

# THE DISPATCH

News, views & miscellany

## THE TOP 5 STORIES ON BIGISSUE.COM LAST WEEK

1. Priti Patel's 'refugee pushback' policy has been scrapped days before a High Court review

2. Tory MP Neil Parish resigns after admitting twice watching porn in the House of Commons

3. After the musical Six comes SVN – meet the group redefining girl power in 2022

4. Jeri Ryan recalls fighting Dwayne 'The Rock' Johnson on *Star Trek: Voyager*

5. Here's how to check air pollution levels at your address

## HOUSING

### Boris Johnson wants to bring back Right to Buy in a very big way. There could not be a worse time to do it, warn experts

● Boris Johnson's plan to extend the Right to Buy scheme to allow housing association tenants to buy their home at a knockdown price has been labelled as a ploy to secure votes from low-income households in traditional "red wall" areas.

The Prime Minister is looking to give as many as 2.5 million people the chance to buy their home for a discount of up to 70 per cent on the market price, depending on the number of years they have spent living in the property.

Johnson is also exploring using money spent on housing benefit to contribute to mortgages, according to reports in *The Daily Telegraph* that appeared just days before last week's local elections in England. A government source told the newspaper the PM "has got very excited about this".

A government spokesperson told *The Big Issue*, "We want everyone to be given the chance to own a home of their own, and we keep all options to increase home ownership under review."

The Right to Buy scheme was originally the brainchild of Margaret Thatcher in the Eighties. The scheme allowed council house tenants to buy their home at a large discount, with the government issuing local authorities receipts to build or acquire homes to replace them. But the policy has been criticised for the erosion of social

housing stock, with thousands of homes sold into the private sector, leaving a shortage of affordable housing that has contributed to the housing crisis. Very few replacement homes were built. The Welsh and Scottish governments both scrapped the scheme in recent years.

Johnson's latest scheme has not been roundly welcomed. "Millions of families in the private rented sector with low savings and facing sky high-costs and rising bills need far more ambitious plans to help them buy their own home," said Lisa Nandy, Labour's shadow housing secretary.

Meanwhile, Polly Neate, chief executive of Shelter, said only five per cent of the social homes sold off to the private sector were replaced. "The hare-brained idea of extending Right to Buy to housing associations is the opposite of what the country needs," she added.



▼ Right to Buy was a key part of Tory leader and General Election winner Margaret Thatcher's 1979 manifesto, and proved to be a hugely popular policy

## DEMOCRACY

### New voter ID laws make it harder for young people to vote

● New laws making voter ID mandatory at elections do not allow young people to use their railcards – but older people's travelcards will be accepted.

The Elections Bill, one of the bills rushed through at the last minute before the end of the parliamentary session, will make it mandatory for voters to show photographic ID at the polling booth. It is likely to come into effect for the May 2023 local elections. Ministers say it will protect the "integrity" of elections and prevent voter fraud. Labour says the Tories are "trying to rig the rules of the game to help themselves".

The bill sets out a list of identification documents that will be accepted as valid forms of identification, including passports and driving licences. Yet while some forms of travel passes for older people will be permitted, young people's railcards, including the 16 to 25 and the 26 to 30 versions, are not on the list.

#### THE CONCESSIONARY TRAVEL PASSES WHICH WILL BE ACCEPTED ARE:

1 OLDER PERSON'S BUS PASS

2 DISABLED PERSON'S BUS PASS

3 OYSTER 60+ CARD

4 FREEDOM PASS

A House of Lords amendment shows peers tried to get national railcards, student ID cards and 18+ student Oyster cards added to the list of valid documents. But it was rejected because "the Commons consider the requirement to provide adequate photographic identification to be the most effective means of securing the integrity of the electoral system".

In December, MPs warned that millions of people could be locked out from voting due to not having a valid form of photo ID, including those from ethnic minority backgrounds, who are less likely to possess valid ID. Recent research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that low-income potential voters are six times less likely to have a photo ID than those that are wealthier.

## OPINION

### The left has a London problem

Sam Bright

Journalist and author



● "Levelling up" has been etched onto our political psyche over the last few years, by virtue of the verbosity of Boris Johnson.

Using the Brexit referendum as a springboard, Johnson went into the 2019 General Election pledging to finish what he had started – to "get Brexit done" – and then to improve the fortunes of those who had delivered their defiance against Brussels in 2016.

Indeed, the modern Johnson political project has involved an uncomfortable pact with former industrial towns and cities, whose inhabitants entrusted an Old Etonian with their anti-establishment yearnings. It now costs some £50,000 a year to attend Eton – nearly twice the average annual full-time salary in Wakefield, a 'red wall' seat that flipped to the Tories in 2019.

This pact has also been uncomfortable in practice, as Johnson has done little to fulfil his levelling up pledges,

beyond his rhetorical fervour. In a recent report, the Institute for Government concluded the government's 12 levelling up missions – stipulated in its white paper – will not have a positive impact on regional inequality.

However, despite Johnson's increasingly hollow pontification and a galling disparity between his lived experiences and those who inhabit the 'red wall', the left has been floundering even more comically on the issue of regional inequality. And it has been comical. For a movement that claims to loathe inequality and injustice, Labour's vain attempt to prevent the desecration of its political heartlands has been a study in absurdist self-sabotage.

The party has become ideologically and politically detached from the 'red wall' – because its thought leaders have retreated to the all-consuming capital, a place radically different from the rest of Britain.



▲ Labour has 47 MPs in London, far more than any other political party

Labour has seemed impervious to the needs of former industrial areas – confined to self-captivity in the capital

London's output is between 30 per cent and 50 per cent greater than the rest of the country, its property prices are roughly double the England-wide average, while poor kids in the capital are twice as likely to attend university as their socioeconomic peers in the north.

Yet, London is now the site of left-wing politics. Traditional routes into the Labour movement have been curtailed, Westminster being the only available finishing school for future left-wing leaders.

And as London offers a stage for left-wing debate – and acts as the epicentre of its political successes – the capital and its excesses have been stoically defended by the Labour movement, provoking resentment among 'red wall' areas that are rightfully spiteful of the capital's lofty status in national life.

Previous avenues into the party have fallen into disrepair, including the trail leading through the trade union movement, which used to be an important sponsor of regional interests in the Labour Party.

Even competing against an Old Etonian former mayor of London, Labour has seemed impervious to the needs of former industrial areas – confined to self-captivity in the capital, slowly wandering into the electoral wilderness.

Sam Bright is the author of *Fortress London: Why We Need to Save the Country From Its Capital*, out now (HarperCollins, £20)

## NHS

### Covid disruption risks privatising the NHS by stealth

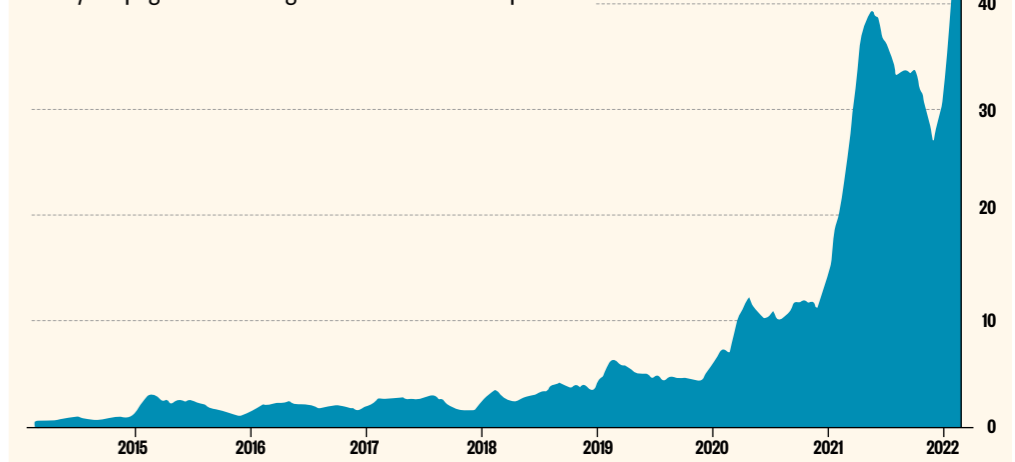
● The devastating impact of Covid has seen hospital waiting lists hit record highs, and the knock-on effect has been a surge of people turning to GoFundMe to fund private treatments.

More than 6.2 million people are waiting for routine hospital treatment in England following the pandemic, including 23,281 people who have been waiting for more than two years. A&E waiting times in Scotland were also the worst on record, while last month Welsh ministers announced £60 million in funding until 2025 to crack down on waits.

The graph on the right, compiled by John Burn-Murdoch in the *FT*, shows a five-fold increase in people turning to crowdfunding sites to pay for going private instead.

#### THE NUMBER OF BRITONS RESORTING TO CROWDFUNDING TO PAY FOR PRIVATE MEDICAL EXPENSES HAS SURGED IN RECENT YEARS

Weekly campaigns launched on gofundme for uk medical expenses





WELFARE

# Ministers admit almost one million people will be worse off as they're moved to Universal Credit

● Around six million people were forced to rely on Universal Credit during the pandemic as Covid hit jobs and forced the Department for Work and Pensions to delay already-overdue changes to the benefits system.

Those changes have restarted after a two-year pause, with 2.6 million on so-called legacy benefits set to move over to Universal Credit by 2024 – seven years after the original target of 2017. The move will see 900,000 people worse off in the long-term, the DWP has admitted.

Of those 900,000 people, 300,000 claim tax credits and 500,000 are sick and disabled people on Employment and Support Allowance (ESA). They will receive transition payments, but they will then have their benefits effectively frozen every April, as the transition payments will deplete each year when Universal Credit rises with inflation. Others will lose out on transition payments completely if they have a change of circumstances.

Marc Francis, Z2K's policy and campaigns director, told The Big Issue, "DWP's announcement that the transitional protection for those people moved over onto Universal Credit via its managed migration process will be eroded is yet another stealth cut."

"It will leave hundreds of thousands of vulnerable disabled people already struggling with the current cost of living crisis even more out of pocket in future."

An activist and claimant, who goes by the name of Ben Claimant, added, "I really worry that some people will fall through the cracks – and, at worst, people will die prematurely."

In a statement, Work and Pensions Secretary Thérèse Coffey said the changes are part of the UK government's plan to "fully transition to a modern benefit, suited to the 21st century".

HISTORY

## MAKING THEIR MARK

► This is not just a British high street icon, it represents the central role migrant entrepreneurs have played in shaping our lives. Marks & Spencer was founded in Leeds in 1884 by Thomas Spencer and Michael Marks, who had immigrated from what's now Belarus only a couple of years earlier. This store, located not far from what is now The Big Issue's London distribution office, is seen here in 1914. The history of migrants 'taking care of business' is explored at a new exhibition from the Migrant Museum being held inside Lewisham Shopping Centre in South London.

migrationmuseum.org



NATURE

# It's been 1,300 years since the lynx was on the prowl in Scotland. Now there is 'sufficient appetite' for the wild cat to return

● There is "sufficient appetite" in Scotland for exploring lynx reintroduction, according to the first detailed study into the social feasibility of the species' return.

Lynx, a species of wild cat, were last recorded in Britain around 1,300 years ago before becoming extinct due to hunting and habitat loss. There is a desire for them to return as they are known as a type of "keystone" species, meaning they maintain balance and diversity in an ecosystem.

New research commissioned by the Lynx to Scotland project found a broad consensus among communities, farmers and other

stakeholders for taking the next steps towards reintroduction.

The study has recommended setting up a Lynx Action Group to explore whether current concerns around people's attitudes towards the species can be overcome to pave the way for a reintroduction.

Previous research suggests the Scottish Highlands are the most feasible location for lynx reintroduction, with enough land to support a population of around 400 animals. They have been successfully reintroduced across continental Europe in recent years.

Peter Cairns, executive director at Scotland: The Big Picture said, "When it comes to the return of the lynx, we're in the realm of not yet – but not never."

"Positively, this new research shows there is sufficient appetite amongst different stakeholders to develop a more comprehensive understanding of this little-known species and the potential for its return to Scotland."

Beavers were reintroduced to Scotland in 2009. There are now an estimated 1,000 of the animals. A call to reintroduce wolves, some 400 years after they last ran wild, to help curb accelerating deer numbers has had renewed backing in recent months.

▼ Should the lynx be reintroduced to Scotland, their main prey would be roe deer, which are in plentiful supply in the Highlands



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GOVERNMENT

# Forget an MP's tractor porn. The government rushed through a rash of legislation at the end of last session and we really need to pay attention

● Stories about a Tory MP watching porn in the House of Commons may have won out when it comes to column inches, but all the while some very impactful laws were snuck in as MPs were readying for the end of the current parliamentary session. Here's a round-up.

## THE BUILDING SAFETY BILL

This lays out attempts to overcome the building safety crisis following the Grenfell fire in 2017, and has faced opposition from peers and campaigners.

While the government's £5.1 billion Building Safety Fund will cover the costs of fixing dangerous cladding in buildings above 18 metres tall, leaseholders caught up in the crisis could still face bills for non-cladding fire defects. The bill caps these costs at £10,000 per leaseholder – £15,000 in London – for "all but the most expensive properties".

Baroness Kath Pinnock told the Lords the bill was a "shattering defeat".

UK Cladding Action Group co-founder Ritu Saha told The Big Issue the "flawed" bill will fail to protect all leaseholders from the financial impact of the crisis, even if it does mean some will now not face six-figure bills, as was the case previously.

## THE HEALTH AND CARE BILL

Dubbed the NHS privatisation bill by critics, this focuses on restructuring the health service in England to create a localised system with less



▲ Health care protesters outside Parliament on October 26 last year

central bureaucracy. It will establish 42 Integrated Care Systems run independently by boards made up of NHS trust representatives, finance, nursing and medical directors, and, significantly, private companies.

It also introduces a social care cap limiting the amount a person pays towards their own care to £86,000 over their lifetime. This means poorer people are more likely to have to use all their available resources, whereas wealthier people won't be as badly affected. The cap is set to be implemented in 2023.

Campaigners and charities had hoped the bill would 'fix social care' by introducing a zero cap. Fiona Donald, president of the Royal College of Anaesthetists, called the result "hugely disappointing."

## THE POLICE, CRIME, SENTENCING AND COURTS BILL

This has proved to be one of the most controversial government bills

in recent years, and sparked the Kill the Bill movement. Of particular focus were its provisions giving police greater powers to clamp down on protests, including the power to restrict them for being too noisy.

Writing in The Big Issue, Martha Spurrier of human rights group Liberty, said, "These new powers represent nothing less than an attack on our right to make our voices heard, deterring people from taking part in protests, and making it much easier to criminalise those who do." Kill the Bill activists are not done yet, though. They have vowed to make this bill "unenforceable".

## THE NATIONALITY AND BORDERS BILL

Another one that faced fierce opposition. Among the most contentious elements are laws allowing asylum cases to be processed in other countries, such as Rwanda.

The bill will also see people assigned fewer rights or denied asylum in the UK because they arrived here by a route the government classes as illegal, such as by dinghy across the Channel. Clause nine of the bill also gives the government the right to strip people of their British citizenship without warning. Campaigners say this law in effect makes people from ethnic minorities second-class citizens.

One victory for campaigners was the removal of Priti Patel's policy to turn around small boats in the Channel and send them back to France, which was scrapped following a letter from the government's legal department.

## THE JUDICIAL REVIEW AND COURTS BILL

This one received less attention, but campaigners say it will weaken their ability to persuade courts to oppose government policies. The Law Society said changes to limit the retrospective effect of "quashing" orders would have a "chilling" effect on judicial reviews.

## CLIMATE CHANGE HOW INCREASED FLOODING WILL HIT THE POOREST HARDEST

66%

of England's poorest households are not covered by contents insurance

36%

of households say that they would like to have contents insurance but are unable to afford it, compared to one per cent of households on the highest incomes

95,000

homes in England's most deprived neighbourhoods are currently at medium or high risk of flooding

Between 2015 and 2021,

56%

of the new homes built in England were in neighbourhoods where some flood risk exists

543,000

properties were built in areas in which at least one postcode is at medium or high risk of flooding over the same period

Housebuilding increased

50%

faster in areas prone to flooding when compared to neighbourhoods with no flood risk

COST OF LIVING CRISIS

"I have a huge email bag that runs right across society and I can see the desperation that is going on out there. When you see that, anyone who has some compassion will find it very difficult to ignore"

Money Saving Expert founder Martin Lewis tells The Big Issue what it's like to have the nation looking to him to get us through the cost of living crisis. Read the full interview with Lewis in next week's magazine

