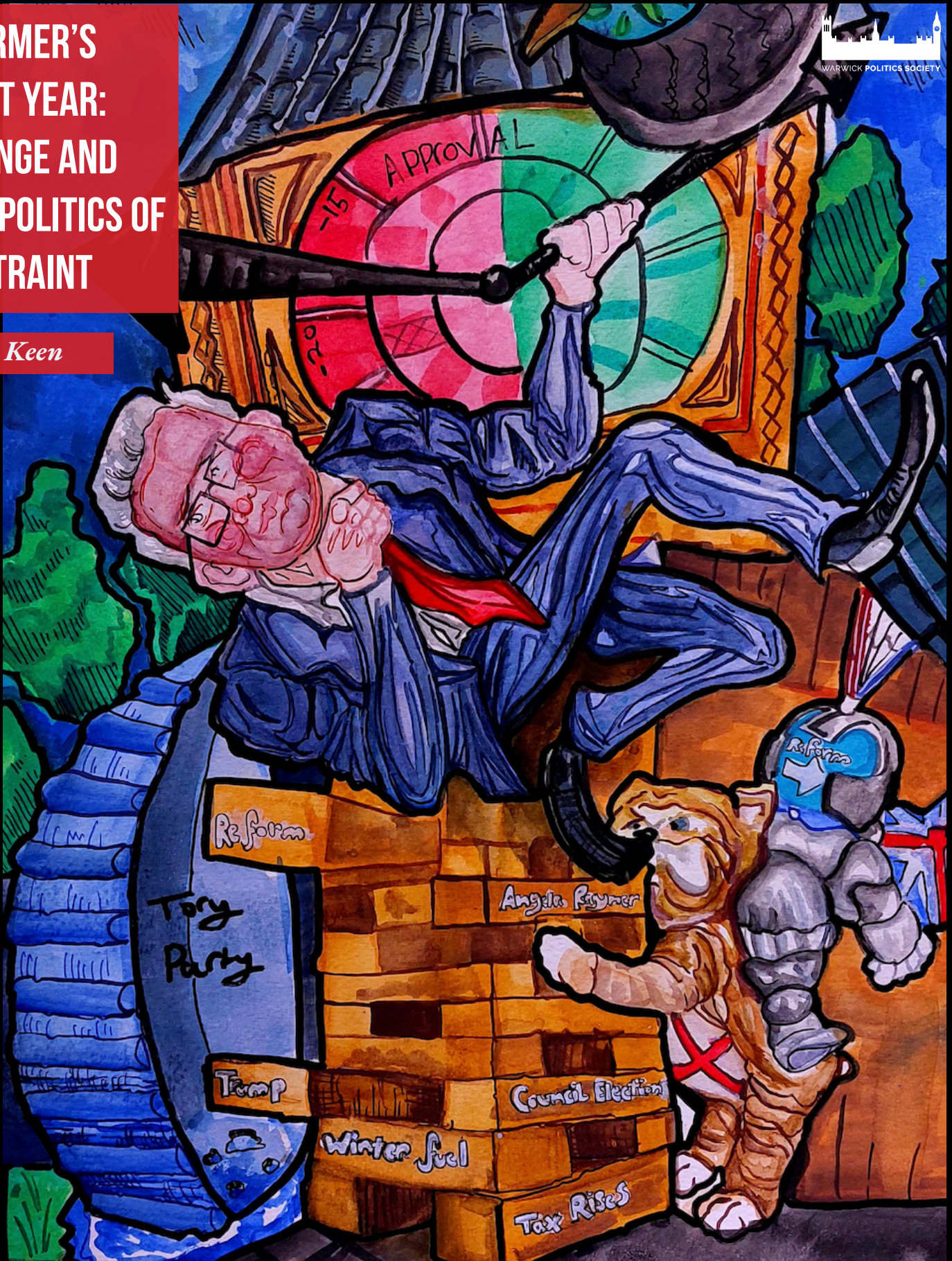


PERSPECTIVES

STARMER'S FIRST YEAR: CHANGE AND THE POLITICS OF RESTRAINT



Jack Keen



EDITORS' LETTERS

Khushi



Welcome to Edition 51! We're so excited to introduce another magazine filled with the brilliant work of our writers and editorial team. We wanted to explore a range of complicated topics from Israel's recognition of Somaliland, to America's intervention in Venezuela, and of course Sir Kier Starmer's first year in office. As ever, our writers have approached these subjects with the kind of passion, sensitivity, and love of debate that characterises Perspectives. Our feature grapples with the future of UK politics, considering a balance between the change promised when Labour won a stunning landslide victory in 2024 against the political pragmatism some have deemed necessary on both the domestic and international stage. Besides this you'll find discussions on the implications of the Epstein Files for the Presidency, a profile on Nobel Prize Winner María Corina Machado that questions political trade-offs, reflections on the international community's engagement with the Sudanese humanitarian crisis, and much more.

We have to thank our wonderful editorial team without which this magazine would never have made it to you! Our deputy editors have done a fantastic job pitching the articles that lie ahead, cleverly illustrated by Tristan, and publicised by Elina and Serena who have done a tremendous job this year. We hope you find the ideas of our writers as thought-provoking and inspiring as we do.

Will



We are very excited to launch the second print-magazine of our tenure as editors, building on the success of the 50th edition with another magazine that exhibits the exceptional quality of student writing here at Warwick. The skill of our contributors ensures Perspectives remains the home of student political commentary for the university and we are very proud to have won multiple awards this term for Best Student Magazine and Best Specialist Publication at the Midland Media Awards and SPA Conference. Without the work of all those who contribute so much to the life of Perspectives none of this would have been possible. We are indebted to all the students who have been part of our passionate and ever hard-working community. This edition takes time to reflect on the world around us, examining Sir Keir Starmer's first year as Prime Minister, in addition to global perspectives on crises in Venezuela, Ukraine, and Syria to name just a few. Our writers approach this task with fresh opinions that challenge and extend the discourse. We hope this makes for reading that is just as enjoyable, intriguing, and thought-provoking as Perspectives has come to be known for.

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A BETRAYAL OF BREXIT?

UK to rejoin ERASMUS+

On 17 December last year, Nick Thomas-Symonds, Labour's minister for European Union relations, gleefully announced to MPs that the UK would, from 2027, once again participate in the EU's mobility and training programme, ERASMUS+. The UK will be an 'associate member', joining the likes of Iceland, Türkiye, and Liechtenstein at a cost of £570 million for the first year of the programme's new cycle. This was celebrated by some in Labour as a 30% reduction on what a non-EU member would usually pay, a sort of 'try before you buy', but this figure could rise in the future. Dame Priti Patel, shadow foreign secretary for the Conservatives, was quick to admonish the government for being "obsessed with dragging Britain back under the control of Brussels" and wanting to "betray Brexit". Does UK participation in the ERASMUS+ scheme really undermine the vote to leave in 2016?

The instinctive answer is no, precisely because rejoining ERASMUS+ does not mean rejoining the European Union. British students taking part will still likely need to apply for study or work visas to undertake a placement in an EU country, and vice versa for EU students. What ERASMUS+ will bring, however, is the opportunity to apply for funding to offset some of the many costs incurred as part and parcel of studying and working abroad. Critics of ERASMUS+ point out that, when the UK was previously a member, undertaking a study placement abroad was often the reserve of the middle-class, who could count on financial backing from parents, such that they effectively did not need ERASMUS+ funding. This time round, the government is adamant that UK membership will benefit all students, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

If rejoining ERASMUS+ does not 'betray Brexit', it is because there never was any clear consensus on what Brexit meant or what it ought to look like, at least not at the time of the referendum in June 2016. Instead of setting out, early on, what it wanted the specifics of a future EU-UK relationship to look like, the Vote Leave campaign was non-committal, clinging to abstract notions of sovereignty, independence, and 'taking back control' (a catchy slogan plastered on the big red campaign bus). This was also the cause of the political gridlock, which drove a coach and horses through British politics between 2017 and 2019. Boris Johnson broke the deadlock by pushing through an 'oven-ready' Brexit deal, which was one of the many possible ways to enact Brexit. Importantly, leaving the EU did not automatically mean the UK would leave the ERASMUS+ scheme –

Johnson's government chose to do so.

The other objection has been that rejoining ERASMUS+ is a waste of British taxpayers' money, which could be better spent elsewhere. It is predicted that more European students will come to the UK under the scheme than British students will go to the EU. In 2020, the last year the UK participated, 16,100 European students and trainees came to the UK, as opposed to 9,900 from the UK to Europe. Yet, if this fixation on numbers reflects the thorny issue that immigration has become in British politics, it does miss the point. The worth of an ERASMUS+ placement is to be found in its enormous cultural, professional, and personal value for participants, offering the opportunity to interact with and learn alongside students from all across Europe. The advantages for language learning, uptake of which has been in alarming decline at GCSE and A-Level for some years now, should not be underestimated either. It is hard to see how this could be incompatible with the notion of 'Global Britain', which many supporters of Brexit have championed.

The decision to rejoin encapsulates the willingness of both the UK and the EU to usher in a cultural rapprochement that will mend the abrupt severing of ties in January 2020. It does not, in any way, commit the UK to rejoining the bloc, although successive polls have shown that a majority of the electorate would be in favour of this, rather it is proof of a much-needed reset in our relations with the EU, still haunted by the protracted and divisive Brexit negotiations.

Rejoining ERASMUS+ is not a contradiction of Brexit, for it is Brexit that gave the UK the freedom to decide whether to take part again; as an EU member state, our previous participation was automatic. Far from snatching away this freedom to choose its own destiny, which Brexit gave the UK, this decision might just be the best example of its realisation.

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MARÍA CORINA MACHADO:

DOUBLE STANDARDS AND MORAL INCONSISTENCIES

Venezuelan opposition leader María Corina Machado won the 2025 Nobel Peace Prize “for her tireless work promoting democratic rights for the people of Venezuela and for her struggle to achieve a just and peaceful transition from dictatorship to democracy”. She has long been a prominent political figure in the country and a vocal critic of both Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro and has gained worldwide fame as a beacon of human rights defence and a brave dissident to a violent dictatorship. However, is this perception of her truly consistent with the policies she supports?

Machado herself claims to be a peaceful opponent to authoritarian rule. She has often emphasized the importance of resisting injustice through civic methods in order to bring about a “bright, democratic and free” Venezuela. She has consistently framed her struggle as a just, moral, and peaceful one. In spite of this, she has very publicly supported, and even encouraged, foreign military intervention to forcefully remove Maduro from power. In 2025 she claimed that more action was needed quicker from the United States as Maduro posed a security threat to them. When, in early 2026, the United States did just that, she praised the action saying that “what had to happen is happening”. This goes directly against her fundamental ideal of defending the democratic process as a foreign military power forcefully removed Venezuela’s president. In that process, the United States also bombed the nation’s capital, Caracas, a fact which she has not addressed. This suggests a major inconsistency in Machado’s supposed peaceful and moral resistance as she seemed to have no problem circumventing the democratic process and putting Venezuelan citizens’ lives in danger to have Maduro tried in court.

María Corina Machado has been a big critic of state violence in Venezuela, and justifiably so. Maduro’s government has been accused of repression, torture, and killings. This has provoked large-scale criticism from the international community. However, an inconsistency can also be observed in this case. Although Machado is justified in criticizing the government’s practices in Venezuela, she does seem to tolerate it in other places. Most notably, Machado has long been a supporter of the Israeli government who she promised Venezuela would have a close relationship with, should she win the elections. They too have been accused of repression, torture, and killings among a myriad of other human rights violations. Suggesting that perhaps her criticisms are less founded on the ethical issues associated with Maduro’s government and more of a pragmatic choice allowing her to apply further pressure on them. This can also be seen in her praise of El Salvador’s president,

Nayib Bukele who she thanked for his solidarity with Venezuelan democracy following the 2024 presidential elections where Machado was blocked from running despite having won

the opposition primaries. Bukele’s government has also been accused of numerous human right violations and has been observed as having authoritarian tendencies. Her lack of criticism with respect to this suggests that her defence of human rights is less of a universal principle and more of a political instrument.

María Corina Machado has been pursued by Nicolás Maduro’s authoritarian government and has genuinely feared for her life because of her political views and opposition to a dictator. Machado’s struggle is a legitimate one which could bring about positive change for the citizens of Venezuela, however her ethical framework is inconsistent. It is selective and seems to only be employed when it furthers her political goals. In spite of this she is often portrayed in the media as a brave dissident who is a symbol of moral resistance. This highlights a wider issue with opposition politics where it is often solely focused on the actor being opposed. In general, democratic opposition should also be judged by its own politics and where values are applied inconsistently, criticisms are justified.



THE EPSTEIN FILES: WHAT THEY MEAN FOR [REDACTED] AND THE WIDER POLITICAL ELITE

On November 19 2025, President Trump signed the Epstein Files Transparency Act, a bipartisan bill that forced the Department of Justice to release all relevant investigative materials connected to the Jeffrey Epstein case within a 30-day deadline. On the final day of said deadline, the Department of Justice released hundreds of thousands of photos and documents, with plans for further releases extending into the new year and beyond as the department continues to review additional evidence. Prior to this, Democrats on the House Oversight Committee had successfully pushed for the release of several images and files relating to the investigation, piling significant pressure on the Trump administration to fully commit to releasing the remaining materials.

Many notable figures, including the President himself, former President Bill Clinton, disgraced former Royal Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor, and numerous other high-profile public figures have been named or pictured in the files. However, the Department of Justice has come under significant fire for its failure to meet its legal obligation to release the material in full. Deputy Attorney General Todd Blanche has stated that “several hundred thousand files” remain under review and have yet to be made public, despite the 30-day deadline imposed by Congress. Additionally, large portions of the released files have been heavily redacted, causing increasing doubts over whether the judicial system, and wider political establishment can be trusted to reveal the truth and hold those involved to account.

For many, the release of the Epstein files has been a long time coming, with the Trump administration changing its stance on the files’ existence, contents, and who may be involved several times. Trump initially pledged to support the release of further material if he was re-elected, framing this as part of his promise to “drain the swamp” and take on the political establishment. Following his re-election, Attorney General Pam Bondi told Fox News that the Epstein “client list” was on her desk, ready for review and public release.

However, this position quickly shifted. Trump began downplaying the severity of the files, referring to them as a “Democrat hoax” designed to distract the public from his administration’s achievements on other issues. This framing recast demands for transparency as a partisan attack rather than a genuine concern over the case, raising further suspicion about the administration’s motives and ability to release the truth. Bondi later clarified that she had been referring to the wider Epstein case files and that no formal “client list” existed, prompting calls for her resignation from across the political spectrum.

In a dramatic U-turn, Trump later urged Republicans to support the release of the files, stating that they had “nothing to hide,” before signing the Transparency Act days later. The chaotic journey leading up to the files’ release, combined with the extent

of the redactions, has placed the President and his administration under intense scrutiny. Critics argue that this has fuelled allegations of a potential cover-up and that the administration is ultimately failing to protect the real victims of Epstein.

Notably, criticism has not been limited to Democrats or Trump’s usual political opponents. Members of the MAGA base, including former Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene, alongside other members of the Republican Party like Representative Thomas Massie, have been vocally critical of the administration’s handling of the files. This marks a shift away from the typically partisan pattern of criticism, where Republicans and Trump’s core base have often rushed to his defence in the face of scandal. Instead, the Epstein files have become a genuinely bipartisan issue, with implications for the wider political establishment and further damaging trust between politicians, the public and the governing elite.

Repeated denial, narrative-shifting and attempts to reframe involvement appear to have intensified, rather than suppressed, public demands for transparency. In this sense, the Epstein files have shifted from questions of individual involvement to a broader reckoning over whether political elites can preserve public trust when confronted with allegations that directly threaten their power and credibility. Whilst previously politicians and public figures have been able to somewhat weather a scandal, the Epstein case has evolved into a wider debate about transparency, trust and manipulation in modern politics. It is unsurprising that Democrats have pushed for the files’ release, but the visible break from figures such as Marjorie Taylor Greene, and the growing pressure from within the Republican Party itself, suggests that this controversy presents a deeper problem for Trump than previous scandals.

Trump has repeatedly survived controversies that might have ended other political careers, showing the President’s notable resilience and ability to re-take control of a narrative. Yet many increasingly feel that this may become a Watergate moment for the President, moving beyond typical cross-party conflict to become a bipartisan issue. Therefore, whilst questions remain over how long Trump can continue to weather the storm as more files are released, what is clear is that the framing of the case as a political attack on the President takes away from the true victims of Epstein. It is difficult to see how Justice will be effectively and fairly served if it’s at the cost of those in power.

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★ FROM ASSET TO LIABILITY: ★ HOW VENEZUELA'S OIL WAS WEAPONISED

Venezuela should be one of the most powerful energy states on the planet. It holds the largest proven oil reserves among OPEC members, ahead of Saudi Arabia and Iran. Yet what should be its greatest gift has become its most enduring curse. Venezuela has been battered not only by economic mismanagement at home but also by geopolitical exploitation from abroad, spearheaded by Donald Trump. What might have been a foundation for prosperity has been transformed into a political weapon, used to isolate, punish and pressure Venezuela's capital, Caracas. In Trump's hands, Venezuelan oil ceased to be a commodity and became a tool of coercion, revealing a brutal reality of global power politics. For resource-rich states without leverage, natural wealth offers no security; rather, it becomes the very mechanism of their captivity.

Blaming Venezuela's collapse entirely on President Nicolás Maduro is tempting, but that would ignore the deeper structural problem that predated him. He inherited an economy heavily dependent on oil, which makes up two-thirds of its exports; these funds account for approximately 60% of the government budget. This dependence has left the state extremely exposed to price shocks and external economic pressure. However, while Maduro didn't create Venezuela's oil dependence, he has transformed it into a fatal weakness through mismanagement, politicisation and repression. Petróleos de Venezuela (PDVSA), once regarded as one of the world's most respected national oil companies, has experienced a massive decline in output and, consequently, revenue. PDVSA lost its engineers and technocrats as oil revenues were redirected into patronage networks, leaving maintenance and investment to wither. This undermines Maduro's claims that external pressures alone have caused Venezuela's collapse, as oil production was failing long before U.S. sanctions were imposed. Granted, sanctions undeniably worsened the crisis, as they struck an industry riddled by corruption, distortions and state interference. Rather than using the oil revenue to diversify its economy, Venezuela has doubled down on extractive dependence, reinforcing its "resource curse" dynamics. This is evident in Venezuela's weak accountability, growing autocracy and repression fuelled by resource rents. In this sense, oil was not the original sin but rather magnified by every leadership failure, turning misrule into systemic ruin.

Donald Trump didn't create the pressure on Venezuela, but he perfected it as a weapon. From the outset, he cast Nicolás Maduro as an illegitimate dictator and reframed Venezuela as a nexus of uncontrolled migration, drug trafficking and regional disorder. That narrative was not incidental; it was the political foundation for a sanction regime designed to choke the state's economic lifeline. U.S. oil sanctions cut Venezuela off from dollar

transactions, restricted access to refineries and spare parts, and pushed PDVSA to the margins of global markets, sending exports and government revenues into freefall. Oil exports, which exceeded two million barrels per day earlier in the decade, fell to well under one million after sanctions were imposed, while independent estimates suggest the state lost tens of billions of dollars in oil revenue as a direct result. The recognition of opposition leader, Juan Guaidó, in 2019 made the logic unmistakable: oil would flow again only after a regime change in Caracas. The policy played neatly into domestic politics, allowing Trump to project toughness on socialism, borders and lawlessness, while signalling to allies that energy policy could be wielded as a strategic force. In early January 2026, that logic reached its most extreme expression when U.S. forces captured Maduro and Trump announced that Washington would temporarily oversee Venezuela's political transition and engage directly with its oil sector. The episode laid bare a grim reality: Venezuela's oil no longer conferred sovereignty but invited domination. Far from delivering stability, this escalation deepened humanitarian suffering and exposed the limits of coercion masquerading as foreign policy.

The consequences of Venezuela's oil collapse are no longer abstract. More than 7.7 million Venezuelans have fled the country, creating one of the largest migration crises in the world and turning economic breakdown into a regional shock that Washington has often framed as a security threat rather than a policy failure. As the state emerges weakened and exposed, its future is increasingly shaped by external powers. China, Venezuela's largest creditor, has channelled billions through oil-backed loans, tying repayment directly to crude exports, while Russia has secured long-term extensions on joint oil ventures that embed its strategic interests deep within the energy sector. These relationships offer short-term relief but no escape. They replace Western pressure with Eastern dependency, reinforcing the same extractive model that hollowed out sovereignty in the first place. Venezuela's oil has become a prison, not a prize, binding a country with the resources to flourish into dependency, while its people are left to absorb the fallout. Until the country breaks its reliance on oil and builds institutions capable of insulating politics from resource wealth, it will remain trapped in a cycle where abundance invites control, and prosperity remains permanently out of reach.

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THE FALLOUT FROM UKRAINE: THE END OF EUROPE?

For the last 1000 years Europe has dominated the world stage. From the Holy Wars through the Enlightenment and into the 20th century, Europe has created, colonised, and controlled, until now. For the first time in “modern” history, Europe’s dominance is under threat from the expansion of global superpowers elsewhere. The US, China, and Russia have absorbed the global focus through their intensive military spending and expansive geopolitical influence. However, until recently, Europe has remained an essential player in the global game of politics.

Then, on 24 February 2022, Russia decided to test the previously untested cohesion of European powers by launching a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. For the first time since the Cold War, Europe had to respond. And respond they did. Economic restrictions collapsed Russian markets and Europe donated over \$20bn in military aid to Ukraine. Four years on from the start of this devastating conflict, millions of Ukrainian refugees are housed across Europe, and the Russian front has been mostly stagnant.

However, the invasion of Ukraine left a lot to be answered for. Our reliance on American military aid and intelligence suggested that perhaps Europe isn’t as powerful as we had assumed. So, if Europe can’t defend itself alone, then what real power do we have?

In terms of military, European spending on defence is expected to reach somewhere just shy of the \$460bn mark in the coming year. To put this into context, Russian spending sits around \$150bn, China is between \$235-\$315bn, and the US clocks in just shy of \$1 trillion. When looking solely at numbers, Europe as a continent possesses the second most powerful military in the world.

Economically, Asia has financially crippled European manufacturing. Whilst Europe has focused on high quality clothes, materials, and cars, Asia has found cheap labour and even cheaper materials which led to the mass production of affordable clothing and the outsourcing of general manufacturing to Asia, specifically China. Consequentially we saw the decline of British steel, coal and other key elements of European economies in the late 20th century. Furthermore, Germany’s illustrious automobile industry is now under threat from cheaper companies such as BYD.

Europe never found its footing with regards to the tech industry. Instead, we fell behind as Silicon Valley became the centre of the technological world. Taiwan then became a key player in the production of microchips, and companies such as Nvidia, Apple, Google, etc. controlled the markets entirely. Meanwhile, European leaders claim to be investing in AI, yet we have seen a complete dominance in this field from the US and China. Once again, Europe has fallen behind.

Caught up in the messy politics of immigration and populism,

European politics has gone from a cohesive and strong EU to a mess of fragmented nations who suffer intense domestic turmoil regarding their own politics. The Far Right has risen across Europe in response to growing immigration and economic stagnation, Brexit has become a talking point of the continent, and regional differences between countries (especially in the East) seem to block any real productive talks.

But it’s not all doom and gloom. Europe as a continent can be one of the most positively influential forces today. We possess extreme amounts of soft power, from our history, major cities, legacy, and general standings within the world, Europe can still retain its place on the world stage and prevent the domination of unpredictable and unstable superpowers such as the US and China.

Europe still has meaning in modern politics but to achieve anything we, as a continent, need to work together with the intention of being seen as a superpower. That means standing up to Trump’s conviction of buying Greenland, stopping Russian expansion into Europe, and creating an identity for ourselves.

Last year we saw Prime Minister Keir Starmer and Italian PM Giorgia Meloni come together from different sides of the political spectrum and cooperate positively. We then saw the newly elected Canadian PM Mark Carney get invited to European talks, showing our solidarity as a continent against President Trump’s aggressive foreign policies.

If we do not continue to show cooperation and influence, then we risk living in a world defined by the unpredictability of American politics and Chinese autocracy. Europe can and needs to step forward.

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STARMER'S FIRST YEAR: CHANGE

What a year in British Politics! There is little doubt that 2025 has been a tumultuous political period, with pressures that would test any administration, from extreme market pressures to multiple foreign policy crises. The Labour Party under Prime Minister Keir Starmer has governed the most challenging era of the 21st Century. Nevertheless, Britain has seen a measured approach to policy, revealing a consciously cautious style of politics. One constrained by tight public finances and a determination to project stability even as events unfold rapidly. The first year, therefore, should be judged as much by restraint as by change.

The key demonstration of the government's cautious approach has been on the economic front. Faced with a large fiscal hole inherited from the Tories, Chancellor Rachel Reeves finely tuned public finances rather than rushing to break the bank. A few examples include: reducing cash ISA allowances, reducing business rates on hospitality, retaining a fuel duty cut, and freezing income tax and national insurance thresholds. All of these actions are aimed at reducing the cost of living whilst retaining fiscal sustainability. This is not to say that there were also some more politically controversial and consequential decisions taken: freezing rail fares and nationalising trains, reinstating winter fuel payments, ending the two-child benefit cap, and reforming inheritance tax all got their fair share of headlines, but were carefully considered and were decisions taken not as a result of extenuating pressures placed onto the government. This year, we have seen a calm, calculated, and unradical approach to the economy.

Whilst fine-tuning finances, Starmer's government also began strategically investing in key industries. The green energy sector saw progress when Parliament passed the Great British Energy Act 2025, creating a new publicly owned energy company, Great British Energy. Its tasks: accelerating clean, domestically produced power from the people with a £8.3 billion budget. The YIMBY (Yes in My Back Yard) faction of labour saw its interests being fulfilled as the government introduced new planning regulations and began building towards its 1.5 million new homes target.

The government has also begun a comprehensive domestic plan to improve the lives of everyday people in various ways. In healthcare, the new 10-Year NHS Plan aims to hire more staff,

boost funding, shift care out of hospitals, and hit long-delayed waiting-time targets. In infrastructure, tens of billions are being pledged for new roads, schools, and renewable projects. And on housing, not only is the government investing in new homes, but they also passed the Renter Rights Act, which banned no-fault evictions, limited rent increases, and introduced rules around deposits and advance rent.

Starmer frames his policy as a carefully balanced package to "reform the creaking state," which aims at kickstarting growth and addressing challenges. Supporters have praised the mixed reform approach as a pragmatic long-term strategy with tangible real-world implications for people. However, critics within Labour argue that this focus on fiscal stability has killed any political momentum built during the election campaign. Opposition parties have also focused on high-profile missteps, such as the government's reversal on winter fuel payments, and Deputy PM Angela Rayner's stamp duty scandal.

More broadly, voters have often criticised that the government's changes are incremental and too slow to tackle the UK's most pressing challenges. Labour's cautious approach aims to reassure markets and convince moderate voters, but it risks alienating those seeking bold, immediate change. Many such voters have turned to more radical alternatives, such as Reform UK, which promises large-scale deportations and now beats Labour in the polls, or the Green Party, which advocates for sweeping taxation of the super-rich, or even the newly formed, struggling, Your Party.

Starmer and Reeves' economic plan reflects a middle-of-the-road approach and does not follow an ideological purity that some previous iterations of Labour may have demanded. The reforms, though often nuanced and still a topic of heavy debate, have seen some successes. Already, inflation seems to be cooling, with an eight-month low of 3.2% in November 2025, and interest rates were cut to 3.75% in December 2025.

As Labour enters its second year, the central question is what comes next. On one hand, there is pressure to deliver more change for working families: raise living standards, fix public services, and make Britain feel more prosperous. On the other hand, the government knows it cannot risk economic disruption by overspending.



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AND THE POLITICS OF RESTRAINT

Whilst politics at home has been relatively unrevolutionary, the same cannot be said for the international arena. The new paradigm of global relations in 2025 has posed challenges for every nation, yet Starmer has taken a calm, non-combative approach, favouring steady diplomacy and cooperation with European neighbours. The approach that has often yielded concrete results.

Starmer's central challenge this year has been to build improvement out of chaos. His government has faced economic crisis, international uncertainty, and scandal. Despite this, he has been able to pass consequential legislation, rebuild strained relationships abroad, and restore a measure of trust in government whilst softening international impacts at home.

Despite the reflection of Donald Trump, the placement of tariffs and the publishing of a hostile US Security Strategy, Starmer has managed to keep the USA engaged with key issues. Early in the year, we saw the placement of multiple tariffs on the UK. This threatened to spiral into a trade war, but the government did not reply with a sudden retaliation, instead it coaxed out a successful sector-by-sector series of agreements that minimised the US tariff impact. For example, partial reductions were achieved on steel and car duties, in exchange for easing UK tariffs on American beef and ethanol.

Furthermore, Starmer has maintained continuity on global issues that are important to British security, such as emphasising shared support for NATO, Ukraine, and a rules-based order. While supporters view this as a strategic solution under difficult circumstances, critics often note the deal remains narrow and falls short of a full free-trade agreement; they also criticise the PM for not meeting the aggressive policies with a show of strength. However, supporters are often quick to point out that successes are more important than rhetoric.

In 2024, Keir Starmer promised a 'reset' in relations, and we have seen this in 2025. The government's approach to Europe has been close and friendly, a stark difference to previous years. Labour has priorities, rebuilding bridges, and cooperating with neighbours and the European Parliament on mutual interests. Already, the UK has pledged to rejoin the Erasmus+ program and worked with European Allies to provide support to Ukraine. Going forward, especially as economic pressure mounts and hostility from former allies grows, the government will likely look to work with its closest neighbours. Already, Starmer plans to work with Brussels in three key areas to help the free flow of trade: food and farm exports, electricity, and emissions trading.

A controversial highlight of 2025 international policy decisions was the government's move to reduce the UK's overseas aid budget from 0.5% of GNI to 0.3% by 2027 in order to fund a planned rise in defence spending to around 2.5% of GDP. Starmer described the cut as "very difficult and painful," but argued it was necessary to meet shifting geopolitical pressures and ensure the security of the UK. The cut came at a particularly painful time in developmental aid, as the USA also gutted its international aid department, USAID. International aid cuts have been an

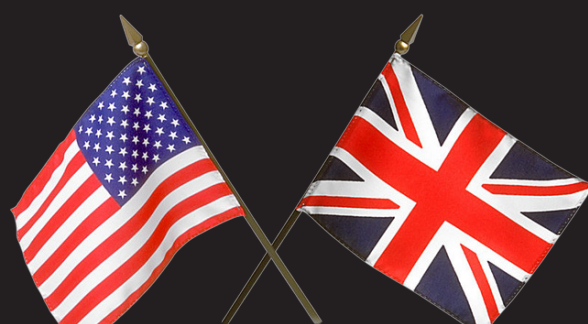
instance this year where we see the real, immediate impact of economic difficulties.

There is no doubt that international relations have been rocky in 2025, but the government has steered them well. Starmer has been able to navigate unstable allies, a shifting world order, and an impending trade war by strengthening old relationships and making painful but calculated and pragmatic choices.

Alongside improving the lives of British people, a core promise of the Labour 'change' manifesto in 2024 was to rebuild trust in government and to raise the standards of politics. Upon taking government, Starmer set up an ethics unit and barred ministers from riding in second cars, etc. But the year has still seen its share of controversies; no government is perfect. The biggest story was Deputy PM Angela Rayner's admission that she had underpaid stamp duty on a second home she bought in London. Her opponents cried hypocrisy, but Rayner defended herself as having followed flawed legal advice, and promptly resigned from her role in government. The Rayner affair may have damaged the clean politics appeal that Labour wanted to portray, but it has not destroyed it. Starmer's response has consistently been to highlight accountability and, even if damaging to his government, cooperate with standards inquiries. This contrasts with previous governments, many of whose decisions, particularly around Covid-era procurement, are only now coming under formal investigation.

This imperative to 'behave' well in government has had its benefits and concerns. Whilst helping to reduce cynicism and corruption in politics, there has also been tighter control on MPs. Starmer and his whips have insisted on loyalty, causing some backbenchers to complain that they have little say in policy and fear deselection if they rock the boat. We have seen MPs frequently being suspended if they vote against government policy, for example, seven rebels on the two-child benefit cap were expelled from the party. But this itself has benefits; supporters note that the government has held most key votes easily, creating political certainty in an unstable political context.

Starmer's central challenge this year has been to build improvement out of chaos. His government has faced economic crisis, international uncertainty, and scandal. Despite this, he has been able to pass consequential legislation, rebuild strained relationships abroad, and restore a measure of trust in government whilst softening international impacts at home. Voters may not always welcome the calculated, cautious approach to policy, but there are signs it is delivering stability and incremental progress. The key question going forward is whether this model of governance restraint can survive as political pressures intensify. Will Labour be forced to choose bolder change?



ISRAEL'S RECOGNITION OF SOMALILAND: MARRIAGE OF CONVENIENCE OR GENUINE FRIEND- SHIP?

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Against the backdrop of what has widely been described as a genocidal campaign in Gaza, the increasingly scrutinised State of Israel has, understandably, found it difficult to make friends on the international arena. Even countries like the UK and Poland, which have traditionally stood by the US's *carte blanche*, have now called on Israel to stand down in Gaza, and have recognised Palestinian statehood, much to the Israeli government's displeasure and protest. Yet even for Israel it seems, there are roses among thorns. The country has recently become the first to recognise the independence of Somaliland, a breakaway region and de-facto independent state in northwest Somalia.

So, what does Somaliland offer for them? Above all else, location. This may seem irrelevant at first given the territory's relative distance from Gaza, but Somaliland sits right next to the Babel-Mandeb strait. Even without the context of local politics, the region is a global lifeline for the trade of natural gas and oil to the Suez Canal. This has been reason enough for Israel's political bedfellow, the US, to begin making its own overtures to Somaliland.

For Israel specifically, across this strait lies one of their main political rivals: the Houthis in Yemen. They have been among the most steadfast advocates for the Palestinian cause, going as far as to attack Israeli commerce travelling through the area in solidarity with Gaza. It is no wonder then, that through securing influence in their backdoor, Israel will strengthen its ability to both protect its shipments and potentially strike back against the Houthis. The country is no stranger to strategic bombardment, regardless of the diplomatic circumstances. It has been demonstrated countless times, from their relentless and indiscriminate bombing of Gaza, to strikes against the new Syrian regime that annihilated its air and naval capabilities. Somaliland then, is yet another potential launchpad for Israel's militaristic powerplay.

Additionally, and more disturbingly, recognition could be an effort to advance Israel's plans to forcibly relocate Gaza's population, which the Israeli government has shamelessly hinted at several times before. Somaliland, with its shared religion, would be a natural target.

Among geopolitical experts, the above proves to be already clear. But another question to ask is whether this development is purely a marriage of convenience. Israel for their part has made overtures about deepening ties across the board, not just in military affairs. However, given Israel's heavy emphasis on necessary *realpolitik*, rather than true regional integration, there is good reason to be sceptical of any claimed commitments to international harmony. Agreements like the Abraham Accords, for instance, have never gone beyond the nominal normalisation of relations, let alone a significant increase in mutual investments.

For Somaliland, the situation is more complicated. The country is unlikely to get much recognition for its cause from elsewhere. The African Union has held a longstanding precedent of downplaying

breakaways, out of fears that legitimising one will cause a cascade that would destabilise its other members. Only South Sudan has managed to bypass this firewall in recent history, and the AU was quick to condemn Israel's recognition. The region has also had a troubled history with the rest of Somalia, having fought a war of independence in the 1980s against the government of Siad Barre, which led to tens of thousands of deaths from government reprisals. Negotiations with the Somali government since then, have frequently stalled.

It would make political sense, therefore, for Somaliland to not turn down this development entirely. The President responded to the recognition with gratitude, and a promise to ascend to the Abraham Accords. Nevertheless, Somaliland also have their limits, with the country denying any intent, for now, to consent to Israeli proposals to relocate Palestinians to the region.

The fragility of this high politics becomes even more clear when analysing the response from the Somalilanders themselves. Despite support for Israeli recognition in Berbera, hundreds of young protestors took to the streets of Boroma to defy Israel's actions, out of support for Palestine, and broader fraternity with the Islamic world. The war in Gaza is almost universally condemned in the Islamic world for advancing the near-imperialist ambitions of Israel against the Palestinian people. Such a moral dilemma holds as much weight in Somaliland as it does elsewhere.

On the broader geopolitical stage, these moves have created significant risk for both Israel and Somaliland. Israel's recognition has been universally condemned by most of the world's major regional blocs, including the EU, for undermining Somali sovereignty. Countries like China have gone as far as to call out Israel for what their plans are: a selfish attempt to interfere in regional politics to advance their own interests.

Worse still, Israel's actions could restart major military conflict between Somalia and Somaliland, now as a proxy war of regional powers. Turkey, whose relations have soured with Israel over Gaza, has already held an emergency meeting with the President of Somalia to reaffirm support. The sharing of military equipment and intelligence on both sides to gain an edge over the other, from two countries with sophisticated capabilities, cannot be ruled out.

Israel's recognition of Somaliland is a hot potato of a strategic partnership, one that holds massive stakes for both sides. While they have found natural affinity in lacking alternate avenues, it has come at the cost of both countries' reputations internationally, and the risk of further militarisation and conflict at the expense of ordinary lives. Ultimately, if Somaliland seek to present themselves as a case for self-determination, they may be better off not dealing with a state that actively undermines such a principle at every level.

REFLECTIONS ON A YEAR IN POST-ASSAD SYRIA



On December 8, 2024 the Ba'athist regime came to a close, with Bashar al-Assad and his family fleeing to Moscow following the capture of Damascus by militant forces. Known to many as 'The Butcher', Assad's regime had been characterised by "arbitrary arrests and detention, torture, extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, rape, and mass surveillance." Thus the end of the 53-year regime, with 24 years under Bashar al-Assad, saw many Syrians celebrating the end of a violent dictatorship they had known all their lives.

Hopes for a new political beginning were articulated by Ahmad al-Sharaa, whose forces had seized Damascus and now head the transitional government. Speaking at the Umayyad Mosque, Sharaa promised to rebuild a "strong and just Syria" for all, pledging reconstruction and national renewal for the war-torn nation. These declarations signalled unity, inclusivity, and a decisive break from the practices of the past. But Assad's departure did not resolve the question of Syria's recovery. One year on, Syria's first experiment in post-Assad governance reveals the profound challenges of transitioning from authoritarian collapse to political renewal.

Although Syria's new rulers have managed to reintegrate the country into the global community, the disappearance of the previous coercive state did not automatically produce stability or effective governance. Instead, Syria entered 2025 as a fragmented political space due to the lack of a coherent system of governance, with power dispersed across the transitional authorities, ex-rebel groups, and local militias rather than through functioning state institutions, with sporadic clashes and localised unrest highlighting the fragility of the post-war order.

The transitional President, Sharaa, stands at the centre of this fragile nation. His ascent from insurgent commander to head of state encapsulates both the possibilities and contradictions of post-Assad Syria. A former warlord with a documented jihadist past, Sharaa has attempted to reshape his image by presenting him as a pragmatic nationalist committed to form an inclusive government. Since assuming office, he has distanced himself from transnational Islamist movements, emphasised Syrian sovereignty, and adopted rhetoric centred on unity and gradual reform.

Despite progress, significant challenges to Syria's transition persist. There were significant clashes in Latakia in March and in Suwayda in July, resulting in the deaths of hundreds of civilians. The northeast and south of the country are not under the control of the Syrian government.

These territorial and security challenges have exposed the structural weaknesses of Sharaa's government. The lack of a unified national army, instead a patchwork of former rebel forces whose loyalty remains conditional, has made it hard to implement an inclusive government. Efforts to integrate these groups into a central command have progressed slowly, hampered by competing

interests, regional identities, and mistrust accumulated over years of conflict. As a result, governance in many areas remains transactional rather than institutional, with authority negotiated on the ground rather than enforced uniformly.

This fragmentation has also constrained the government's ability to deliver basic services and economic relief, deepening public frustration. While Sharaa has prioritised security consolidation to prevent renewed war, this focus has come at the expense of political inclusivity and social reconciliation. For many Syrians, the post-Assad order has therefore replaced one form of uncertainty with another, as the promise of peace has yet to translate into tangible improvements in daily life.

Justice is also an unresolved aspect of Syria's transition. The UN human rights office warned that progress had been slow, noting that "while the interim authorities have taken encouraging steps towards addressing past violations, these steps are only the beginning of what needs to be done." Weak judicial accountability has allowed continued violence, resulting in hundreds of deaths involving both state-affiliated and non-state armed groups. Without meaningful judicial reform, the pursuit of stability risks entrenching impunity rather than addressing past abuses.

Despite these domestic challenges, Sharaa's transitional government has achieved a degree of international acceptance that many observers initially considered unlikely. Sharaa's high-profile engagement with Trump and his visits to regional capitals such as Riyadh and Ankara have signalled a cautious warming of relations, portraying him internationally as a pragmatic actor willing to cooperate on security and reconstruction. By signalling a clear break from transnational jihadist networks and emphasising Syria's territorial integrity, the leader has reassured regional and Western actors concerned about the country's future trajectory.

Reflecting a year on from the fall of Assad, Syria's transition presents a mixed and fragile picture. The absence of full nationwide conflict and the country's partial reintegration into the global community represent meaningful departures from the violence and isolation of Ba'athist rule. At the same time, governance remains weak, economic hardship is widespread, and political authority is unevenly distributed. Rather than a clear rupture with the past, 2025 has functioned as a transitional phase in which stability has been prioritised over transformation. As Syria looks toward 2026, the durability of this transition will depend on whether temporary arrangements can evolve into inclusive institutions capable of delivering security, economic recovery, and political legitimacy to a war-weary nation.

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INDIA'S CASH-FOR-CARE REVOLUTION: FEMINIST MOVEMENT OR VOTE-BUYING PLOY?



Although domestic work is an integral part of a functioning society, it has remained largely invisible for generations. To rectify this undervaluation, some countries have recently introduced cash-for-care systems which compensate stay-at-home mothers and wives for their unpaid work as homemakers. A significant example is India, where 118 million women across 12 states now receive cash transfers from their state governments, making it one of the world's largest social-policy experiments. While this shift may appear to offer long-overdue recognition of a female-dominated sphere, it also raises concerns about the fiscal sustainability and moral implications of monetising care work. Before rushing to label this policy a feminist victory, it is worth scrutinising its practicality and ingenuity.

India's cash-for-care schemes are administered by state governments rather than the national government, resulting in a variation of their design and implantation from state to state. These differences extend to eligibility criteria and the size of cash transfers, which range from 1,000 to 2,500 Indian rupees, around 12 to 30 USD a month. Although only worth 5 to 12% of household income, the payments are received regularly. What these schemes have in common is their unconditional nature - payments are made regardless of school attendance or employment status. This distinguishes India from other countries with large conditional cash-transfer schemes like Mexico, Brazil or Indonesia. Whilst this is a negligent decision, in a country with over 1.4 billion citizens, 70% of whom reside in rural areas, enforcing conditions is simply unfeasible as it would be costly and prone to exclusion errors, particularly when many households require immediate financial support. A survey in West Bengal supports this pragmatism, finding that recipients often spent their sum on food, education and medical costs, effectively reinvesting into their household.

These cash-for-care schemes are posed as avenues to female financial independence. This framing is particularly culturally significant in a context where women's unpaid domestic responsibilities, though essential to household survival and social reproduction, are often treated as a moral obligation rather than as economic work. By recognising care as productive labour, these programs challenge such patriarchal norms by granting women transformative financial liberty. Their agency is reflected by a 2023 survey in West Bengal found that 90% of women operated their own bank accounts and 86% decided how to spend the money themselves, rather than it being subsumed under the control of male kin. Despite the concern that compensating women for housework may deter them from joining the workforce and entrench gender roles, evidence from Indian states suggests otherwise. In Tamil Nadu, beneficiaries reported reduced financial stress, lower marital conflict, and increased self-confidence. When embedded within feminist movement that uplifts domestic work in this way, cash-for-care schemes can not only support struggling households, but also

meaningfully advance women's empowerment.

This impact, however, is not an automatic consequence of introducing such schemes. In the absence of this feminist messaging, cash-for-care schemes can instead be exploited for electoral mobilisation. What distinguishes examples like West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka from the majority of Indian states is that they are governed by non-Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) parties at the state level. In contrast, comparable schemes in BJP-majority states are depoliticised and stripped of feminist intent, with policymakers expecting women to deploy the transfers only for household welfare over small personal indulgences. This instrumentalisation invites criticism that women are being positioned less as rights-bearing citizens and more as votes to be bought by the BJP. For example, recently, in Bihar, in the weeks before polling, the government transferred 10,000 rupees to 7.5 million female bank accounts under a livelihood-generation scheme in the weeks before polling. As a result, women voted in larger numbers than men, securing the BJP a landslide victory. Even if the BJP's electoral gains from the schemes were dismissed as coincidences, they do little to advance the feminist cause in India. Since its rise, the party has largely ignored rising sexual violence against women, refused to pass the Women's Reservation Bill to include women in Parliament, and consistently produces sexist remarks from government officials, including the Prime Minister, exhibiting an utter neglect of women's quality of life. Although cash transfer schemes provide tangible benefits, they are tools that serve a clear political objective. Thus, unlike in non-BJP states, these programmes are purely superficial and cannot be considered part of a genuine feminist agenda.

An alternative response to the persistent gender gap in household labour is to implement policies that encourage men to share domestic work and provide women with access to jobs, safe workplaces, and childcare. Such measures are more economical, less susceptible to political exploitation, and less likely to reinforce women's confinement to the home. Nonetheless, cash-for-care programmes deliver substantial benefits to women, and their feminist impact could be maximized if combined with complementary initiatives that promote female education, workplace participation, and broader social support, provided adequate funding is available.

Ultimately, India's cash-for-care revolution has the potential to bolster women's financial and social autonomy when enacted within a broader feminist framework. Yet, in many states, its use as a political device by the BJP, combined with their mistreatment of women both at home and in the workforce, renders it an exploitative vote-buying ploy. Therefore, although these schemes can provide real benefits for women in need, in India they require substantial reform before they can be considered a genuine feminist movement.

SUDAN: “ONE OF THE WORLD’S WORST HUMANITARIAN CRISES”

In April of 2023, Sudan entered into a civil war that has now become one of the world’s worst humanitarian crises. Shattering all hope the Sudanese had for the establishment of democracy, a power struggle between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the powerful Rapid Support Forces (RSF) paramilitary group, resulted in a protracted conflict, marked by war crimes, genocides, sexual abuse, and famine. Almost three years on from the outbreak of war, over 30 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance; with 9.6 million internally displaced and a further 15 million children left without a home, education, or proper nutritional intake.

The war started following a prolonged period of tension revolving around dictator Omar al-Bashir who seized power during a coup in 1989. In 2019, enormous anti-Bashir protests led to an successful army-organised coup. Civilians continued their campaign for democracy and a civilian-led government was formed, however, it too was overthrown by another coup in 2021. The coup was led by two men, Gen Abdel Fattah al-Burhan (SAF leader) and his deputy Gen Mohammed Hamdan Dagalo, or ‘Hemedti’ (RSF leader). Over time, Gen Burhan and Gen Dagalo disagreed amongst themselves on the proposed move towards civilian rule, resulting in a long period of tension regarding the direction the country was to go in. On the 15th of April, these tensions came to a breaking point as the two sides commenced hostilities, marking the outbreak of the civil war. It is unclear who fired the first shot, although the result has seen over three years of heinous fighting, at the cost of civilian life.

Both the SAF and RSF have been accused of serious war crimes and violations of human rights, including the shelling of urban areas, mass civilian killings, gender-based violence, and obstruction of humanitarian aid. Hospitals, schools, markets, and more civilian inhabited areas have been strategically attacked by both sides, resulting in the collapse of health care systems and raising the alarm for human rights organisations.

Resultingly, the scale of displacement has become astonishing. Millions have fled their homes in place of neighboring countries such as Chad, South Sudan, and Egypt. Internally however, displacement camps are overcrowded and under-supplied, leaving those who have been forced to live there vulnerable to disease, malnutrition, and violence.

Perhaps the most dire consequence of the war has been its impact on the nation’s food security. Once considered the ‘breadbasket’ of the region, Sudan now faces a severe depletion of agricultural production as fighting disrupts the agricultural sector. With markets reduced to rubble, inflation sky-rocketing, and humanitarian supplied food being repeatedly blocked by the armed forces, famine conditions have been confirmed in parts of Darfur and Kordofan, as well as further tens of millions facing acute food insecurity. Starvation has become a weapon of war used by both sides, disproportionately affecting civilians.

So what has been done in an attempt to end such a horrific

injustice? In short, whilst some action has been taken, nothing of value has come to effect. The UN health chief, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, has stated he feels there is less global interest in Sudan than in other global conflicts, a view supported by Amnesty International. Several rounds of peace talks have failed, as well as numerous mediation efforts - on behalf of the African Union, IGAD, UN, and more - proving poorly coordinated and repeatedly undermined by the warring parties, who show a continued disinterest in coming to a compromise and signing truce agreements. Furthermore, humanitarian relief has been severely affected by way of the Trump administration who cut aid resources, resulting in the closure of roughly 80% of emergency food kitchens in Sudan.

The international community has much to learn from this grave injustice if effective peace talks are to be achieved. First, the current approach of fragmented diplomacy has only created space for such a war to take place, and requires a strict, coherent peace framework with meaningful accountability to prevent a similar occurrence in the future. Second, protecting humanitarian access should be a priority in itself, not a bargaining chip in negotiations.

With all this in mind, as the new year begins, many around the world look forward to change, and hope for better beginnings, whereas the people of Sudan have no such ability to do so. Due to neither the SAF or RSF coming any closer to achieving a decisive victory, and a clear absence of external support, the people of Sudan are left with little hope to help them through such troubling times. Whilst there are some regions in which fighting has temporarily eased due to local ceasefires, this only offers some cautious optimism as the growing necessity of welfare and relief becomes more and more of a pressing matter as time goes on.

The prospects for peace remain bleak as Sudan looks towards 2026.



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‘THE SECRET RIVER’, BY KATE GRENVILLE

A settler nation’s relationship with its indigenous population is a live, highly contested issue, which tends to generate emotive responses from people in countries such as Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. It is not hard to simply switch off hearing culture war-infused debates. Politicians and commentators like to make an enemy of those with different views and offer only a surface-level critique of what their opponents say. When I read Kate Grenville’s *The Secret River*, however, I found it offered a more thoughtful reflection on the topic.

Published in 2005, this historical fiction book imagines a realistic relationship between Australian Aboriginals and early British settlers at a granular level, set in the early nineteenth century around a community living along the Hawkesbury River, located north-west of central Sydney. Grenville initially intended to write a non-fiction book about her relative who settled in the area, but this research later evolved into *The Secret River*.

The narrative begins in London in the late eighteenth century, with the childhood of protagonist William Thornhill, who is born into obscene poverty in a crowded slum and survives through petty theft and precarious work as a waterman on the River Thames. His life permanently pivots when he escapes the scaffold by accepting transportation to the colony of New South Wales instead.

Thornhill, his wife, Sal, and their children are dropped into the “sad scrabbling” place that is Sydney and must restart a life for themselves in an uninsulated, government-assigned house. Whilst Sal longs to return to London, Thornhill wants to leave it in the past. After being released from the custody of the colony, Thornhill and his employer, Thomas Blackwood, journey up the Hawkesbury River, still beyond the control of the colonial administration in Sydney, but a territory familiar to the Aboriginal peoples who have inhabited the river’s surroundings for millennia before them.

Thornhill, like other men, soon carves out a plot of land for himself and his family along the river, running the family farm with help from his sons. As they interact with their fellow settlers along the river, stories of Aboriginal raids on farms further inland and the theft of Thornhill’s corn fuel a fear of imminent attack by Aboriginals. It becomes obvious that these two communities, with customs and legal systems alien to each other, are doomed to clash violently. With the implied political support that settlers receive from the colony’s government, it is obvious who will win

in the long run.

It is easy, but also simplistic, to write off the early settlers as nothing but monsters. Some of the people involved in the colonial process, in this novel and in real life, were such. But applying simplistic moral thought would be a disservice to a thoroughly engaging and detailed novel. Most of the convicts transported were from the margins of society, regarded as inferior by those who were wealthier and given few prospects for socioeconomic advancement back home. Transported to a huge, fertile landmass, they are given a second chance at life – literally, in the case of convicts who escaped a death sentence – this concept of a “fair go” at life is baked into the Australian cultural psyche. But through fear and ignorance, they lash out at a landscape and a culture they had little prospect of understanding, perceiving a threat to their agency, which they were denied in their homeland.

None of this is said with the intention of absolving these characters of their wrongdoings. Many of the settlers coexist amicably with their Aboriginal neighbours without difficulty, forming bonds of trade, friendship, and marriage. Other characters fail with little pressure, and others delight in persecuting Aboriginals. We ought to remember that many Aboriginal communities remain impoverished with significantly worse than average life outcomes.

Fiction is a way of expressing ideas and emotions towards complex topics through analogous stories that are easier for a reader to connect with compared to a dreary political address or a set of statistics. *The Secret River* is no exception in its handling of Australia’s colonial history, creating a believable illustration of early settler life through its portrayal of the convicts’ ambitions for a better chance at life. What Grenville does not permit is ignorance of the harm against Australian Aboriginals, enriching the reader’s understanding more effectively than any angry panel debate ever could.

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WAKE UP DEAD MAN OR WAKE UP AMERICA?



A review of Rian Johnson's third instalment in the Knives Out series.



The long anticipated third film in the Knives Out series was released this December and, as a fan of a murder mystery, I was very excited to watch this film with its classically ingenious and complicated Rian Johnson plot. What the audience got was certainly that, but instead of the usual light hearted comedy-focused dialogue, it was the darkest film of the series. Though Rian Johnson has played with power dynamics and class divides, the overt political theming is something he has yet to explore but it was beautifully done in this film, using a small community as a microcosm of the wider American political landscape, as well as highlighting issues such as misogyny within the church. Before I continue, there will be spoilers ahead - please go and watch the film, figure out the murder for yourself, then come back!

The film opens up with the narration of the priest Father Judd, portrayed by Josh O'Connor, as he is placed within the church of the extremist Monsignor Wicks (Josh Brolin), and his dwindling flock, our group of suspects. Firstly, I would like to highlight the women. Misogyny and shame is a huge narrative force in this film, especially within the structures of the church. We start with the mother of Monsignor Wicks, the deceased Grace, who is posthumously coined the 'Harlot Whore', a woman subjugated by her own father, shamed for becoming a single mother, hated for her sexuality and hopeful of freedom after her father's death when she is due a large inheritance that she would ultimately never receive. She is toyed with in Monsignor Wicks' preaching, as he advocates for the nuclear family, claiming it would be better to beat and starve a child than to deprive them of a father figure. It is only at the end of the film in a change in narrative that Grace is transformed through cinematography from a demonic force in red to a desperate and devastated woman, enslaved by the misogynistic forces in the church.

Women are integral to this story, the murder itself masterminded by Martha, a 'good and faithful' woman who acted to defend the church. Fuelled by a devotion to the male figures in her life, she kills for the church, trying to keep alive the legacy of Monsignor Wicks' father. The whole church is built on the labour of women, utilising the tale of Grace to further the political extremist agenda of Monsignor Wicks, the labour of Martha and her administrative work to keep the church running, another

character (Simone) is financially supporting the church in hope of a cure to her disability. Another female character, Vera, is put in a position where she must raise Monsignor Wicks' illegitimate child, an irony that she rightly calls out, holding back her legal career in the process.

Now, onto the political themes. This is only directly addressed through the political career of Cy, Wicks' son, who comes back from being the GOP golden boy but fails to connect with the people. Cy uses the 'abortion thing, the gun thing, the 5G thing' to connect with his followers as he portrays many of the flashpoint issues in the right wing of America today. The final mirror, however, is shown right at the end of the film. Benoit Blanc, the master detective played by Daniel Craig, cannot solve the case. He must wait for the ultimate confession as the reveal must come from the murderer themselves. This, I believe, is commentary from Rian Johnson on a world that reflects our own, filled with such hate and anger and division, figures like Blanc cannot come in and solve problems on behalf of the public. We must ourselves ensure that love prevails over hate, acknowledge our personal flaws, and cleanse ourselves of our own sins. This clearly mirrors America today, a world where a loyal group is tearing themselves to shreds for the benefit of one man who can do absolutely no wrong.

'Wake Up Dead Man' is a fantastic film, with a strong moral message. Without preaching or guilting it acknowledges that as humans we all have deep rooted flaws and that no man is above god however hard they may try to be. Johnson tells this story without being too overt, using subtle comparisons to show the audience the reality of our political situation and maybe change some minds on religious fundamentalism.

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DEBATE

“THE GREEN PARTY IS WHAT THIS COUNTRY NEEDS”

For

With the left-wing of UK politics in pieces and a supposedly left-wing government insistent on taking pages out of the Conservatives’ guide to austerity, Britain needs The Green Party, led by Zack Polanski, as the only viable true left-wing contender for government.

The Greens offer genuinely and unapologetically left-wing policies, giving a political home to those disillusioned with Labour’s pseudo-Conservatism. The Greens’ policies have been portrayed by rival parties as unachievable if in power however, since the election of Zack Polanski as leader the policies have become implementable. Polanski’s tax policies aren’t as radical as made out to be and are in line with left-wing leaders already exercising power, such as Manchester Mayor Andy Burnham. When defending a reform of council and land value tax, Polanski asserted “that’s not to say the market shouldn’t have a role”, dismantling the image built by the media of his hard-line anti-market policies.

Another headline policy of Polanski’s was a 1% tax on assets above £10m. While concerns have been raised that such a tax would result in the ultra-wealthy leaving the country, experts say there was no evidence of a mass millionaire exodus from the UK following a proposed wealth tax in 2024. Accordingly, there is no reason to claim this for the Greens’ policy. Another criticism is that a wealth tax won’t create funds for public investment. This argument fails to acknowledge that this is not the purpose of such a tax. Polanski asserts “whatever you’re going to create from a wealth tax, it’s ultimately about reducing inequality.” The Green Party’s economic policies are what this country needs due to their unapologetic and deliberate left-wing basis, providing a genuine alternative to the failing Labour government.

The Greens’ foreign policies are a hot area of attack with criticisms of their NATO and nuclear policy pulling attention. However, the radical extent of these policies is exaggerated, as for Polanski, „the world is in political turmoil, and we need to make sure our country is defended“. He rejects withdrawal from NATO. On issues such as immigration Reform seemingly dominates the agenda. However, this is due to a misrepresentation of the issue in the media: net immigration numbers are lower than dubious politicians make out, and immigration has repeatedly been proven to help a country’s economy and workforce.

The Greens’ policies are sensible and fit for government, with Polanski having rejected claims his party would push for open borders on immigration as it is „not pragmatic.“ The media and other parties exaggerate the Greens’ immigration policies to frame them as unsuited for power when in reality, Britain would

benefit from a pragmatic socialist approach. The Greens’ self-proclaimed pragmatism has been routinely ignored but is what this country needs: a compassionate yet practical government.

Leader Zack Polanski has launched an active programme of ‘professionalisation’ to create an electable Green Party. Polanski has claimed to have discussed possible defections with dissatisfied Labour MPs, with the number being claimed to be in “double figures”, adding that the Greens would “absolutely” welcome disillusioned MPs. Further, many ex-Labour staffers have been welcomed into the Greens ranks. This has provided the Greens with practical lived expertise, mitigating arguments of naivety and inexperience.

Shifts from Labour to the Greens aren’t just possibilities but realities, with former Labour mayor Jamie Driscoll defecting to the Green Party. In the last few months alone, defections from Labour to Green have taken place with 12 councillors, including five in Brent in mid-December, totalling 50 councillors defecting in 2025. The party of the left wing is shifting Green.

The disillusionment of the British people with the mainstream parties and the Greens’ opportunity to bring new ideas to the playing field demonstrates Britain’s needs for the Greens. The momentum of the Greens allows for an opportunity to involve new thinkers in politics, with Polanski’s self-proclaimed economic idol being Mariana Mazzucato. Mazzucato, a professor of economics at UCL, argues for state investment. Mazzucato and Polanski are in contact with each other and Mazzucato has already provided consultation for the direction of the Greens’ economic policy.

This is not to say the Greens would be ready for government tomorrow, as this modern iteration of the party is still in its infancy. However, they are taking active steps to prepare the party in their perceived weaker areas such as economics, with the new, independent think tank ‘Verdant’ being set up and ready to launch in early 2026.

The UK needs the Green Party because it is their destiny to unite the left which, in turn, will bring the necessary expertise to prepare them in time for the next election. All areas of British politics know the Greens are what the country needs; that’s why they’re so hypnotised by Polanski’s ability to enlarge the Greens’ popularity and are so focused on their one-track attack on his past. As Polanski said, “British politics is changing, Greens are giving Britain hope again.”

*Ed Watkins;
1st Year, History, Hertfordshire*

Against

Since becoming leader of the Green Party in September 2025, Zack Polanski has significantly increased the popularity of the party in the polls and their membership numbers, which recently surpassed 175,000.

Branding his style of communication 'eco-populism', Polanski has used social media to challenge the political establishment and articulate a more positive vision for Britain, to counter the hate and division sown by the politics of Reform UK. Despite his positivity, critics have increasingly questioned the substance of his proposed policies. The general secretary of the Fabian Society, Joe Dromey, has criticised the "twin populisms" of Reform UK and the Green Party, arguing "their politics are very different but both of them are pushing simplistic solutions to challenging problems that just don't stand up to scrutiny". Polanski has also faced criticism from within his party. During the leadership election, Green MP Ellie Chowns said: "I think it

is neither possible nor desirable to be the Reform of the left", arguing "fundamentally, people do want politicians that they can trust and are credible".

Nowhere is this trustworthiness more important than in relation to the economy, due to the worsening cost-of-living crisis. Polanski's recent interview with The Rest is Politics podcast sparked debate surrounding his economic credibility, as Rory Stewart challenged his knowledge of taxation, the debt and the deficit.

Polanski's main economic policy is a wealth tax, which consists of an annual tax of 1% on assets above £10 million and 2% on assets above £1 billion. He has suggested the policy could raise between £15 billion and £25 billion each year and would drastically reduce wealth inequality. However, this policy has been challenged as unrealistic. Joe Dromey has suggested that the Green Party is offering "fantasy" solutions which "won't solve the kind of fiscal challenge we face". Evidence from other countries that have implemented wealth taxes also undermine the credibility of the policy. The number of developed countries with a wealth tax has reduced from 12 in 1990 to 4 in 2025, with tax expert Dan Neidle suggesting: "almost all raised a pittance, hit the middle class more than the ultra-wealthy and were abolished". In France, their wealth tax took the form of the *impôt de solidarité sur la fortune* (ISF), which was a tax of 0.5% to 1.5% on individuals with assets over €10 million. The policy caused 60,000 millionaires to leave the country between 2000 and 2016 and only contributed to 2% of tax receipts when it was in place. The policy therefore risks decreasing the future tax base through capital flight from the UK; the Institute for Fiscal Studies highlights that "trying to raise large amounts of revenue from only the very wealthy would make the UK a less attractive place for those to live".

Defence is another essential policy area, particularly in an era marked by increasing geopolitical instability due to threats from Russia and the unreliability of President Trump as an ally. In their 2024 manifesto, the Green Party called for the dismantling of Trident, Britain's nuclear deterrent, and the removal of all foreign nuclear weapons from UK soil. The Trident missile

system acts as an at-sea deterrent, with one of Britain's four nuclear-armed submarines always in the ocean to deter nuclear attacks. Despite criticisms about its high cost, its reliance on US technology and fundamental objections amongst anti-nuclear campaigners, dismantling Britain's entire nuclear defences during an increasingly volatile period would be a dangerous step. Whether the Green Party chooses to include this policy in their future election manifestos will be an important consideration in deciding their credibility. Polanski has also suggested "the age of NATO is now fully over" and that Britain should withdraw from the treaty in the long-term. Despite his focus on ensuring peace and emphasising diplomatic relationships, critics have suggested that his scepticism towards NATO, an essential alliance for Britain's defence, reveals the Green Party's lack of credibility on issues of defence.

The Green Party under Zack Polanski has been hugely successful in increasing its popularity, however so far, it has proven itself as a successful movement, rather than a credible governing party. Particularly in the midst of a cost-of-living crisis and serious threats to UK security, the Green Party is not currently offering what Britain needs, as its policies often do not hold up to scrutiny. The coming years will be crucial in determining whether the party can combine its strong communication methods with more credible policies, in order to transform popularity into governing capability.



Charlotte Roff;

2nd Year, French and History, Slough

SUPPORTING THE STUDENT VOICE IN PAIS

In PAIS we value your feedback; we know this is a challenging time and we want to do all we can to support you to succeed. Based on your ideas, we have put together an exciting agenda of events, activities and opportunities this term and beyond - please check our emails, social media and webpages for more details.

ACADEMIC SUPPORT

Academic support for students is a top priority for PAIS so please:

- Sign up for our Virtual Common Room chats on a range of topics including essay writing, wellbeing and the liberated curriculum.
- Benefit from our online workshops on essay writing for second years and finalists.
- Benefit from our online workshops on preparing for your online open book exams.

STUDY CHOICES

In response to your feedback, we have put together detailed online guides on making your study choices, including which modules to take, which assessment methods to choose and advice on applying to postgraduate study.

STUDENT VOICE

We want to hear from you and have a number of opportunities for you to feed-back on your course throughout the year including via your Course Reps and our end-of-year module evaluation surveys. There is also the National Student Survey (NSS) which will open for finalists on Monday, 8th February - we would love you to complete it!

EMPLOYABILITY SERIES

Following your feedback, we are running an Employability Series with a number of exciting speakers from a range of careers speaking at events this term. Details will be shared shortly.

EVENTS AND SEMINAR SERIES

Embed yourself in the PAIS research culture and attend our Wednesday Research Seminar Series which is open to all PAIS staff and students. Finalists are also encouraged to join the Burning Issues: Geopolitics Today MA lecture series which focuses on contemporary world politics.

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