Daily Universal Register

UK: Kwasi Kwarteng, the business secretary, and Lord Hague of Richmond, the former foreign secretary, are among speakers at the Make UK manufacturing conference.

Nature notes



It looked as though a tiny hummingbird was hovering around the purple honesty flowers. It was a dark-edged bee fly, a fluffy creature with a long proboscis and a characteristic style of flight. That proboscis really comes into its own with deep-throated flowers like those of white dead-nettles; as it sips nectar it picks up pollen, which is transferred to the next bloom. Bee flies, in common with perhaps 40 per cent of insects, are parasites: disguised as bumblebees, they flick their eggs towards the brood chambers of ground-nesting bees and wasps. When they hatch, the larvae feed on the host's food stores and eat the grubs. MELISSA HARRISON

Birthdays today



Katya Adler, *pictured*, BBC Europe editor, 50; **Steve Barclay**, Conservative MP for North East Cambridgeshire, chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, minister for the Cabinet Office (2021-Feb 2022), 50; **Patti Boulaye**, singer, *Stop It I Like It* (1976), and actress, *Bisi, Daughter of the River* (1977), 68; **Rob Brydon**, actor and comedian, *Marion & Geoff* (2000-03), 57; **Kathy Cook**, athlete, three-time Olympic bronze medallist (1980, 1984), 62; **Poppy Delevingne**, model and actress, *Riviera* (2019-20), 36; **Peter Duncan**, TV presenter, *Blue Peter* (1980-86), and chief scout (2004-09), 68; **Ben Elton**, author and comedian, co-writer, *The Young Ones* (1982-84), 63; **Dr Timothy Evans**, apothecary to the Queen and to the Royal Household, 67; **Richard Eyre**, chairman, Internet Advertising Bureau, 68; **Nona Gaprindashvili**, chess player, 81; **Rebecca Hall**, actress, *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* (2008), 40; **Sir David Harrison**, chemical engineer, master, Selwyn College, Cambridge (1994-2000), 92; **Christina Hendricks**, actress, *Mad Men* (2007-15), 47; **Ken Hom**, TV chef, *Ken Hom's Chinese Cookery* (1984), 73; **Mary Hopkin**, singer, *Those Were the Days* (1968), 72; **Edward Kessler**, founder director, Woolf Institute, Cambridge, 59; **Michael Kiwanuka**, musician, *Kiwanuka* (2019), winner of the Mercury prize (2020), 35; **Sir Alan Parker**, founder (1987) and chairman, Brunswick Group LLP consultancy, 66; **Carlo Rovelli**, theoretical physicist and writer, *Helgoland* (2020), 66; **Mona Siddiqui**, professor of Islamic and interreligious studies, University of Edinburgh, 59; **Sandi Toksvig**, comedian and presenter, *QI*, 64; **Akio Toyoda**, president, Toyota Motor Corporation, 66; **Sarah Rose Troughton**, lord-lieutenant of Wiltshire, 69; **Frankie Valli**, singer, *Big Girls Don't Cry* (1962), 88; **Allan Wells**, sprinter, Olympic gold medallist (1980), 70; **Rachel Zegler**, actress, *West Side Story* (2021), 21.

On this day

In **1494** Christopher Columbus sighted Jamaica, and landed on the island on May 5. The native Arawak tribes were later decimated under Spanish rule; in **1898** Golda Meir, the fourth prime minister of Israel (1969-74), was born in Kyiv.

The last word

"The winds and waves are always on the side of the ablest navigators." Edward Gibbon, historian and MP, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776)



Labour's Left

Though Sir Keir Starmer has made some progress in restoring the party's credibility, he should move faster and further against his internal critics

Labour's record in general elections since 1979, as Lord Mandelson observed in an interview last year, goes like this: lose, lose, lose, lose, Blair, Blair, Blair, lose, lose, lose, lose. He might have extended the point by noting that only three Labour leaders have secured a parliamentary majority, of whom only one was born in the past 100 years.

This weekend marked a quarter-century since Sir Tony Blair's first landslide election victory, and the party faces a mountainous task to win office let alone emulate that achievement. Under Sir Keir Starmer's leadership Labour has made distinct but fitful progress, from a very low base. Little will be gained by caution. Having won the leadership by persuading party members that he was an authentic upholder of left-wing verities, Sir Keir should make a virtue of boldness in jettisoning these, just as Sir Tony did on becoming leader in 1994.

In local elections across Britain this week, about 6,800 seats in 200 councils are being contested. Despite the damage the government has sustained from successive scandals about the behaviour of its MPs and Downing Street parties during lockdown, Labour may struggle to make gains. The last time most of these seats were contested was in 2018, a comparatively strong year for Labour in a decade of permanent opposition. And, for all their problems since, the Conservatives won a by-election seat from Labour less than a year ago, taking Hartlepool for the first time, in a humiliating rebuff for Sir Keir.

The extent of Labour's defeat in 2019 under Jeremy Corbyn makes any notion that the party can secure government by a mere swing of the electoral pendulum improbable. It needs to give voters a reason not just to switch sides but for investing trust in it. Mr Corbyn broke records for negative ratings for leader of the opposition, and it is not credible for Labour to suppose that this was due to unfavourable coverage in the media. Few will forget Mr Corbyn's refusal to tackle antisemitism in the party, his willingness to trust in the good faith of Vladimir Putin, his evasiveness over Brexit and his incomprehension of technical details of policy.

Sir Keir was slow to distance himself from so baneful a legacy, but he has begun the task. He needs now to hasten it. His allies are urging him not just to confront the hard left within the party, but to remove them. Mr Corbyn had the Labour whip withdrawn for claiming that antisemitism under his leadership was "dramatically overstated for political reasons by our opponents inside and outside the party, as well as by much of the media". He must never get it back, and his supporters within the parliamentary party have done quite enough to justify similar action.

Labour in government, though not always in opposition, has supported a strong defence, including a nuclear capability. Nato was in part created by the diplomacy of Clement Attlee's post-war Labour administration. It is extraordinary that, in the gravest European crisis since 1945, not all Labour MPs recognise Russian aggression for what it is. In February, Sir Keir threatened to withdraw the whip from 11 MPs, including John McDonnell, Diane Abbott and Richard Burgon, unless they withdrew their names from a statement on Ukraine by the Stop the War Coalition.

They did, but should not have been given the option. Despite its name, Stop the War is not anti-war at all but anti-western. It holds that the Ukraine crisis has been caused by Nato rather than Russian expansionism. There should not be a place in Labour's ranks for a current of opinion that extenuates aggression and echoes the claim of the Kremlin. Attlee himself ensured that Labour MPs who held such views were expelled from the party. Sir Keir should do likewise. If he does not, the Conservatives will relish the opportunity to depict him as being at the mercy of the party's far left. He cannot allow them that luxury.

Pension Problems

High inflation imposes costs on even supposedly generous retirement schemes

High inflation is damaging. It rewards imprudent borrowers while penalising savers and especially those on fixed incomes. One effect of the rise in inflation in Britain to its current 12-month rate of 7 per cent is to punish retired people holding what has long been considered the safest form of private pension. It exemplifies how, with an ageing population and economic uncertainty, Britain has a problem with pensions. Millions of retired people face unanticipated risks to their income. The system badly needs review and reform.

A perverse effect of inflation affects roughly 4.2 million former private-sector employees in Britain who draw "defined benefit" (DB) pensions. These schemes guarantee a particular level of income to those who reach retirement age. The risk hence lies with the employer, who must pay out regardless of whether financial markets go up or down. It is a more generous arrangement than "defined contribution" (DC) pension schemes, in which employee and employer contributions are invested in funds, whose performance determines how much income a person then receives.

DB schemes in the private sector are typically indexed to inflation. Yet almost all impose a cap: the inflation-linked element goes to a maximum of 5 per cent, and sometimes only 2.5 per cent or even zero. With the Bank of England expecting inflation to reach 8 per cent this year, and some private forecasters projecting 10 per cent, the loss to retirement incomes once this is taken into account will be dramatic. With inflation at 10 per cent, the average person with a DB scheme will lose about £400 a year. Even assuming that annual inflation returns rapidly to the Bank's target rate of 2 per cent, this loss will be irrecoverable.

Britain adopted inflation targeting in 1992, since when policymakers have broadly achieved their aim of price stability. Hence the inflation cap on DB pensions has not previously been a problem. It is now. So too is the effect of inflation on the purchasing power of the state pension, which went up by 3.1 per cent last month. Moreover, there is the plight of holders of DC pensions. These schemes have almost entirely replaced DB pensions in the private sector, because of the high cost of guaranteeing benefits in an environment of low interest rates. Global stock markets fell sharply last month, ensuring that those invested in the markets have lost immediate income. If they take money out of their pension, they will find it harder to make up that lost ground. Investment is for the long term, and people may have an urgent need for money.

Governments have enacted sensible reforms on pensions in the past 25 years. These include raising the state retirement age and equalising it between men and women, abolishing the requirement that people must use their pension pot to buy an annuity, and launching the automatic enrolment of most employees to their company pension scheme. But there is still a potential crisis of pensioner poverty because of these pressures on private provision and the state pension.

Pensioners are especially vulnerable to high inflation, and the Bank of England has a statutory obligation to bring inflation back to target. There needs to be a political consensus to ensure that workers fully understand how important it is to belong to occupational pension schemes and to build up a pot of savings throughout their careers. Their happiness and life plans may well depend on what they accrue.

Raise the Tone

A young composer stresses melody in preference to noise

Mozart began his career as a composer at the age of five, and Mendelssohn at the decidedly more mature milestone of ten. Alma Deutscher, aged 17, likewise possesses virtuosity well beyond her years, having premiered a violin concerto, a symphonic piece and an opera by her tenth birthday. Having been raised in Surrey, she now lives in Vienna and has amassed a big following of young people on the TikTok social media platform.

Perhaps as distinctive as Deutscher's talent is her taste. To those new to classical music, she stresses the importance of melody in contrast to the ugliness she perceives in some modern music. She explains: "People who push noise down the throats of audiences and pass that off as music that only very educated people can understand — these are the people killing classical music."

Concertgoers of all ages will surely nod in recognition. Atonality — that is, music without a sense of key or tonal centre — is an immense force in the music of the 19th and 20th centuries, and with good reason. Music develops, and atonality is not synonymous with being dissonant.

But it has to be said that some other modern movements do appear to have more devotees in the orchestra than the audience. Their music may have mathematical elegance without being easy on the ear. It takes an effort of will to, for example, sit through the evening-long performances of Karlheinz Stockhausen's 1970s works with electronics such as *Sternklang* (which, according to the composer "is music for concentrated listening in meditation, for the sinking of the individual into the cosmic whole").

By contrast, Deutscher seeks audiences rather than disciples. She is surely right to hold that the surest way to introduce her generation to the joys of classical music is to provide something beautiful rather than merely ingenious.