give children the same rights to bodily integrity that the law accords adults.



TAKE THE POWER BACK!
1st April 2022
Join and support the Big Power Off protest by committing to using as little or no gas or electric in your home as you possibly can! Share your story; how do energy price rises affect you? Post on your socials using the hashtag and encourage your friends and family to join the movement. Together we can take the power back!

#BigPowerOff



This weekly column is about faith. I'm not talking about preachy, judgmental religion, but a very real, practical faith that we need every day, just to get up in the morning.

The Attention Game
You can't talk about Westminster without a few choice words unsuitable for a Sunday morning. Over the last twelve years, they have shut down essential services, cut the money supply to businesses and private individuals, and given private companies a license to gouge you out of every last penny you have. They have been making over the UK into a hard, cruel, vindictive place, in their image. These politicians want power over you. They want to have a say in your life, and they have now extended that reach into whatever makes you happy. Basic food and heating are necessities. Wine and chocolate are luxuries. It's all about getting you to make them the centre of your lives. They're in your minds and in your wallets, thanks to the media holding them up as idols. They hold the purse strings, but most of all they want to live rent free in your heads, like Josef Fritzl or Jim Jones.

Faith and Survival
If we are to beat them, we must

survive. We are in a survival situation now. And like every survival situation, you first have to stop, assess and plan. Community action is the only way forwards. We have reached a point where your only option is to reach out to your neighbours, learn about the people in your local area, form community groups, and share what little we have. Our only shelter from this storm of Tory misery is to have faith in each other. The only way out of this is together. You're vital to our survival. You make a difference. You are the difference. And that is something to put your faith in.

Have a good week, everybody.

Photo courtesy of Needpix.com



Time to act on air pollution

Dave Middleton

The world's governments are failing to meet their air pollution targets. A new report from IQAir finds that not a single country managed to meet the World Health Organization's (WHO) air quality standard in 2021. The survey of pollution data in 6,475 cities was taken from a variety of governmental and non-governmental sources.

The WHO recommends that average annual readings of small and hazardous airborne particles known as PM2.5 should be no more than 5 micrograms per cubic metre after changing its guidelines last year, from 10 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$, saying that even low concentrations caused significant health risks.

New Delhi, India, has the worst air pollution with levels at 85 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$, but most major cities are way beyond the recommended guidelines. Paris at 13.7 is one of the worst in Europe but London's 9.8 leaves significant room for improvement.

Too many deaths

Public Health England estimate that 28 to 36,000 deaths per year can be attributed to poor air quality. It is therefore in everybody's interest to improve the quality of the air we all depend on. In December the inner south London coroner Philip Barlow made legal history when he ruled that the death of 13 year old Ella Krissi-Debra in 2013 was caused by air pollution. At the time a government spokesperson claimed "We are delivering a £3.8bn plan to clean up transport and tackle NO2 pollution, and going further in protecting communities from air pollution, particularly PM2.5 pollution, which we know is particularly harmful to people's health." How shallow that commitment seems in the wake of this week's damning report. Moreover, whilst the media reported on Ella's case, they fail to follow up in any meaningful way.

Search for discussion of this topic following the publication this week and you would be hard put to find it in any major news outlet. The BBC, our state propaganda station, mentioned pollution only in relation to a report from the London Mayor who had issued a high air pollution warning. Reading the comments beneath that story shows just how ill prepared some people are to change their lifestyles for the sake of future generations.

One particular belief that many drivers cling to is that lower speeds create more pollution, hence lowering speed limits from 30 to 20 mph will create more pollution. Imperial College London's research into the impact of 20mph speed limits found that vehicles moved more smoothly, with fewer accelerations and decelerations, than in 30mph zones, reducing particulate emissions from tyre and brake wear. In other words, apart from reducing accidents, lower speeds reduce pollution.

Changing lifestyles

As with Covid restrictions, we are living through an era where people are unwilling to give up their lifestyles regardless of the impact on others. Saving the planet is not just a question of turning off the odd

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lightbulb, it is going to require significant changes in our lifestyles.

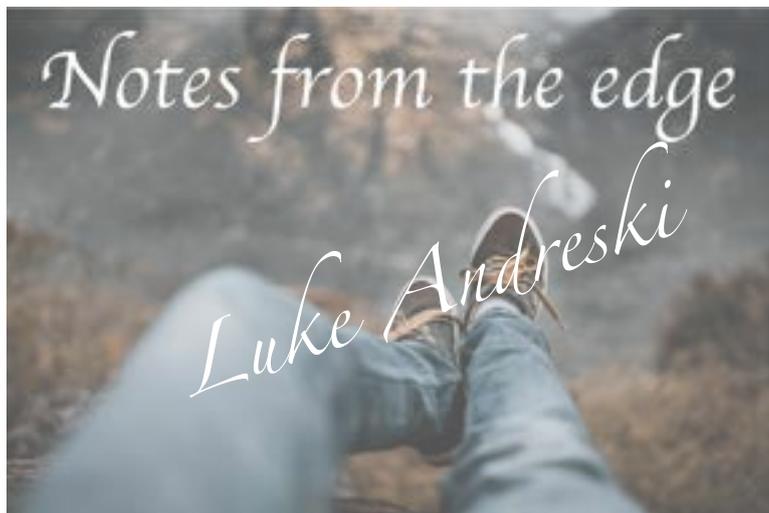
Dr Terry Matthews, a member of Doctors for Extinction Rebellion, said: *“Breathing illegal toxic air from fossil fuel combustion causes deaths and hospital admissions from heart attacks, strokes and asthma. Air pollution also increases the risk of dementia, impaired brain function and depression; miscarriage and infertility. Child development is delayed and child lung development can be reduced by around one tenth.”*

In 2020 Sustrans produced a list of things people could do to reduce air pollution. They included: Cycling or walking to work or school; Cutting down car journeys; Switch to an energy supplier using renewable energy sources; Avoid open fires and wood burning stoves; Reduce your meat and dairy intake.

All of these are good ideas for individuals to make a difference, but it is important to recognise that over 50% of air pollution comes from manufacturing and industrial processes. The amount of difference that you and your kids can make is minimal compared to what needs to happen. We are beyond the point where we can sustain global capitalism and save the planet. Yet, constantly, saving the planet gets pushed down the agenda as pandemics or wars attract the miniscule attention span of our media. The fact is that those who benefit, at least in the short term, from a system which is geared solely towards accumulating wealth do not want a discussion about how it is that system that is making the planet uninhabitable. The truth is that the climate emergency is real and if we fail to act, or worse, sit back and allow those in power to fail to act, then humanity has very little time left.

Photo courtesy of Extinction Rebellion





This was a remarkable week. I noticed something truly staggering – something that I've spent the whole of 2022 not realising....

You see, I'm old enough to remember 2021!

Now, some of you may question whether that's really so remarkable, but I can assure you it is. 2021.... Yes, I'm that old!

I remember, in 2021, a government bill coming into being, and passing through the House of Commons, then the House of Lords, then again the House of Commons, finally to be confirmed in all its vulgarity only this week, aimed primarily at KEEPING OUT IMMIGRANTS AND REFUGEES. And the target for this bill, and for a great deal of the Brexit Project, was to take 'control of our borders', particularly in relation to Eastern Europeans.

People like the poor refugees now desperately fleeing Ukraine.

Priti Patel was no doubt pleased that her hard work paid off. After strenuously publicising her support for Ukraine, she was able to keep out most of the Ukrainian refugees who wanted to come to the UK. She could claim both the kudos for caring, and the kudos for not caring, at the same time.

I don't call the Tories the Hypocrisy Party for nothing.

But the anti-refugee antics of this government aren't all that people appear to have forgotten this week. Advanced memory loss is obliterating a dozen other 24-hour-news-cycle scandals from those halcyon days of 2021. (Reminder: yes, I'm THAT old.)

The Tories and their malign oaf of a leader are resurgent in popularity because almost everyone but me, it seems, is too young to remember:

PartyGate. Surprise! Those who make the rules break the rules!

StandardsGate. Dislike the findings of your own standards committee? Set up a new one!

FlatGate. Why would Florid Boris properly register £17k in donations towards refurbishing his meagre Prime Ministerial flat? It's just cash between mates, surely?

PatersonGate. It seems some MPs, particularly Conservatives, work primarily not for the people who elected them but for companies hoping to get government contracts, influence government policies and evade government taxes.... Who'd have guessed?

SewageGate (let's not go there)

COPGate, featuring an un-masked PM asleep on the shoulder of National Treasure David Attenborough (himself masked-up and

alert), while authorising between snores a new oilfield in the Shetlands and a new coal mine in Cumbria

ExodusGate. when both Johnson and Raab chose to go on holiday while desperate Afghans struggled to escape the Taliban

PingGate. when Johnson and Sunak stumbled into a secretive 'self-testing' pilot programme to avoid quarantining, unlike the rest of us who had to lock ourselves away when 'pinged' by Serco Track 'n' Trace

GreensillGate. Sunak and Johnson may (who knows?) have been implicated in a cover up of the Greensill scandal....

ClinchGate. You've got it: Hancock and Coladangelo get intimate on work premises and against Covid rules, only a little while after Hancock's strong denunciation of government advisor Neil Fergusson for doing much the same

PPEGate – well, we all know about the crony contracts, the PPE shortages, the warehouses full of unusable PPE and the VIP fasttrack to taxpayers' cash....

1%Gate, with 1% being the pay rise a grateful government gave the NHS workers who struggled to protect us during the early, dangerous waves of the pandemic, in far too many instances at cost to their lives

HamperGate, where poor families faced the insult of derisory 'school meal hampers' while Chartwells and other private caterers filled their own hampers with taxpayers' dosh

It's no surprise, given all of this, that for a brief period, even under the error-prone leadership of Keir Starmer, the Labour Party crept a little ahead in the polls. For a short while, people remembered 2021.

But no more.

This week much of the UK population were reborn very young indeed – thrilled by the adventure of someone else's war, delighted to have their very own Winston Churchill at the helm, and trapped in a present where the past loses all meaning and sinks like a desiccated corpse into the embalming miasma of 24-hour rolling news.



Volodymyr Zelenskyy: Too Good To Be True?

Mike Stanton

Is Volodymyr Zelenskyy too good to be true? Zelenskyy is a popular leader at home in Ukraine and, since the Russian invasion, his popularity has surged around the world. He is a skilled media operator and has shown great courage by remaining in Kyiv, where Russian mercenaries from the shadowy Wagner Group are believed to be operating under orders to assassinate him.

Zelenskyy Superstar

He has been lionised by western leaders and given superstar status by media pundits as the poster boy for western, liberal values pitted against the arch-villain, Putin. But some of his recent pronouncements suggest political naïveté, as when he argued for a no fly zone over Ukraine that would inevitably lead to armed conflict between NATO and Russia and raise the danger level of nuclear war.

This is not meant to judge him too harshly. After all, three years ago he was a TV star with no political experience. He was elected on an anti-establishment, anti-corruption ticket, not as a war leader. But all politicians should be open to scrutiny and challenge. Especially when the fate of the world is in the balance.

Rise to Power

Before he won the presidential election in 2019 with 73% of the votes, Zelenskyy was best known as an actor and comedian. He also has a law degree. His first act as president was to dissolve parliament and, in the ensuing election, his Servant of the People Party (SP) named after the TV series in which he played an outsider who became president, became the first party in modern Ukraine to win an overall majority, taking 254 out of 424 seats. It was as if Martin Sheen had stood for the West Wing Party in the USA and swept to power. Over 80% of the MPs were new. Clearing out the old guard and removing MPs' immunity from prosecution were the first steps in dealing with Ukraine's record as one of the most corrupt countries in the world and the second most corrupt country in Europe, ahead of Russia. First Covid, and then the Russian invasion have made it impossible to assess Zelenskyy's success in his stated aim of reforming Ukraine society.

Questions

But questions were raised before the invasion. Zelenskyy, the 'outsider' is himself an oligarch. OK, he is worth millions, not billions and he got there by cashing in on his talent. But if you are going to tackle corruption it is as well not to be involved in offshore companies registered in tax havens. Zelenskyy is a native Russian speaker who wants to heal the splits in Ukrainian society. It is hard to see how you can achieve rapprochement with the pro-Russian separatists if you also publicly state that you want to turn away from Russia and join the EU and NATO.



Then there is the Azov Battalion, an openly Nazi militia that committed atrocities, torture and mass execution of Russian speakers in the Donbas during the uprising there in 2014. It bears remembering that the Azov Battalion was then stationed in Mariupol, which is now the scene of some of the bitterest fighting in the war. Russian mercenary forces that are fighting in Ukraine are also committing atrocities today. They are there with the Kremlin's blessing, but their mercenary status gives Putin a vestige of plausible deniability for their war crimes. The Azov Battalion is fully integrated within the Ukrainian state armed forces. It provides a fig leaf for Russia's declared war aim of 'denazification' even though the far right links of the Russian mercenaries are also well known.



Protestors in Warsaw, Poland demanded an end to the war in Ukraine. Photo courtesy of DepositPhotos.com

Rhetoric versus Peace

The biggest danger for Zelenskyy is that the adulation he receives will lead him to start believing in his own rhetoric. It is one thing to channel the spirit of Winston Churchill when addressing the House of Commons. But he overstepped the mark in comparing Russia's attack on Ukraine to the Nazi's treatment of the Jews in a speech to the Knesset. Total war is murderous. But the Russian war aim is conquest, not genocide. The decision to ban 11 political parties under martial law because of their links to Russia, while defensible in a time of war, may also prove to be a misjudgement. Most are insignificant in political terms but The Opposition Platform – Choose Life is the second largest party in Parliament with 43 seats and 13% of the vote. Its leader, Viktor Medvedchuk, a close associate of Putin, was placed under house arrest on charges of treason last year. He escaped, presumably to Russia, shortly after the invasion began. If Zelenskyy is to overcome the divisions in Ukraine, he needs to persuade pro-Russian voters that they have a future in a west leaning Ukraine. The decree he signed on Sunday that brings all news media that have not been banned together to counter disinformation about the war is also understandable. But, after the war will there be a return to a plurality of voices and parties in Ukraine? Zelenskyy has risen to the task and held his country together, making a Russian victory difficult, if not impossible. Can you even begin to imagine Boris Johnson in that situation? But his success so far makes it all the more imperative that Zelenskyy chooses his words carefully. He has to plan ahead for a negotiated peace that will end the misery and carnage of war. For that he has to be able to demonstrate statesmanship as well as the charisma and courage he has shown so far.

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Dirty War: The Horror Of Chemical Weapons

Luke Andreski

Euro-centrism and chemical warfare

Quite rightly there is horror at the thought of chemical weapons being used in Ukraine. This horror easily translates into propaganda, and both Russia and the West are keen to implicate one another in chemical weapons development and their potential future use. A BBC-selected 'expert' recently suggested that if chemical weapons are used in Ukraine, this will be their first use since World War II. Perhaps the expert was thinking, as BBC pundits often do, in purely Euro-centric terms.

International law

In 1925 chemical weapons were banned under the Geneva Protocol. Their use was also prohibited in the Chemical Weapons Convention of 1997, with signatories from most major nations including Russia, the United States and the UK. The United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA) was set up to drive forward multinational treaties against WMD proliferation (chemical, biological and nuclear), and OPCW (the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons) monitors the illegal use of chemical weapon and strives to limit their proliferation.

So why is the world now concerned that such weapons may be used in Ukraine?

Well, despite these protocols, treaties and institutions, our track record on inhibiting their use is poor.

Here are some examples.

Vietnam

Unable to win the Vietnam war using conventional weapons, the United States in the late '60s and early '70s resorted to the use of a variety of chemical weapons. The best known of these are Napalm and Agent Orange. Napalm is a mixture of jet fuel and polystyrene which sticks to the skin and causes agonizing injuries and death. It was banned in 1980, but this didn't stop the US from using an updated version in Iraq. In Vietnam they also used Agent Orange, a defoliant aimed at forest clearance. This chemical caused leukemia, Hodgkin's lymphoma and various other kinds of cancer in the Vietnamese population. Many children continue to be born with defects as a result of these weapons and the contaminated areas still produce unsafe food. Agent Orange alone has damaged the health of over a million Vietnamese people.

Iraq

In the Halabja Massacre in Iraq in 1988 Saddam Hussein's army used mustard gas and nerve agents which killed up to 5,000 people and injured up to 10,000 more, mostly civilians. These weapons were developed, stockpiled and used in large quantities in the Iran-Iraq war, which ended in 1988. Iraq's chemical weapons were disposed of as part of an agreement after the Gulf War of 1990.

However, this did not stop the US and UK from using Iraq's alleged possession of chemical weapons as a pretext for their invasion of Iraq in 2003. In a bitter irony, the US themselves then deployed chemical weapons against Iraq: white phosphorous in attacking Fallujah, and napalm against targets close to Baghdad.

White phosphorous is often used in tracer rounds or for generating smoke screens, but for combatants and civilians it causes burn injuries and harm to the throat and lungs. Residues damage plant life, accumulate in fish and remain active in deep soil.

The US also used depleted uranium in Iraq. This is not normally categorized as a chemical weapon but, given its chemical and radiological toxicity, it should be. Depleted uranium residues cause particular harm to the kidneys and lungs. The US ignored their own guidelines on its use and deployed depleted uranium against troops, unarmored targets and buildings in populated areas. According to www.paxforpeace.nl, more than 1,000 uranium-contaminated sites have been identified in Iraq.

Libya, Syria, Israel

There are claims that NATO utilised depleted uranium in its bombing missions against Libya in 2011 and that the US used these weapons in bombing sorties in Syria in 2018. Chemical weapons have also been used by government forces throughout the Syrian civil war (2011 to present), with OPCW documenting the use of chlorine, sarin and sulphur mustard. There are credible claims of the 'false flag' use of chlorine gas in Douma by groups associated with al-Qaeda –

linking the origins of the gas to Turkey. The Israeli government admit to using white phosphorous against targets in Gaza in 2009.

Russia and Ukraine

Given this extensive use of chemical weapons over the last fifty years, it is understandable that Russia fears their use in Ukraine, either in active warfare, or as a false flag manoeuvre. Similarly, given Russia's involvement in the Syrian war, the fear in Ukraine and the West that the Russian army will deploy these weapons is also legitimate. Experts in the West are saying that Russian forces are not geared up for chemical warfare, but other commentators suggest they may take advantage of either chemical or biological weapons potentially available from research facilities in Ukraine. In my view, the greater risk is not from either the Russians or the more traditional Ukrainian forces, but that these weapons may fall into the hands of smaller militant groups, such as the Nazi-aligned Azov Battalion, where it would be difficult to control or monitor their use.

Ethics

Is there an ethical case against chemical warfare? The answer is: How could there not be?

These weapons cause painful and protracted deaths in combatants, and, where not fatal, lead to disability and poor health long after the cessation of hostilities. They are also indiscriminate, putting civilians at risk and causing health issues and birth defects long after their use. They cause long term harm to eco-systems and harm future generations through food and water supplies. Given this, their use is clearly morally abhorrent, and criminal sanctions should apply to any nation or group who use them.

The danger in Ukraine is that we may see an escalation from conventional to non-conventional weapons, whether openly or as false flags, and then to nuclear... That would be, for Ukraine, for our species and for the entire biological world, the most dangerous and immoral outcome of all.

Daily News THE PEOPLE'S ASSEMBLY

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Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe: Why Did It Take So Long?

Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe was right to ask why it had taken so long to secure her release from Iran when she spoke at yesterday's press conference. It has taken six years and five foreign secretaries.

Philip	Hammond	(2014-2016)
Boris	Johnson	(2016-2018)
Jeremy	Hunt	(2018-2019)
Dominic	Raab	(2019-2021)
Liz	Truss	(2021-present)



*Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe with daughter Gabrielle
Image courtesy of Amnesty International*

Boris Johnson

Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe's MP, Tulip Siddiq singled out Boris Johnson for particular criticism. Johnson's careless talk, when he falsely stated that Nazanin had been in Iran, 'simply teaching people journalism,' when she was there to introduce her daughter to her parents, helped to strengthen the case against her in the eyes of the Iranian authorities that she was plotting against the Iranian government. Johnson had such a poor grasp of his brief that, when he met Richard Ratcliffe to apologise for that egregious error, he asked him if he had enjoyed his visit to Iran! Firstly Nazanin had travelled with her daughter. Richard stayed in Britain. Secondly, what planet was Johnson on, if he felt it appropriate to ask a man, did he enjoy himself on a trip where his wife was arrested!?

The Debt

In 1979 the Shah of Iran paid £400 million up front for the delivery of 1,750 Chieftain tanks and other vehicles. Then he was overthrown in a popular uprising against his barbaric and repressive regime. The UK government kept his money but refused to deliver the tanks. In 2013 when a diplomatic mission from Iran was granted visas to come to Britain to discuss this, they were detained on arrival and deported. The Home Secretary at the time, Theresa May, was Prime Minister when Nazanin received an initial sentence of 5 years in September 2016. Successive prime ministers, Cameron, May and Johnson have all denied the debt was legitimate or that it was an issue in Nazanin's arrest. It was finally acknowledged by the UK government as a legitimate debt in 2020, but the connection to Nazanin's imprisonment was always denied. Nazanin herself has stated that she was told by her captors that it was connected. The Iranian News Agency announced that the debt was repaid on the day that Nazanin was freed. So draw your own conclusions.

Dual Nationals Still Detained

Liz Truss as good as suggested that another dual national would be released soon.

I can confirm Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe and Anoosheh Ashoori will return to the UK today, and Morad Tahbaz has been released from prison on furlough. They will be reunited with their families later today.

We will continue to work to secure Morad's departure from Iran.

— Liz Truss (@trussliz) March 16, 2022

Morad Tahbaz was detained again, shortly afterwards. He has cancer and is reported to be on hunger strike. The latest news is that he has been moved from prison to a hotel. According to the Guardian, after a phone call with Liz Truss, his family believe that his joint US citizenship led the Foreign Office to leave him out of the deal in order to get Nazanin and Anoosheh home. A very cold call between the family and Truss showed the family the British had chosen to make him America's problem.

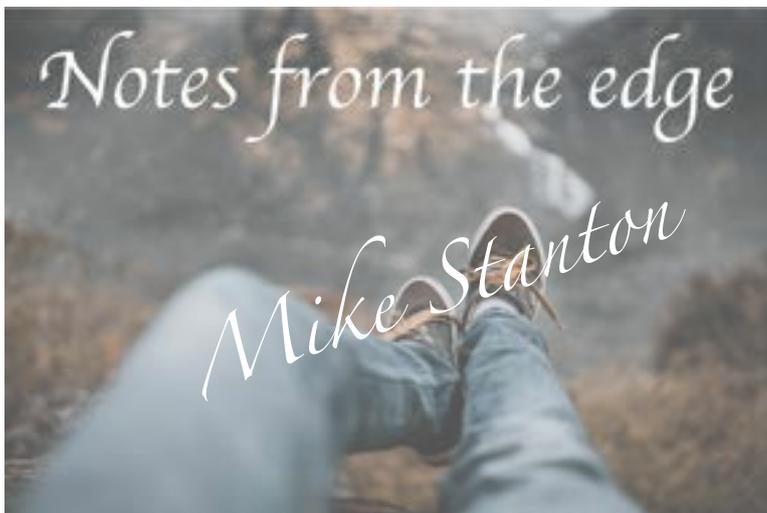
[The left behind: the dual nationals still in jail in Iran | Iran | The Guardian](#)

When Jeremy Corbyn asked Liz Truss about another dual national, Mehran Raoof, she claimed that she did not have his permission to raise his case in public. How is he supposed to give permission? He is a trade union and labour rights activist serving ten years in prison for belonging to an illegal organisation and is denied access to a telephone! Is there no end to the dysfunction at the heart of government?

Back to Ukraine

At least 17 dual nationals are being held in Iran, not all of them British. If you believe the government the release of Nazanin and Anoosheh and the repayment to Iran were parallel negotiations that just happened to coincide. Yeah, whatever. But what about oil? After Venezuela and Saudi Arabia, Iran has the third largest oil reserves in the world. Worth thinking about if you are trying to wean yourself off Russian oil in the light of their invasion of Ukraine. Again, the government deny any connection. But there are renewed attempts to revive the Iran nuclear deal whereby Iran agreed to cut back its nuclear programme in return for an easing of sanctions. The UN and the US State Department agreed that the deal was working. But Trump insisted on designating the Iranian Revolutionary Guard as a terrorist organisation and pulled out of the deal. Trump has gone but things are complicated by the fact that Russia is also a signatory to the deal. What can they get out of a deal that eases the pain for the West of imposing sanctions on Russian oil while making it easier to buy Iranian oil? Welcome to the world of realpolitik. Despite their claims to be acting out of respect for morality and justice, our rulers are as cynical and self interested as any despot. Say what you like about Putin. When it comes to hypocrisy we have him beat.

Welcome to the world of realpolitik. Despite their claims to be acting out of respect for morality and justice, our rulers are as cynical and self interested as any despot.



Good News week?

We needed a good news story this week and we got it with the release of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe and Anoosheh Ashoori from Iraq. But it did not take long for the story to sour. First, there was the backlash against Nazanin for criticising the government for taking so long to secure her release. Never mind that, as Foreign Secretary, Boris Johnson did not even read his brief and made false statements about the purpose of Zaghari-Ratcliffe's visit to Iran which were seized upon by the Iranian government as proof that she was there to plot against them. Then there was the tweet by the present Foreign Secretary, Liz Truss, suggesting that another Anglo-Iranian national, Morad Tahbaz would soon be released. Instead he was re-arrested and is now on hunger strike. Since talking to the Foreign Office his family are convinced that, because he also has US nationality, the UK abandoned Tahbaz to secure the release of Zaghari-Ratcliffe and Ashoori. There was not even a tweet for Mehran Raouf, another dual national serving ten years for belonging to an illegal organisation. But there again, he is a trade unionist and a human rights activist. I wrote this story for Critical Mass

on Tuesday: good news for Nazanin and Anoosheh; less good for the government and a lot worse for Morad and Mehran. Except it had to get worse. Anoosheh Ashoori was in the news again today because Johnson has asked to meet him. Ashoori is yet to make up his mind. Hardly surprising when you read that he risked his life to smuggle an audio message to Johnson from his prison cell and Johnson ignored it completely! And if that wasn't bad enough, he revealed that one condition of his release was the payment of a fine of £27,000. The government should have added that to the longstanding £400 million debt that they finally repaid to facilitate his release. But no. His family had to max out their credit cards to raise the money. The Great British Public more than covered it via a crowd funder. But nothing can cover for the incompetence, the shameless opportunism and the sheer bloody mindedness of this mean-spirited government.

Neo Nazi banned from entering Germany

Susie Granic

MANY of you may have missed this bit of news with all that is flooding in from the war in Ukraine, but it is a timely reminder, given what we are seeing of the neo-Nazis in Ukraine, of how one country is doing its best to get it right with neo-Nazi laws in direct comparison to another which is not.

19-year-old Spaniard, Isabelle Medina Peralta, was stopped from entering Germany late last week because she was carrying a flag with a swastika, a swastika-themed keychain and a copy of Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf* in her luggage. She tried to tell police she was only carrying the items because she was a student of history and interested in the Nazi era, but she is known to be one of the leaders of the Bastión Frontal, a neo-Nazi organisation which originated in the San Blas district of Madrid. However, the possession of Nazi material is banned in Germany, and so she was refused entry.

Around this time last year Peralta gave a speech in her country at a memorial service for the Division Azul (Blue Division), the Spaniards who fought under Adolf Hitler during World War II, where she said, "Our highest duty is to fight for Spain, to fight for Europe, now weak and being destroyed by the enemy." Peralta has often referred to Jews as being the 'enemy'. And in November last year, the Public Prosecutor's Office in Madrid filed a complaint against her for "calling" for violence against Moroccan and Muslim migrants in front of the Moroccan embassy in Madrid in May of that year.

While the far right and fascists are becoming more widespread in Spain, and elsewhere, German citizens and authorities are working to change the mindset of these extremists as the authorities believe that fascist organisations could pose an existential threat. They remember how Hitler used the electoral system to gain influence until he had the power to completely abolish the country's democracy.

There are about 30,000 far right extremists in Germany and, while neo-Nazis are permitted to march, rules prevent them from carrying shields, batons and helmets – such as the neo-Nazis did in Charlottesville and elsewhere in the US. Openly anti-Semitic chants are not permitted, and German police will step in and detain individuals who may be chanting. These marches are generally met with counter-protestors whose numbers far outweigh the neo-Nazis, and there are many groups within Germany who raise money to help get right wing extremists out of the life and 're-educate' them

German law prohibits publicly denying the Holocaust and the dissemination of Nazi propaganda, both online and off. This includes sharing images such as swastikas, wearing an SS uniform and making statements in support of Hitler. It also places strict rules on how social media companies must moderate and report hate speech and threats. These hate-speech laws were tightened two years ago after three far-right terror attacks in 2019 and early 2020 – the assassination of the pro-refugee politician Walter Lübcke; shootings outside a synagogue in the town of Halle, on Yom Kippur; and a mass shooting in Hanau, as, specifically with the latter two, the killers had been radicalised on the internet.

While Holocaust denial is punishable by a sentence of up to five

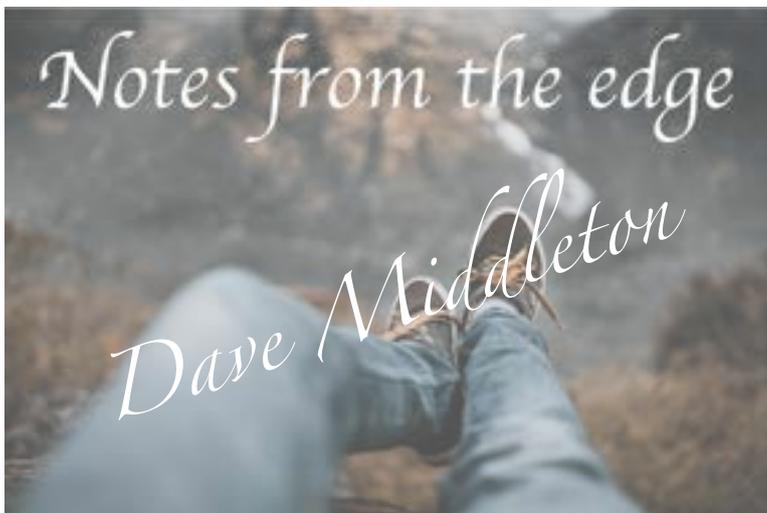
years, Germans can face up to three years in prison for 'approving of, glorifying or justifying' Nazi rule. There are many sections to these laws and they cover all areas of hate speech, threats, Holocaust denial and more. The laws, however, have raised concerns from both left and right-wing political parties in Germany, as well as human rights advocates who are concerned about the people's right to speak freely.

It's always difficult to know where to draw the line, regarding censorship, between freedom of speech and hate speech, because we do not all agree on what hate speech is. I would hope though we could all agree that the shutting down of neo-Nazis is a good thing, but in most Western countries we are focused on our freedoms and think everybody has a right to say what they wish. There may be consequences to what we say, yes, but we have a right to say it, and this can too easily lead to radicalisation of those who are perhaps more susceptible and more prone to 'othering'. The question on what should be banned is a difficult one, but I think Germany has it right. Their laws are rooted in their history and national identity. The German people know better than most what can happen if such hatred of 'others' is allowed to prevail. They have taken lessons from their history and personally I think it is a shame other countries have not.



Spain was not averse to Nazi influences. In this image a German officer from the Condor Legion is seen instructing Nationalist infantry soldiers, Ávila, January 1939.

Image courtesy of Cassowary Colorizations



We don't tend to do sport in Critical Mass. I suppose we just kind of know that sport and politics is not a great mix. We are constantly told, are we not, to keep politics out of sport? After all, as if to make this clear, in 2016 Scottish football club Celtic, they of the green hoops, were fined £16,000 by UEFA after fans displayed the Palestinian flag during a Champions League match. How things change. Now before every game we have commentators waxing lyrical about the great footballing family as fans hold up Ukrainian flags. These same fans incidentally who Gary Lineker described as "rude and classless" for booing the anthems of opposing teams, whilst Priti Patel supported those fans who booed English players who took the knee against racism, describing it as "gesture politics". Of course, there is a great deal of support for Ukraine, a country that is being ravaged by an invading army as I type. But, the support is opening up huge charges of hypocrisy as writers in Critical Mass, including Tanweer Dar and Luke Andreski have pointed out recently. But, let's get back to sport. I live in Wales and despite being an English football supporter (I was brought up with the belief that it was mandatory to support Tottenham Hotspur), I am aware of how much sport means to my Welsh compatriots. On Thursday I settled down to watch Wales in their World Cup qualifying semi-final against Austria, aware as everybody who follows Welsh football must be, that the last time Wales qualified for

the World Cup was in 1958. It was a thrilling match, the support of the fans genuinely spine tingling and the display from Gareth Bale absolutely magnificent scoring two goals from the top drawer to give Wales the victory they needed to set up a final against either Scotland or, as fate would have it, Ukraine. On cue, enter the Daily Telegraph, backed by the Prime Minister, calling on Wales and Scotland to step aside and let Ukraine qualify as this would cheer up the Ukrainians. Apart from the obvious bias that nobody was suggesting England, for example, might step aside, the suggestion was the kind of "gesture politics" Tories are supposed to abhor. Of course deflecting attention to sport allows the government to avoid scrutiny of their visa shambles. I don't believe sport and politics should be kept separate. I am old enough to remember the raised fists of Tommie Smith and John Carlos in Mexico in 1968. But I don't think we should hand out sporting success in lieu of a commitment to finding a diplomatic solution to a war either.

March 27th 2022
