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65 years ago, sit-ins were born. Has their time come again?

This February marks the 65th anniversary of the sit-in movement, which started in Greensboro, North Carolina. Four students from a historically Black university, North Carolina A&T¹, sat at a Woolworth's counter and did not move until the store closed.

The act of sitting at segregated lunch counters was rightfully seen as radical at that time - a form of civil disobedience that not only empowered the Civil Rights Movement, but was the start of a diverse array of protests that would yield messages such as "Black Power."

Years later, the founders of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, now organized under the SNCC Legacy Project (SLP), find themselves countering another era, one that they believe mirrors those of the recent past. If "time is not a circle," as the saying has it, history is still cyclical in nature. And, members of the SNCC say, it might be time for activists to return to the metaphorical counter and not be moved.

"We are alarmed. Perhaps we are the best qualified to be alarmed. We organized and fought for civil rights in some of the most violently dangerous areas of the Black Belt South. Yet we live today in more dangerous times than we imagined our future would be 60-some-odd years ago," members of SLP wrote in a statement. "Our own experiences as civil rights movement veterans leave us without illusions about the capacity of tyranny to take root. Today we see a national government taking shape that is reminiscent of the white supremacist Citizens Councils in Mississippi and throughout the South. And we remember that their viciousness was not only directed at civil rights activists and organizers, but at all people who criticized or stood in dissent of their practices and programs."

Courtland Cox is the chairman of SLP's board of directors. He is an organizer and activist linked with the sit-in movement, the Freedom Rides, and the 1963 March on Washington. Time magazine profiled Mr. Cox in September and said that his activism started as a 19-year-old student at Howard University. But anyone born in the civil rights struggle knows that protest is a part of one's DNA.

¹ A&T = Agricultural and Technical

"Our fathers and our mothers got us to the 1954 [Brown v. Board of Education] Supreme Court decision, but those of us in college said that wasn't enough", Mr. Cox said in a phone interview. "Over a 10- to 15-year period, I would say from sit-ins to Black Power, we changed the dynamic of America.

"Today is a direct result of what people tried to do in 1960, and what we did in 1960 was a direct result of the veterans who came back from World War II," he adds, speaking about the Black GIs who faced violence and segregation at home after the war. (...)

"We are working with young people who were engaged after the Trayvon [Martin] murder in 2012," he said. "We are joining with them to create a digital place where anyone can see what has happened, whether it's us, Dr. King, CORE² [2], or the Dream Defenders."

With attacks on Black history in public schools and institutions, SLP hosted a "Freedom School" course ahead of the 2024 presidential election, including lessons on political power and "The Meaning of the Right To Vote in Freedom Summer." Further, part of SLP's work is also creating curricula that will tell our stories well into the future.

"We're not just making this up from books. These are the lived experiences of people over 75 years, and how do we now begin to talk about it and make sure that's the public record," Mr. Cox says. "We're gonna try to do those specific things to influence the next generation, both in terms of the community and the institution, so that whatever happens lives on past me."

The Christian Science Monitor

February 24, 2025

² Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) is an African-American civil rights organization in the United States that played a pivotal role for African Americans in the civil rights movement.



'It's controversial and polarising': is Disney's new Snow White a poisoned apple?

Five years ago, a \$250m remake of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, Walt Disney's first full-length animated feature film, must have seemed like a fine idea to corporate executives, who were going all out on remaking the studio's dated classics into contemporary live-action movies.

But the film, set to be released in cinemas this week, has turned into a massive headache for the studio. The press have barely been let near the remake's stars, Rachel Zegler, who plays Snow White, and Gal Gadot, playing the Evil Queen. And there are no dwarves. But why should a film based on an archetypal fairy tale of a wicked queen, jealous of her stepdaughter's beauty, who orders her murder, only to discover that she is hiding in a cottage with seven dwarves, then poisons her with a drugged apple, causing her to fall into a deep sleep, to be awakened by the kiss of a prince – cause so much bother?

"It's a complete quagmire but, realistically, what did they expect?" says Stephen Galloway, dean of Chapman University's Dodge College of Film and Media Arts in California. "You're going into this with a movie called Snow White. It's hard to imagine a picture in this DEI³, post-woke age that could be more controversial and polarising – and Disney is all about bringing people together and avoiding controversy at all costs."

Actor Halle Bailey, who is Black and starred in the 2023 Little Mermaid remake, faced racist backlash after being cast as Ariel, who was white in the animated film in 1989. Zegler, the star of Snow White, who is Latina, has suffered similar abuse. But Snow White also arrives on our screens with a different set of issues. Screenwriter Erin Cressida Wilson said the 1937 classic had been fleshed out for a more contemporary audience and that she had "massaged the theme of her discovering and trusting her own voice and her own purpose with compassion and strength".

Zegler told Vanity Fair in 2022 that people were making jokes "about being the PC⁴ Snow White. It's an 85-year-old cartoon, and our version is a refreshing story about a young woman who has a function beyond *Someday My Prince Will Come*." She has also been criticised for saying the prince "literally stalks" the princess in the 1937 original.

³ DEI = diversity, equity and inclusion

⁴ PC = Politically Correct

Both Zegler and Gadot have run into trouble with political statements. Gadot, who served in the Israel Defense Forces, spoke at an Anti-Defamation League summit on antisemitism, and her stance on the Israel-Hamas war triggered calls by Palestinian groups for a boycott of the film. Zegler, on the other hand, has posted “always remember, free Palestine” on X. After the US election, she wrote “may Trump supporters and Trump voters and Trump himself never know peace” on Instagram. Zegler later apologised, saying she was “sorry I contributed to the negative discourse”.

And then there are the notorious dwarves, created using CGI animation. Cyrano star Peter Dinklage, who has a form of dwarfism, questioned why the characters were included while Snow White was cast diversely. “It makes no sense to me. You’re progressive in one way, but then you’re still making that backward story about seven dwarves living in a cave together?”

Disney said it has consulted members of the dwarfism community “to avoid reinforcing stereotypes” and, later, that it would replace the seven with “magical creatures”. But updating for contemporary tastes does not necessarily resonate with audiences. A film can only do so much to capture a culture, and then there’s the question of: whose version of that culture do you capture?

If the movie is good enough, it could cut through the cultural flak. From the beginning Snow White had red flags waving – a whiter-than-white heroine at a time when Hollywood is moving away from that, rescued by Prince Charming, when that’s a chauvinist trope, and seven dwarves, when the word dwarf is a negative. It’s not like any of this crept up on Disney unawares. But Snow White is also the classic of classics – it is to animation what Hamlet is to the theatre.

The Observer

16 March 2025



Parents urged to delay smartphones for children amid 'alarming' rise in toxic masculinity

Parents should consider delaying access to smartphones for their children due to the “alarming trend” of alpha-male influencers promoting toxic masculinity among boys online, Tánaiste⁵ Simon Harris has said. He was speaking at an event in his hometown of Greystones, County Wicklow, where all eight primary schools and parents' associations have agreed a “no smartphone voluntary code”.

“The Conor McGregors, the Andrew Tates – these are figures that exploit insecurities and reinforce outdated and dangerous narratives,” he told a gathering of principals, teachers and parents. “If we don’t get on top of this, the result is a generation of boys who struggle to form healthy relationships, who are less emotionally resilient, and who are at risk of internalising damaging ideas about gender and identity.”

Mr Harris said the critically acclaimed Netflix TV series, *Adolescence* – about a 13-year-old who kills a classmate, which addresses themes including social media and masculinity – should be “compulsory viewing in every secondary school in Ireland”.

“It gives an incredible insight to young people, to parents and educators as to what the actual experience for many young men is today. Delaying smartphone use ... gives children time to develop critical thinking skills before being exposed to these harmful influences,” he said. “They allow boys to learn that true strength is found in kindness, respect, inclusion and emotional intelligence, not in the toxic and despicable bravado that they may encounter online.”

Mr Harris said the Government and EU were taking steps to regulate social media at a time when other parts of the world were adopting an attitude of “just let them off”. “The idea that the online space can be like the wild west just simply doesn’t stand up to scrutiny. The era of self-regulation is over,” he said.

The Tánaiste was speaking at an event to mark the publication of research into the impact of the “It Takes A Village” initiative in Greystones, where schools have come together in a bid to tackle rising anxiety levels among children at primary level. The initiative, led by Rachel Harper, principal of St Patrick’s National School, involved all eight primary schools in the area working together to work with the community to assist children, families and teachers in need of help with

⁵ Tánaiste - (a Gaelic word - pron: TAW-nish-te) - The deputy Prime Minister of the Republic of Ireland

issues around anxiety in young children. The initiative included the introduction of the “voluntary no smartphone code” across all primary schools, as well as fundraising to hire two play therapists to be shared across the schools.

The “It Takes A Village” initiative received international interest with schools across the globe adopting the principals of the initiative. It also led to the Department of Education publishing guidelines to support parents and parent associations wishing to develop voluntary codes regarding smartphone use among primary schoolchildren, which have since been adopted by many other primary schools across the State.

Dr Mags Crean, professor in social policy in Maynooth University, presented the findings of a research evaluation report examining the impact of the initiative. Her recommendations include the need for greater amplification of children and parents’ voices, the need for school-based supports in addition to resourced community supports, along with the need for Government action and provision of resources.

In addition, it is recommended that Government provide support to enable other communities to replicate the initiative elsewhere. The event also heard details of a new peer mentorship programme, which involves educating transition years as mentors for first years and sixth class pupils on managing their wellbeing and safely online.

The Irish Times

March 21, 2025



Is Leo the liberal Pope who's going to take on Trump?

Remember that AI image Donald Trump posted on Truth Social just a few days ago, of an American pope? Well, take a deep breath, folks, because we have one. Fortunately, this is not Trump, nor one from the school of JD Vance, Catholic convert and scourge of Christians who think loving one's neighbour is about, well... loving your neighbour, whoever they may be, not just the person who thinks, talks and walks like you. It is Cardinal Robert Prevost, now Pope Leo XIV, and it looks like the world has been delivered a new pontiff from Pope Francis's playbook.

When Francis was elected in 2013, the cardinals inside the Sistine Chapel chose an Argentinian who described himself as "from the ends of the earth". The new Pope Leo is not quite that – he is from Chicago – but he knows something of poverty and injustice. He worked in Peru as a missionary for his religious order, the Augustinians, and later served as a bishop there. And some weeks ago, an X/Twitter account of Robert Prevost reposted a criticism of Trump and Vance's migration policies that asked if they had a conscience.

A clue as to how Prevost sees his role as leader of the world's 1.4 billion Catholics comes in his choice of papal name. In the Catholic world, a Leo is seen as a reformer pope, not least because the last, Leo XIII, wrote a famous encyclical – or teaching document – in 1891 on workers' rights and the importance of trade unions.

Although Prevost was not spoken of as a candidate for pope as often as Luis Tagle, who was dubbed the "Asian Francis", or Pietro Parolin, the Vatican's secretary of state, he was frequently mentioned in long lists of those who are papabile – possible popes. His combination of experience as a missionary, as a diocesan bishop, and as a Vatican insider heading the office that deals with appointing bishops gave him the skills and experience that will be vital as the leader of the Catholic Church. These include administrative nous, pastoral qualities, and an understanding of the world beyond the Vatican, beyond the United States, and in areas where poverty and injustice are dominant.

All manner of people are now claiming Leo XIV as one of their own. Joe Biden, a devout Catholic, has called him Leo XIV of Illinois. Barack Obama, who became involved in politics in Chicago, has declared the new Pope Leo a "fellow Chicagoan", while Peru's president, Dina Boluarte, has claimed him as a Peruvian.

What Boluarte said of Pope Leo, who apparently became a Peruvian citizen 10 years ago, is particularly pertinent to gauge some insight into who this new pope is and why the cardinal

electors chose him so speedily: "In our lands, he sowed hope and walked alongside the most needy."

This is the version of the Catholic Church that Pope Francis epitomised and which has been so influenced by the liberation theologians of Latin America: a church that stands in solidarity with the poor. It has caused trouble in the past. As the Brazilian theologian Helder Camara once said: "When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why they are poor, they call me a communist."

During the pontificates of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, there was deep suspicion of Latin American influence in the Church. Now, with Francis and Leo XIV, the Latin American version of the Catholic faith seems to be coming to the fore. It's apparent, though, that the new Pope Leo's team wanted more than this focus on the poor. They spoke of the need for a pope who could be a bridge, someone who could offer both the world and the Church itself a means of bridging divides. That will be the hardest task of all for the new pope.

The Independent

May 10, 2025



The Blue Origin flight showcased the utter defeat of American feminism

There are some spectacles of US decadence and decline that almost seem too on the nose – the sort of orgies of vulgar provocation or fantastic lack of self-awareness that exceed the limits of parody. Among these is the all-female flight by Blue Origin, the Jeff Bezos-owned rocket tourism company, which on Monday launched a phallically shaped pod full of women – including the pop star Katy Perry and Bezos’s partner, Lauren Sánchez – on a brief trip into space.

The flight was touted as a triumph of feminism, a win for science and an embrace of the kind of expansive, curious human spirit of striving and possibility that once animated both. Instead, the flight served as a kind of perverse funeral for the America that once enabled both scientific advancement and feminist progress – a spectacle that mocked these aspirations by appropriating them for such an indulgent and morally hollow purpose.

Blue Origin itself is a product of state abandonment of space exploration. Founded in 2000 to fill the void left by the federal government’s effort to privatize the work of agencies like Nasa, Blue Origin has long been a pet project of Bezos, who was almost the sole funder of the company in its early years. Focused on tourism, rather than scientific inquiry, the company is best known for its slow technological development in comparison with its main competitor, SpaceX, and for its periodic publicity stunt flights featuring celebrities. (...)

Once, Nasa was the pride of the American experiment: a testament to how a society dedicated to legal equality and passionate hard work could expand the horizons of human possibility. Now, Blue Origin is a testament to the corruption and circumscribed possibilities of the profit motive run amok. Space used to be a frontier for human exploration, a fount of innovation, and a symbol of a bright, uncertain and expansive future. Now, it is a backdrop for the Instagram selfies of the rich and narcissistic. The Blue Origin flight does not make me feel like humanity will reach new heights of achievement. It makes me feel like everything that is coming is grimly predictable, tailored to the impulses of the richest, least responsible and least morally intelligent people on Earth.

But the flight might be most depressing for what it reveals about the utter defeat of American feminism. Sánchez, the organizer of the flight, has touted the all-female crew as a win for women. But she herself is a woman in a deeply anti-feminist model. It is not her rocket company that took her and her friends to the edge of space; it’s her male fiancé’s. And it is no virtue of her character

that put her inside the rocket – not her capacity, not her intellect and not her hard work – but merely her relationship with a man.

There are at least two women on the mission who can be credited as serious persons: Aisha Bowe, an aerospace engineer, and Amanda Nguyen, a civil rights entrepreneur whose past work with Nasa makes her something closer to an actual astronaut. But most of the crew's self-presentation and promotion of the flight has leaned heavily on a vision of women's empowerment that is light on substance and heavy on a childlike, girlish silliness that insults women by cavalierly linking their gender with superficiality, vanity and unseriousness. (...)

It is not misogynist to say that these women do not have their priorities in order. Rather, it is misogynist of them to so forcefully associate womanhood with cosmetics and looks, rather than with any of the more noble and human aspirations to which space travel might acquaint them – curiosity, inquiry, discovery, exploration, a sense of their own mortality, an apprehension of the divine. These women, who have placed themselves as representatives for all women with their promotion of the flight – positioning themselves as aspirational models of femininity – have presented a profoundly antifeminist vision of what womankind's future is: dependent on men, confined to triviality, and deeply, deeply silly.

The Guardian

15 April, 2025



Was DEI really just performative political theatre?

Private US companies are now dialling back their diversity, equity and inclusion efforts after ramping them up in the past decade. Others have revised their pledges on going green. Were statements by companies acknowledging their social responsibility ever anything more than performative political theatre?

CEO views on corporate objectives have been changing, especially in what is arguably their most important official statement, the annual letter to shareholders. In the 1950s, we find these typically mentioned one or two corporate performance objectives such as improved financial performance, growth and better customer service.

In the mid-1960s, as the civil rights movement rose in the political and public consciousness, CEOs made more statements about increasing the diversity of their workforce. But these died down in the 1970s as the political environment changed with Richard Nixon's successful appeal to angry Southern whites and economist Milton Friedman's exhortation that the only social responsibility of business is to increase profits.

The global financial crisis, where profit-minded CEOs took excessive risks, highlighted the limitations of Friedman's views. In its aftermath, the number of objectives CEOs espoused in their letters to shareholders rose to an average of seven by 2020. Many of these were social goals ranging from improving DEI and sustainability to increasing philanthropy. A growing number dropped statements that they intended to maximise shareholder value.

Perhaps expressions of a wider purpose were intended to rebuild corporate legitimacy. They were also a response to a fractured politics where the government seemed unable to tackle major challenges like inequality or climate change. However, once again, as political opposition has grown, firms seem to be abandoning their pledges fast. Given their flip flops, what social responsibility can we reasonably expect of corporations?

We should start by recognising that the primary purpose of a private corporation is to sell a desirable product or service at an attractive price, while obeying the laws of the land. Doing so merits privileges such as limited liability and the legal right to co-ordinate intra-firm activity. Any private corporation that fails to achieve its primary purpose loses society's license, no matter what other purpose it serves. This is what sets a corporation apart from an NGO.

However, profits and share prices are only a partial and sometimes distorted measure of whether a company is working towards its primary purpose. Many actions that further these efforts, some of which fall under the rubric of CSR⁶, involve upfront costs but pay off over time. For example, a corporation may perform better if it nurtures talent in traditionally overlooked groups. A firm can reduce costs by reducing its energy footprint, thereby attracting young talented green-minded employees. Appropriately thought through by the board and articulated by management, companies can take on some social responsibilities. These need not shift with the political wind.

There are social actions that do not directly benefit the corporation's purpose but society at large. Tempting as it is for the corporation to step voluntarily into the breach, these are probably better left to governments. Unilever's efforts in the early 2010s to make its operations more sustainable, while initially considered farsighted and sensible, went beyond its operations, supply chain and even customers to changing practices across the world. The company lost sight of its primary purpose of making better consumer products. Furthermore, corporate governance is not structured to guide decisions on which communities get clean drinking water or what emissions mitigation technology industry should adopt. These are political decisions, best made by those who have the mandate of the people.

Of course, this mandate changes, with dizzying consequences for corporations. Where DEI programmes were once helpful in obtaining government contracts, now they can get companies debarred as contractors. Constant policy change is no way to tackle the challenges of our time, but this is what corporations face until nations settle on what works. But many will simply relabel the social policies that are necessary for their primary purpose and continue as before.

Financial Times

21 February, 2025

⁶ Corporate Social Responsibility



California Wildfires are a Wake-Up Call for Climate Change Adaptation

One quarter of a trillion dollars. This is AccuWeather's estimate of the cost of damages and economic loss from the L.A. wildfires, which continue to rage as I write. If this estimate turns out to be accurate, the economic fallout from the L.A. fires will exceed the costs of Hurricane Helene last year and of the entire 2020 wildfire season. The media carried politicized reports of empty hydrants, which were blamed on irresponsible government officials. While finding villains to shame may satisfy some, we must accept that our cities were built to withstand "normal" conditions which climate change has ensured will never occur again.

Our infrastructure was built to survive adverse events of severity and probability forecasted in the mid-20th century. A former chief engineer at the LA Department of Water and Power quoted in the New York Times noted that the reservoir system serving LA's hillside neighborhoods was designed to provide water to fight a few homes on fire, not hundreds. We cannot rely on strategies from a bygone time; the L.A. Fires exemplify our desperate need to adapt to our harsh new climate.

Los Angeles is the most recent example, but evidence that climate change is pushing extreme weather events out of civilization's comfort envelope is everywhere. Climate extremes are affecting everything, from tax revenues to food prices to interest rates to electrical grid stability. Bloomberg reported last year that the cost of increasingly severe climate disasters threatens to deplete FEMA's disaster aid. Post-disaster climate migration negatively impacts municipal tax revenues. A smaller tax base makes it harder for cities to rebuild and makes municipal bonds riskier.

Bond yields are not the only potential impact. The Financial Times reports that crop yields are suffering from climate impacts, driving up global food prices. While central banks usually exclude volatile food and energy prices when considering discount rate changes, bankers may need to start pricing climate change into their interest rate models.

The New York Times reports that Ecuador's electrical grid has faced severe stress because water shortages attributed to climate change cripple the country's hydroelectric dams, which comprise nearly two-thirds of the country's generation capacity. The Times reports that more than one billion people live in countries where more than 50 percent of their energy comes from

⁷ Federal Emergency Management Agency

hydroelectric plants, while hydropower is expected to become less reliable as extreme weather events like drought and flooding become more frequent and severe. (...)

The Industrial Revolution spurred phenomenal increases in technology, wealth, and well-being, but also unleashed a process that is pushing our climate out of the Goldilocks zone that enabled the Industrial Revolution in the first place. We must now prioritize adaptation and resiliency rather than growth for growth's sake.

What does “adaptation” look like? The easiest and quickest step to take is to make sure that the critical infrastructure we have in place is in good working order. Next, we must bite the bullet and start redesigning critical infrastructure to meet our new climate challenges. Finally, we must find a way to encourage retrofitting older homes and commercial buildings for a hotter world—improving insulation to conserve energy, using building materials that are less flammable, more resilient to high winds, and less dependent on long supply chains, and making modifications to rely more on passive heating and cooling.

The EU's Copernicus program announced that 2024 was the hottest year on record, with a global average temperature 1.6°C above the pre-Industrial era. Though we consider 2024 a hot year looking back, we will likely consider it a mild year looking forward. As we move into this 1.5°C+ world, disasters like the L.A. wildfires are likely to become perennial occurrences rather than rare one-off events. We must adapt to the new climate reality. Intelligent investors take note.

Forbes

21 January, 2025



Do young people like the internet? New UK study has the answer

We're in the era of the digital boom. From sun-up to sun-down, our lives are documented on social media, AIs have become our best friend, and the number of likes, comments, shares, and subscribers has become the marker of our happiness and success. It won't be an exaggeration to say, "Our life is nothing but the internet's field day!"

Despite all the mental health hiccups, self-esteem struggles – a large part of the young and young-adult population stay hooked to the internet, at the cost of their own emotional sanity. But do they really want to? Recent UK research has shed some light on that million-dollar question.

For a generation raised with smartphones and social media, one might assume that young people can't imagine life without the internet. But the findings suggest otherwise. The research reveals that nearly 70% of 16- to 21-year-olds feel worse about themselves after spending time on social media. Half (50%) would support a "digital curfew" that would restrict their access to certain apps and sites past 10pm, while nearly half say they'd actually prefer to grow up in a world where the internet didn't exist at all.

A quarter of respondents spent four or more hours a day on social media, while 42% of those surveyed admitted to lying to their parents and guardians about what they do online. While online, 42% said they had lied about their age, 40% admitted to having a decoy or "burner" account, and 27% said they pretended to be a different person completely.

The results came after the technology secretary, Peter Kyle, hinted that the government was weighing up the possibility of making cut-off times mandatory for certain apps such as TikTok and Instagram. Rani Govender, the policy manager for child safety online at the NSPCC, said that digital curfews, while helpful, could not stop children being exposed to harmful materials online without other measures being put in place. "We need to make clear that a digital curfew alone is not going to protect children from the risks they face online. They will be able to see all these risks at other points of the day and they will still have the same impact," she said. Govender added that the primary focus for companies and the government was to ensure kids are using "much safer and less addictive sites".

The study, conducted by the British Standards Institution, surveyed 1,293 young people and found that 27% of respondents have shared their location online with strangers. In the same

survey, three-quarters said they had spent more time online as a result of the pandemic, while 68% said they felt the time they spent online was detrimental to their mental health.

Excessive internet use can lead to a range of negative effects, impacting physical and mental health, social relationships, and academic or work performance. These effects can range from short-term, like neglecting responsibilities, to long-term, like physical ailments and mental health issues.

Andy Burrows, the chief executive of the suicide prevention charity the Molly Rose Foundation, stated that it was “clear that young people are aware of the risks online and, what’s more, they want action from tech companies to protect them”. He added that algorithms can provide content that “can quickly spiral and take young people down rabbit holes of harmful and distressing material through no fault of their own”. New laws were “urgently required to finally embed a safe by design approach to regulation that prioritizes the safety needs of children and society ahead of the interests of big tech”, he said.

The Times of India

May 20, 2025



Starmer plays up patriotic credentials as local elections in England loom

Sir Keir Starmer has declared himself a “proud Englishman” and emphasised the importance of patriotism, a week before Labour is expected to face heavy pressure from Reform UK in local elections. The UK prime minister hosted a St George’s Day event on Tuesday, on the eve of the annual celebration of the patron saint of England. Guests at Downing Street were served regional dishes such as pork pies from Melton Mowbray, Eccles cakes from Lancashire and Bakewell tarts, as well as English sparkling wine.

The event provided Starmer with a platform to associate himself with traditions and a nostalgic vision of England that some people are more likely to associate with Nigel Farage’s Reform UK party. Voters head to the polls on May 1 to choose more than 1,600 councillors in almost 25 English local authorities. Six mayoralities are also up for election, while a Westminster by-election for the Cheshire seat of Runcorn & Helsby will pit Reform UK against Labour.

In remarks that will be read as an eleventh-hour pitch to voters, Starmer said “football, festivals, cricket and Shakespeare” were among the “wonderful traditions and so many individual, personal reasons that make us proud to be English”. Hailing the nation’s creativity, he paid tribute to England’s musical heritage, spanning Edward Elgar and the Rolling Stones, as well as artists from JMW Turner to Tracey Emin. Former Arsenal and England football captain Tony Adams, Paralympic gold medallist Sarah Storey and several TV personalities joined public sector workers including NHS staff and police officers at the event.

In a warning about the threat posed by “people trying to sow division in our communities”, likely to be read as a veiled reference to populist forces such as Reform, he cautioned against the misuse of the “red and white of our flag”. Describing patriotism as being “about serving the country we love”, the prime minister rallied guests to “fight for our flag and for our values”. He harked back to efforts to quell and clean up the riots that erupted in towns across England last summer after the mass stabbings in Southport, fuelled by misinformation and the incitement of violence on social media.

Greg Rosen, a party historian and author of *Old Labour to New*, said Starmer’s focus on patriotism was an attempt to re-emphasise a tradition within Labour that was discarded and undermined by Jeremy Corbyn, his predecessor as party leader. “Labour is the party that put Churchill not Chamberlain into Downing Street, that created Nato, that championed robust deterrence of

autocratic aggression, in Korea, in the Falklands, and an independent nuclear deterrent,” Rosen said. “Corbyn did not reflect that patriotic tradition and alienated many Labour voters.”

Farage has often campaigned with a focus on patriotic values. Last year the Reform leader attacked former prime minister Rishi Sunak last year when he left a D-Day commemoration in France early.

Starmer’s intervention came after Kemi Badenoch said earlier in the day that the local elections were taking place just six months after she was elected Tory leader, making it “very, very difficult for us to make inroads in such a short period of time”. Badenoch’s attempt to manage expectations comes as the Conservatives average 21 per cent in the polls, trailing in third place behind both Labour, which is averaging 24 per cent, and Reform UK, on 25 per cent.

When local elections were last held in these councils in 2021, the Conservatives were enjoying a bounce in the polls from the Covid-19 vaccine rollout and then-prime minister Boris Johnson was still largely popular with the public. Badenoch did not dispute that her leadership had come in for heavy criticism from quarters of her party, but argued: “It happens to every single leader of every single party, even when they are successful. Being in politics is to be criticised every single day.”

Financial Times

April 23, 2025



Is RFK Jr's divisive plan to Make America Healthy Again fearmongering - or revolutionary?

There's a saying that Robert F Kennedy Jr is very fond of. He used it on the day he was confirmed as US health secretary. "A healthy person has a thousand dreams, a sick person only has one," he said as he stood in the Oval Office. "60% of our population has only one dream – that they get better." The most powerful public health official in the US has made it his mission to tackle what he describes as an epidemic of chronic illness in America, a catch-all term that covers everything from obesity and diabetes to heart disease.

His diagnosis that the US is experiencing an epidemic of ill health is a view shared by many healthcare experts in the country. But Kennedy also has a history of promoting unfounded health conspiracies, from the suggestion that Covid-19 targeted and spared certain ethnic groups to the idea that chemicals in tap water could be making children transgender.

And after taking office, he slashed thousands of jobs at the Department of Health and Human Services and eliminated whole programmes at the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). "On the one hand, it's extraordinarily exciting to have a federal official take on chronic disease," says Marion Nestle, a retired professor of public health at New York University. "On the other, the dismantling of the federal public health apparatus cannot possibly help with the agenda."

Kennedy is reviled by parts of the medical and scientific communities. He was described to me as an "evil nihilist" by Dr Amesh Adalja, an infectious disease doctor and senior scholar at Johns Hopkins University. But even some of Kennedy's critics accept that he is bringing drive and ambition to areas of healthcare that have been neglected. Is it possible that the man who attracts so much criticism might actually start making America healthy again?

There's one industry that Kennedy had set his sights on long before joining the Trump administration: multinational food companies. He has said, poisoned American children with artificial additives already banned in other countries. "We have a generation of kids who are swimming around in a toxic soup right now," he claimed on Fox News last year.

There are some signs this pressure may be paying off. The food giant PepsiCo, for example, said in a recent trading update that Lays crisps and Tostitos snacks "will be out of artificial colours by the end of this year". (...)

But others worry that the flurry of announcements on additives is tinkering around the edges of what is a much wider problem.

"While some of these individual actions are important, they are a drop in the ocean in the larger context of chronic disease," argues Nicola Hawley, professor of epidemiology at Yale School of Public Health. "There is a focus on personal choice and access to natural food, but that completely ignores the big, systematic and structural barriers [to healthy eating] like poverty and really aggressive marketing of junk food to children."

The US government, for example, still heavily subsidises crops including corn and soya beans, key ingredients in processed foods.

Prof Hawley also argues there is a tension between Kennedy's "important message" on food and chronic disease, and what she feels is a lack of policies backed by solid scientific evidence.

"You've got this challenge of him drifting into misinformation about the links between additives and chronic disease, or environmental risk factors," she argues. "And that really just undermines the science."

BBC

July 1, 2025

(Adapted)



Knives for sale on Snapchat as Home Secretary vows crackdown

Chilling photos show an array of deadly knives brazenly on sale on social media. The blades, advertised through Snapchat and Telegram, were sold at marked-up prices by a teenager running a business called Weapons R Us. A bombshell report into online knife sales found it is an example of "grey market" sellers secretly flogging blades to children. It comes as Home Secretary Yvette Cooper vowed to shut "lethal loopholes" and clamp down on knife sales on social media.

Weapons R Us, run by 18-year-old Kaif Sayed, was highlighted in a damning report by Commander Stephen Clayman, who leads national police efforts against knife crime. His review on online knife sales - which called for an array of measures to stop weapons falling into the wrong hands - said 15 such businesses had been identified, responsible for over 2,000 sales.

Ms Cooper told The Mirror: "What the Clayman review found is that there were people who were bulk buying knives and then selling them on through social media channels, distributing them to teenagers. It's what Stephen Clayman calls the gray market, and it's lethal. It is incredibly dangerous." (...)

The Government has announced a string of measures to crack down on grey market sellers. A new specialist policing unit that will target weapons being sold on social media, with £1million of Government funding. It will also create a new requirement for retailers to report bulk purchases of knives. Mr Clayman's report said Sayed, who was arrested last year and handed a suspended prison sentence, used a vulnerable adult's details to buy dozens of knives online, which he then sold on.

He used subtle messages on Snapchat and Telegram to direct people to message him, when sales would be arranged. Mr Clayman wrote: "In one transaction Sayed ordered 30 knives from the retailer, using details belonging to another. His sales offered collection from an area of London. Knives were marketed for approximately three times the retail price and all contact would have been made through the use of private messages."

When police raided his home in February last year, a parcel arrived for Sayed containing 11 new knives. Mr Clayman wrote: "There were particular challenges for law enforcement in that the knives that were being sold were, in the main, legal to sell and possess in private making the majority of his activity legal."

The police chief's report said there are "serious flaws in the system" - particularly with age verification at point of sale and delivery. New measures, known as Ronan's Law, will tighten up rules around knife sales. It is named after Ronan Kanda, 16, who was stabbed to death with a ninja sword his killer had purchased online using his mum's ID. He was able to pick up the package without being challenged before killing popular Ronan in a case of mistaken identity.

The Government has already outlawed weapons like the one that killed the teenager, and will bring in tough new sentences for online staff and executives who fail to carry out proper checks. Ronan's mum Pooja wrote in the report: "The systemic failures in regulating the sale and distribution of these items ultimately culminated in the senseless loss of my son, leaving a family devastated and a community in shock. I believe stricter regulation of these lethal weapons in our society will create necessary barriers and reduce the glamorisation of tools designed solely to kill or gravely injure."

The Home Office has announced jail terms for those selling knives to under-18s will be ramped up from six months to two years. These can be applied to workers who process illegal sales as well as the chief executives of a company.

Daily Mirror

19 February, 2025



Trump's spending bill flounders in Senate as Musk attacks intensify

The clamorous end to U.S. President Donald Trump's alliance with Elon Musk is increasing pressure on the White House over its signature legislation known as the "One Big Beautiful Bill Act" - a bill under intense scrutiny in the Senate that Musk wants killed over its price tag, but that Trump views as critical to the success of his presidency. The bill faces strong headwinds among senators across the Republican spectrum, including fiscal conservatives who say it authorizes unsustainable spending, as well as moderates who fear the consequences of offsetting costly tax breaks in the bill with steep cuts to Medicaid.

Sen. Ron Johnson, a Republican from Wisconsin among those seeking to decrease spending in the bill, told NPR this week it has "no chance of passing" the Senate in its current form. "It's easy to be the parent that says, 'We're going to go to Disney World.' It's hard to be the parent that says, 'Yeah, but we can't afford it,' " Johnson told reporters on Capitol Hill on Friday.

Trump's relationship with Musk, the world's richest man and the largest Republican donor during the 2024 presidential campaign, shattered Thursday in an exchange of public insults between the two men. After leaving his role in the administration last week, where he was assigned to cut federal spending and government waste, Musk sounded off on the bill as an "abomination" that would cause the national debt to soar.

Trump responded by suggesting Musk opposed the legislation because it includes cuts to energy tax credits that have benefited Tesla, Musk's electric vehicle company. The billionaire entrepreneur may also be angry, Trump mused, because his recommendation to head NASA was rejected - an important position for SpaceX, another Musk business. Those comments set off an online tirade from Musk that claimed credit for Trump's election victory and accused the president of links with Jeffrey Epstein, a notorious child sex offender. "Without me, Trump would have lost the election, Dems would control the House and the Republicans would be 51-49 in the Senate," Musk wrote on X, his social media platform. "Such ingratitude."

Musk contributed over \$280 million (U.S.) to Trump and other Republicans during the 2024 presidential campaign. But his tenure in the White House has come at a steep cost. Tesla's profits plummeted 71 per cent over the first three months of the year, with reputation rankings showing a similarly precipitous drop among consumers. On Thursday alone, as his feud with Trump escalated, Tesla's stock price dropped 14 per cent.

"I'm not even thinking about Elon," Trump told CNN's Dana Bash in a phone interview on Friday. "He's got a problem. The poor guy's got a problem."

Musk was also quieter Friday, focusing his social media activity on his companies, a sign that both men see mutual destruction in the fallout from their feud. But the source of their feud - the bill - remains on thin ice. The non-partisan Congressional Budget Office estimates the bill could add \$2.4 trillion to annual deficits over the next decade and result in 10.9 million people losing their health insurance, prompting GOP senators like Shelley Moore Capito, of West Virginia, where 28 per cent of the state population is enrolled in Medicaid, to express concern.

But Senate Majority Leader John Thune, Republican of South Dakota, told reporters the caucus is open to exploring cuts to another popular health program - Medicare, for Americans 65 and older - if it results in lowering the overall costs of the bill. "The focus, as you know, has been on addressing waste, fraud, abuse within Medicaid, but right now, we're open to suggestions that people have them about other areas where there is, you know, clearly, waste, fraud and abuse that can be rooted out in any government program," Thune said in a news conference.

Toronto Star

June 7, 2025