

# The Economist

APRIL 14TH-20TH 2018

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Mr Zuckerberg goes to Washington

A cheaper Reaper

Panspermia: spreading life to the galaxy

# Cool Germany



A SPECIAL REPORT



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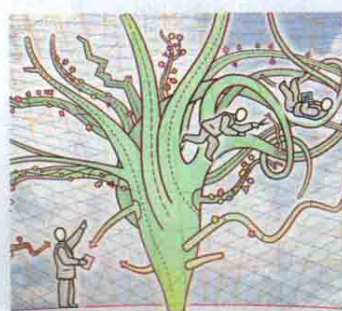


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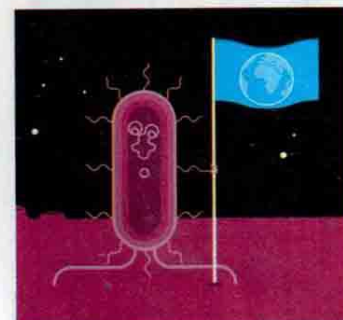
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## Politics



The regime of Bashar al-Assad used chemical weapons in Syria again, this time attacking the town of Douma in the besieged rebel enclave of Eastern Ghouta. Dozens of people were reported to have been killed. Donald Trump described the attack as “barbaric” and vowed that America would respond with force. But Russia said it found no evidence that chemical weapons had been deployed, dismissing the incident as “fake news”. It warned it would shoot down any missiles aimed at Syrian forces.

Israel was on high alert after Iran threatened retribution for an Israeli air strike on a Syrian air base in which seven Iranian military advisers were killed. Throughout the Syrian conflict Israel has struck at targets thought to be aiding Hizbullah, the Lebanese-based militia backed by Iran.

The ruler of Qatar, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, visited the White House, where he was commended by Mr Trump for working to tackle terrorism financing. That was a stark contrast to last year, when the American president sided with Saudi Arabia and its neighbours after they cut ties with Qatar for allegedly supporting terrorism. Mr Trump noted the large American base in Qatar, and that it buys “a lot of military airplanes, missiles”.

A military plane crashed near Algiers, the Algerian capital, killing all 257 people on board. Around two dozen members of the Polisario Front, a rebel group in Western Sahara that is backed by Algeria, were on the

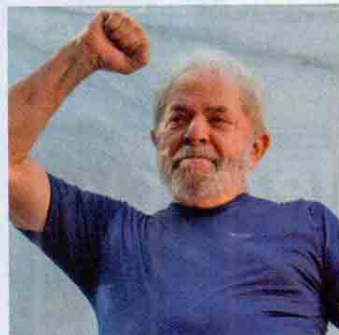
aircraft. It was the world’s worst air disaster in four years.

Nigeria’s president, Muhammadu Buhari, ended months of speculation by confirming that he will run for a second term next year. The 75-year-old has been plagued by bad health in office.

## The no-shows

Donald Trump cancelled his first official trip to Latin America because of the Syrian crisis. His absence from the Summit of the Americas in Peru may be a relief for regional leaders. A recent poll showed that only 16% of Latin Americans approved of Mr Trump. Nicolás Maduro, the socialist president of Venezuela, has been banned from the summit.

Mexico’s electoral authorities ordered that a fifth name be added to the ballot for July’s presidential election. Jaime Rodríguez will be allowed to run as an independent candidate, despite an earlier ruling that more than half of the signatures he collected were invalid.



Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, a former president of Brazil, turned himself in to police after a three-day showdown and began serving a 12-year sentence for corruption. The Worker’s Party denounced his conviction as “baseless” and said that for now he will remain its candidate for October’s presidential election.

Colombian police arrested a former senior leader of the FARC on drug-trafficking charges. President Juan Manuel Santos said that the man, known as Jesús Santrich, conspired to smuggle cocaine into the United States after

signing Colombia’s 2016 peace accord, and thus cannot be shielded by its amnesty. The FARC, which is now a political party, condemned the arrest.

## Viktor victorious



Viktor Orbán won his third successive term as prime minister of Hungary, his Fidesz party taking two-thirds of the seats in parliament. Critics denounced Mr Orbán’s campaign, which focused on decrying migration, and predicted a new crackdown on civil society.

In Azerbaijan, the incumbent president, Ilham Aliyev, was elected to a fourth term. The election commission said he got 86% of the vote on a 75% turnout; opposition parties boycotted the election, accusing him of suppressing dissent.

## How to make markets happy

China’s president, Xi Jinping, attempted to reduce trade tensions with America by reaffirming his country’s commitment to open its markets to foreigners. In a speech at the Boao Forum for Asia he offered tariff reductions on car imports. The governor of China’s central bank, Yi Gang, said caps on foreign ownership of financial firms would be raised or removed within months.

A court in South Korea jailed Park Geun-hye, a former president, for 24 years for corruption. Ms Park was impeached last year after mass demonstrations calling for her removal.

The Liberal-National coalition led by Malcolm Turnbull, Australia’s prime minister, trailed its main rival, Labor, for a 30th consecutive biweekly poll. A similar 30-poll slump was one of the reasons Mr

Turnbull cited for leading a parliamentary coup against his predecessor, Tony Abbott.

India’s Supreme Court overturned a ruling from a lower court that had annulled the marriage of a Hindu woman who had converted to Islam and wed a Muslim man. The decision was a victory for individual rights in the face of a concerted campaign by Hindu nationalists against conversions, which they consider a Muslim ploy to eliminate India’s Hindu majority.

America said it had killed Qari Hekmatullah, the leader of Islamic State in Afghanistan, in an air strike. Mr Hekmatullah had been expelled from the Taliban for excessive savagery.

## The Cohen bother

The FBI raided the office of Michael Cohen, Donald Trump’s personal lawyer. Among the items reportedly seized were papers relating to a payment made to a porn star to keep quiet about an alleged affair with Mr Trump. Mr Trump described the FBI’s legal swoop as a “disgrace”. The raid is not connected directly to Robert Mueller’s investigation into Russian contacts with Trump officials, but the White House said the president now thinks he has the power to fire Mr Mueller.

The most senior Republican in the House of Representatives, Paul Ryan, decided not to run for re-election in November. Since becoming Speaker in 2015, Mr Ryan has had to contend with the rise of Mr Trump and a congressional party frustrated by the lack of progress in its agenda.

Tammy Duckworth became the first senator to give birth while in office (a girl, Maile). And Cindy Hyde-Smith took up her Senate seat this week, the first woman to represent Mississippi in either chamber of Congress. There are currently 23 female senators (out of 100), the largest proportion to date, accounting for almost half the 52 women who have served as senators in total.



## Business

Mark Zuckerberg attended hearings in Congress to defend Facebook, after the revelation that information on 87m users had been obtained by a political-analytics firm linked to the Trump campaign. Mr Zuckerberg said he could accept regulation of the social network, provided it was under the "right framework", which he suggested might be something akin to impending data-protection rules in Europe. Mr Zuckerberg's assured performance helped lift Facebook's share price by 5.7% over his two days on the Hill.

### Get ready Russia!



America's latest round of sanctions against Russia hit hard, causing Russian stockmarkets to dive and the rouble to plunge. Chief among the sanctions' targets were seven oligarchs and 12 companies they own or control, but investor disquiet was more widely felt, spreading to Sberbank, Russia's biggest bank, among others. The list included Oleg Deripaska and his companies, such as Rusal, a producer of aluminium. Underlining the sanctions' potency, Ivan Glasenberg, the chief executive of Glencore, resigned from Rusal's board, which he had joined in 2007.

Stockmarkets in general had another volatile week, in part because sentiment fluctuated about the prospects of a trade war between America and China. Heightened geopolitical tensions over Syria pushed oil prices higher (some good news at least for the Russian economy). Brent crude climbed above \$72 a barrel, its highest level since 2014.

**Deutsche Bank** ousted John Cryan as chief executive, three years into his five-year contract. The German lender has suffered three consecutive annual losses and Paul Achleitner, the chairman, was said to be unhappy with the slow pace of the bank's turnaround. Still, several investors complained about the manner of Mr Cryan's defenestration, which could make for a turbulent annual shareholders' meeting next month. The new CEO is Christian Sewing, who headed Deutsche's retail bank.

### A new driver

Deutsche Bank wasn't the only illustrious German company shaking up its management. **Volkswagen** was reportedly ready to replace Matthias Müller as chief executive with Herbert Diess, who heads its core passenger-car brand. Mr Müller got the CEO's job in September 2015, when Martin Winterkorn resigned in the wake of the carmaker's emissions-cheating scandal.

The Turkish lira fell to another low against the dollar in part because of concerns about Turkey's push for growth at any cost. Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the president, unveiled an investment package this week and again called for interest

rates to remain subdued. That spooked investors already worried that Mr Erdogan's pronouncements on monetary policy are hampering the central bank's freedom to raise rates. Inflation remains stubbornly high at 10% and the current-account deficit has risen on an annual basis.

Investors were taken by surprise when **Saudi Arabia** sold \$11bn-worth of bonds without the customary roadshow. It is thought that the kingdom may have been trying to get a jump on Qatar, which it has been feuding with since last June and which is in the process of drumming up support for its own sale of government debt.

**Novartis** added to its expanding gene-therapy business by agreeing to pay \$8.7bn for **AveXis**, which specialises in treatments for spinal muscular atrophy, a genetic condition that causes progressive muscle wasting.

### The prancing unicorn

Jack Ma was reportedly preparing to raise up to \$10bn in a round of private funding for **Ant Financial**, a mobile-payments group that he controls. Mr Ma created Ant in 2011 to house the Alipay network, which he spun out

from his Alibaba empire. With 520m users, Alipay is the world's biggest mobile-payments platform, though most of its business is in China. Mr Ma's latest round of fundraising could value Ant at \$150bn, which would make it the most valuable startup in the world, way ahead of the likes of Uber and Didi Chuxing, two ride-hailing firms.

The European Banking Authority reported that 77% of the top earners among **European bankers** (those with remuneration packages of at least €1m, or \$1.1m, in 2016) were based in Britain. That was a long way ahead of Germany, the next country in the ranking, where 5% of top earners resided.

A **fat-finger** mistake by an employee at a South Korean brokerage led to 2.8bn shares worth \$100bn being issued to staff in error. The employee typed "shares" instead of "won" when distributing dividends in the Korean currency. It took the brokerage half an hour to spot the slip, during which time 16 members of staff took advantage of their windfall and sold their wrongly allocated stock.

For other economic data and news see Indicators section





# Cool Germany

Germany is becoming more open and diverse. With the right leadership, it could be a model for the West



SINCE the fall of the Berlin Wall the *Ampelmännchen*, the jaunty, behatted “little traffic-light man” of communist East Germany, has escaped his dictatorial roots to become a kooky icon of Germany’s trendy capital. Tourists pose with life-

size models and snap up memorabilia in souvenir shops. The *Ampelmännchen*’s quirky coolness is an increasingly apt symbol of the country as well as its capital. As our special report in this issue describes, Germany is entering a new era. It is becoming more diverse, open, informal and hip.

At first blush that seems a preposterous suggestion. The Germany of international newspaper headlines is a country with anxious citizens and stagnant politics. Angela Merkel is Europe’s longest-standing political leader, a woman who epitomises traditional German caution. Last September’s election saw a surge in support for the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD); it took Mrs Merkel six months to cobble together a lacklustre new coalition. To conservative foreign observers Germany is a byword for a reckless refugee policy; to others it is the country that bullied indebted southern Europeans.

But take the long view, and the *Ampelmännchen* captures how Germany is changing. Post-war German history has moved in cycles of about 25 years. First came the era of reconstruction. Then, from the late 1960s, the federal republic began to reckon frankly with its war guilt. In its latest phase, from the 1990s, Germany has reunified, become a normal country again and shed some of the fetters of its past. Now the wheels of history are turning once more. The Merkel era is drawing to a close. Many of the country’s defining traits—its ethnic and cultural homogeneity, conformist and conservative society, and unwillingness to punch its weight in international diplomacy—are suddenly in flux.

## Promising signals

The biggest change comes from Mrs Merkel’s “open door” policy towards refugees, which brought in 1.2m new migrants in 2015-16. This has confirmed once-homogeneous Germany’s transformation into a melting-pot. A more inclusive identity is emerging—a country that waited until 2000 to extend citizenship to many of those without native ancestors increasingly defines nationality in civic rather than ethnic terms. A patriarchal culture has become more gender-balanced: the share of working-age women with jobs has risen from 58% to 70% in the past 15 years. Germans are divorcing more and marrying less. Even the *Mittelstand*’s firms are adopting disruptive technologies such as artificial intelligence. And having undertaken no foreign military operations in the half-century to 1999, Germany has sent troops to Mali, Afghanistan and Lithuania.

This is shaking up a society that has long prized stability, opening cultural divides between those who embrace the new Germany and those who hanker for the familiar; between urban and rural voters; between young and old. The emergence of a new generation of more combative lawmak-

ers, the AfD’s arrival in the Bundestag and the battle over the future direction of Mrs Merkel’s Christian Democrats are all stoking debates about the country’s identity.

The outcome will determine the future of Europe’s biggest economy. It will also matter beyond Germany’s borders. The country is grappling with the rise of a more plural society at the same time as many others are doing so. Germans are temperamentally moderate and, thanks to their history, particularly sensitive to the dangers of demagoguery. How they navigate their country’s transition could set an example for others.

At home, the new Germany has shed its post-reunification economic woes and is booming, but it is also ageing fast; the largest age group is the 50-to-54s. Preserving its prosperity requires forward-looking reform. Internet access is patchy and slow; roads and classrooms can be surprisingly shabby; a tangle of red tape restricts service industries; and under Mrs Merkel the retirement age has fallen for some and will soon be lower than in France. The flow of newcomers to Germany can help cushion the demographic crunch, especially if immigration procedures are streamlined, education is improved to break the tight link between background and results, and the strictly regulated German professions are made more accessible.

Abroad, the new Germany could also become a different sort of power. It remains frustratingly prone to a small-country outlook: reluctant to spend enough on defence, to confront the imbalances caused by its trade surplus and to accept more burden-sharing in the euro zone. Yet there are signs of movement. Under pressure from France’s president, Emmanuel Macron, it will reluctantly accept some moves towards euro-zone integration, albeit tentative and insufficient ones. Germany’s vulnerability to trade disruption makes it a natural broker in an age of tariff wars. Last month its new economy minister helped to persuade the White House to suspend planned steel and aluminium duties on the EU and other allies.

Meanwhile, the refugee crisis is expanding German horizons. At its peak Mrs Merkel requested a map shaded to highlight Germany’s true borders: North Africa, Ukraine and Turkey. Then at last year’s G20 summit in Hamburg the chancellor advanced a “Compact with Africa” to accelerate development and improve governance on the continent. Though overhyped and underfunded, it gives a hint of the convening and stabilising role a normalised Germany could yet play.

## Green for go

All of which makes the character of Mrs Merkel’s successor pivotal. Her uncontentious, reactive style has suited her times. But a new Germany requires a different type of chancellor: proactive at home, ambitious abroad and with the skills to persuade German voters of the case for this ambition.

With the right leadership, there is little doubt about the country’s capability. In its latest historical phase alone it has absorbed the sclerotic, ex-communist east, overcome economic crisis in the early 2000s, taken in over 1m poor, often desperate immigrants—and coped. Now, as in the past, it would be a mistake to underestimate Germany. Like the *Ampelmännchen*, it has a knack for reinvention. ■



## Facebook

## Unmarked

Mark Zuckerberg and his questioners in Congress fail to reassure



**S**AYING sorry can be an enriching experience. For Mark Zuckerberg, who this week endured two days of questioning in front of Congress, the rewards of contrition are not just metaphorical. Over the course of his testimony, as the Facebook boss

apologised for the leakage of data on 87m users to a political-campaign firm, his company's shares rose by 5.7% and his own net worth by \$3.2bn.

Shareholders were doubtless relieved by Mr Zuckerberg's robotic but gaffe-free display. And even the firm's fiercest critics ought to acknowledge the distance that it has travelled since the Cambridge Analytica story broke in March. Mr Zuckerberg welcomed the idea of regulation and cautiously endorsed a forthcoming European law on data protection. By saying explicitly that Facebook was responsible for the content on its platform, he has opened the door to bearing greater liability for the material it carries. But the bounce in the share price also signals something worrying: that neither the firm nor American legislators have grasped the need for radical change.

Start with Facebook. Mr Zuckerberg told Congress that any firm that has grown at the speed of Facebook was bound to make mistakes. But the dorm-room excuse is wearing thin. Facebook is the sixth-most-valuable listed firm on the planet. It spent \$11.5m on lobbying in Washington in 2017. Its endless guff about "community" counts for little when it has repeatedly and flagrantly disregarded its users' rights to control their own data. The company has carried out lots of fiddles in recent weeks—from making privacy settings clearer to promising an audit of suspicious apps. But it should go much further.

An internal investigation into how third-party apps have been using Facebook users' data is not enough to restore trust:

it should appoint an outside firm to conduct a full independent examination of its own conduct. That would help address lingering questions; Cambridge Analytica may be just one of many such outfits to have got hold of user data, for example. The appointment of an independent chairman would be another way to improve the quality of debate and scrutiny within Facebook. Along with other tech firms, it should create an industry ombudsman whose jobs would include making access to platforms easier for independent researchers. Instead of opening up, however, the risk is that Facebook will throw up walls: its decision to kick third-party data-brokers off the platform has the convenient effect of both protecting users' data and entrenching its power as a source of those data.

#### Wanted: well-informed legislators

Even if Facebook did all this, there would still be a need for data-protection regulation in America. Mr Zuckerberg has a majority of the voting rights at the company: an independent chairman would not stop him wielding ultimate control. The firm's advertising-led business model incentivises it to turn users' personal data into targets for ads. Facebook has said nothing about allowing people to opt out of being tracked across the web. It is inherently hard for users of online services to make informed choices about how their data should be stored. In any case, these issues span more firms than Facebook.

That leads to the other concern raised by this week's hearings: the capacity of policymakers to put together good legislation. Where Mr Zuckerberg was competent, his interrogators were often clueless (see United States section). One seemed not to know that the firm made money from advertising; another was more interested in getting Facebook to build fibre-optic cable in her state. To work for its users, the data economy requires thoughtful policy and a sea-change in the way tech firms are run. On this week's evidence, neither looks likely. ■

#### War crimes in Syria

## The duty to deter

Bashar al-Assad has used chemical weapons again. If he is not punished, others will do so, too



**A**FTER seven years of war and hundreds of thousands of deaths, it takes an act of utter barbarism to shock the world out of its indifference. But every so often, Bashar al-Assad supplies one. On April 7th more than 40 Syrians were killed with

poisonous gas in the town of Douma. Videos showed men, women and children lying lifeless, with foam dribbling over their lips. Such horrors are why most countries outlawed the use of chemical weapons long ago—and why Syria's despot flouts that ban. He has carried out dozens of chemical attacks

over the course of Syria's war, sowing terror in rebel-held areas. The world should not let him get away with it.

As *The Economist* went to press, America and its allies were considering responding to the atrocity in Douma with military action. If they are convinced of the evidence against Mr Assad (who denies responsibility), then they should punish him hard enough to deter him from gassing his people again. That will take more than a flurry of cruise missiles. Air strikes should be aimed at the dictator's chemical-weapons plants and command-and-control centres. Turning one of his palaces to rubble (after a suitable warning to let civilians escape) would give ordinary Syrians visible evidence of the disgust the world feels for their ruler. ▶▶



Some argue that a bombing campaign would merely prolong Syria's war, which Mr Assad, regrettably, has all but won. Rebels control only a few pockets of territory in the north and south and are largely cut off from international support. Deterrence has already failed, say others, and hitting the dictator again might provoke a response from Russia, which has threatened to shoot down American missiles and fire at their launchers. More risks come with the man in charge of the mission, President Donald Trump. His Syria policy is scandalously inconsistent (see Middle East and Africa section). Only last month he indicated he would withdraw American troops, saying "Let the other people take care of it now."

### The costs of inaction

These are serious concerns. But they do not justify inaction, which would embolden Mr Assad to commit more atrocities. In the past, a failure to act has had precisely this effect. Barack Obama called the use of chemical weapons a "red line". Yet when Mr Assad used Sarin nerve gas to kill 1,400 civilians in Ghouta in 2013, Mr Obama did too little, settling for a disarmament deal that Mr Assad quickly broke. Mild punishments have not worked, either. When Mr Assad used Sarin again last year, Mr Trump launched 59 cruise missiles at a Syrian air base, and then stopped. That did not deter the attack on Douma.

Mr Assad's next target is rebel-held Idlib, where thousands of civilians are hunkered down—and where new chemical massacres are likely if nothing is done. Hitting him hard

enough to prevent such horror runs the risk of provoking Vladimir Putin, Russia's leader and Mr Assad's protector. Care should therefore be taken to avoid killing Russians. Existing "deconfliction" arrangements should be used to give Russian commanders warning of imminent attacks, and thus a chance to get their men out of the way. America should make it clear that it wishes to avoid a direct confrontation with another nuclear power. Such a campaign will require nerve and precision. Even with both, it is not without risks.

Yet it is the least bad option. Syria has made a mockery of the UN's Chemical Weapons Convention, which Russia and Mr Assad himself have signed. If such agreements are to be taken seriously, they must be enforced. Alas, the UN cannot perform this task as long as Russia wields its veto at the Security Council. So the burden falls on countries that believe that the rules-based international order is worth upholding.

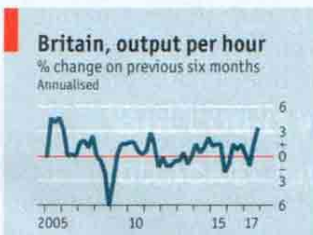
Mr Trump champions such rules only when it suits him. Nonetheless, he is right to argue that Mr Assad should pay a "big price" for his crimes, and he deserves credit for calling out Iran and Russia for backing Syria's tyrant. If he means what he says, he will not be alone. Countries as diverse as France and Saudi Arabia are urging that Mr Assad be held accountable.

Punishing the use of chemical weapons will not end the suffering in Syria, or unseat Mr Assad. But if the taboo on chemical weapons is allowed to fade away, other despots will be tempted to use them, too. And war, already vile, will become even more so. ■

## Brexit and the economy

# Brittle Britain

Productivity is rising at last. On its current course, Brexit threatens to undermine those gains



LOW productivity growth has plagued Britain's economy since the financial crisis. From 2010 to 2016 output per hour grew, on average, by just 0.2% a year, down from 2.5% between 1950 and 2007. In the G7 group of rich countries, only Italy has

done worse. Productivity drives a country's living standards in the long term. It is a relief, then, that the stagnation may at last be coming to an end. In the second half of 2017 productivity grew at an annual rate of 3.4%, the fastest growth since 2005.

Accelerating productivity is the latest, and most important, piece of good news on Britain's economy. Capital spending is improving. As a share of GDP, total investment is a percentage point above its average since the crisis. Foreign firms are readily investing. A tenth of global mergers and acquisitions announced so far in 2018 have involved a British target. Wage growth is picking up in nominal terms and, with inflation falling, real wages may soon start to grow again.

The strength of Britain's labour market stands out. America may have a lower official unemployment rate, but nearly a fifth of people there aged between 25 and 54 are not even looking for work, meaning they are not counted in the figures. Not so in Britain, where the employment rate for this age group is 84%, among the highest of large economies.

Inevitably in a country still riven by the referendum deci-

sion to leave the European Union, Britain's economic performance is analysed through the prism of Brexit. Those in favour of leaving the EU gleefully recall predictions, made by the Treasury and others, of a collapse in confidence after the referendum, and then a recession. Not only have those forecasts proved wrong but, some Brexiteers say, Brexit may actually be helping the economy. On their view, productivity is rising because falling net migration from Europe has led to a tighter labour market, spurring firms to find ways to do more with less.

### Too soon to celebrate

Not so fast. The reasons for the rise in productivity are not yet clear (see Britain section). But there are two ways in which the recent economic news must be put into perspective.

The first is that the aftermath of the referendum has coincided with a broad, sustained rise in global growth. Against that backdrop, it is not surprising that Britain's economy has performed better than anticipated. It has nonetheless slowed. The economy grew by only 1.4% in the year to the end of 2017, down from 2% a year earlier. And it has slipped sharply relative to others. Not long ago Britain had the fastest growth in the G7 group of rich countries. Now it has the slowest. Comparing Britain's growth with that of the world economy, one estimate puts the running cost of Brexit at 1.3% of GDP, or £300m (\$426m) a week. Had the global economic cycle not turned in 2017, some of the more blood-curdling forecasts made before the referendum might not have looked quite so silly. ►►



Second, the biggest downside to Brexit was never going to be immediate economic pain. If Britain leaves the single market and customs union in an orderly manner, the short-term shock should be manageable. But there is still the swingeing cost to longer-term growth from higher trade barriers. Firms selling to the continent will gradually cut Britain out of their supply chains. Britain's workers and capital will have to be re-directed to produce things that previously were imported more cheaply. Britain's exports to Europe will cost more. With free movement curtailed, it will be harder for knowledge to flow across borders. The economy will be less efficient.

Brexiters retort that economists have been proved wrong once and will be proved wrong again. Yet the profession is much better at predicting trade flows than it is at guessing how investors will respond to events. Few economic models have had as much success in explaining the real world as the one saying that as distance between trading partners doubles, trade flows fall by roughly half. There is no replacement for frictionless trade with a single market of 450m people on Britain's doorstep, whatever the government's hopes for trade deals

with countries, like America, that are oceans away.

Reliable trade models predict long-term losses from Brexit of up to 10% of GDP, depending on how it is conducted. According to analysis by civil servants, even if Britain retained tariff-free access to the single market and maintained free movement of people, as Norway does, the eventual hit to GDP per person could be as high as 2.6%—enough to undo its growth during 2017 almost three times over.

In theory, investment could boost productivity enough to outweigh the effect of lost trade. Policymakers are, slowly, getting some things right. Government investment, as a share of GDP, may soon reach its highest sustained level for 40 years. Philip Hammond, the chancellor of the exchequer, is saying some sensible things about solving Britain's housing shortage.

Yet the government is walking down a train that is speeding in the opposite direction. The effects of merely tinkering with policy will be of a different order of magnitude to those of upending Britain's trading relationships with its neighbours. For productivity, as for so much else, how Brexit is conducted is the thing that matters most. ■

## Undertakers

# Death, disrupted

Great news for the dead: the funeral industry is being shaken up



FEW choose how they die, but they can choose what happens next. Most leave this to loved ones who, in their distress, usually outsource the decision to an undertaker. The transaction is often a let-down, with hardly any choices beyond

“Burn or bury?” and “Cheque or card?”

The average American funeral with a burial costs nearly \$9,000. In some countries, the exorbitant cost of staging a “proper” funeral can lead families to financial ruin. Nearly everywhere, the bereaved have put up with rip-off last rites because of the lack of better options. At last, technology and competition are starting to disrupt this most conservative of industries (see International section). This is good news for anyone who plans to die one day.

The funeral trade has the most basic of business advantages: inexhaustible demand. Every minute more than 100 people die somewhere. Not all pay for a funeral. Tibetans still practise sky burial, leaving bodies on mountaintops; the Caviteño in the Philippines bury their dead in hollowed-out tree trunks. But in the rich world, dying is big business—an industry, for example, worth \$16bn in 2017 in America.

Undertakers have long been able to get away with poor service. Their customers are typically distressed, under time-pressure and completely inexperienced (people in rich countries buy more cars than they do funerals). As a result, few shop around, let alone haggle. With consumers docile, providers can keep quality low and prices high—much like tourist-trap restaurants, another one-off purchase made in haste with little information. Some sellers have made matters worse with techniques ranging from opaque pricing to emotional blackmail. The asymmetry in knowledge between undertaker and

grief-stricken client allows ludicrous markups on things like coffins. It also makes it easier to sell services that people do not realise are mostly unnecessary, such as embalming.

But now undertakers' market power is being challenged on at least three fronts. One is changing customer demand. Driven in part by the decline of religion, and broader shifts in attitudes to death and dying, fewer bereaved are ready to cede their dead unthinkingly to an off-the-shelf burial. They prefer shrouds and woodland burials to coffins and graveyards; celebrations of life to sombre rituals in funeral homes; and video tributes to a life just lost to displays of the embalmed dead.

Second, more and more, they choose cremation, which is cheaper than burial, and allows a “direct” form in which the disposal of the body is handled without fuss, and kept separate from the commemoration of the life lost. And third, the internet is disrupting death as it has life. Comparison sites shed light on funeral providers' services. And though not many bereaved relations yet “bring their own coffin”, a quick browse online gives people a far better idea of what it should cost. Startups are offering more radical disruption: rocket-launches for ashes; QR codes on graves linked to online tributes; new ways of disposing of bodies besides burying or burning.

### The nail in the coffin?

Nobody is yet writing undertaking's epitaph. But the industry will have to adapt. The first signs of a shift are already on display in America, where funeral-home revenue is projected to stagnate despite an annual death rate—the industry's lifeblood, after all—that is expected to rise. In Britain a price war between the largest providers may at last cause prices to drop.

The most important effect of all this disruption is not just cheaper funerals and fewer debt-burdened families. It is a more profound shift in returning to consumers perhaps the most personal of all decisions: control over their farewell. ■



## A party of the people



Although your briefing on Russia's young post-Gorbachev generation offered optimism for the future, it fell into the trap of relying on elites for change ("Gorbachev's grandchildren", March 24th). Elites can spearhead social and political reform, but it is mass behaviour that ultimately entrenches norms, values and practices. Previous generations of Russian reformers, from the Bolsheviks to the post-Soviet New Russians, ignored this at their peril. Boris Yeltsin's young technocrats never managed to cultivate popular support for their reforms. As a result, change was driven from above, resulting in a preponderant presidency counterbalanced not by a strong parliament or civil society but by a fractious coalition of oligarchs. This created the conditions for Vladimir Putin's autocracy.

If Russia is to develop the institutions and customs necessary for a competitive democracy and market economy, it will require a national movement. Even though the Communists and (self-styled) Liberal Democrats are widely recognised as being deferential to the regime, they are nonetheless able to command a limited popular following, while liberal outfits such as Yabloko barely take a bite of the vote. The reason why Alexei Navalny is perceived as such a threat to the system is because he has sought to broaden the opposition beyond the metropolitan elite and into the Russian heartland by tapping into the nationalist vein of grievance that Mr Putin has mined to maintain power.

Meanwhile, Ksenia Sobchak ran a traditional

campaign aimed squarely at your new generation and came away with less than 2% of the vote. Only one of these approaches offers a long-term path to power, as well as the popular mobilisation necessary to entrench democracy after its establishment.

MARK DUNCAN  
Moscow

## Measuring social discord

Bagehot took issue with the "open" and "closed" division in politics that Global Future discussed in its most recent report (March 24th). We agree that in this debate it is important to show empathy and respect for all sides. But Bagehot overlooked the extent to which our argument is based on clear evidence. Our data show that there is a demonstrable open/closed values divide in Britain, starkly correlated with age. That divide increasingly helps predict and explain voting behaviour in Britain, as is already the case elsewhere, perhaps most notably in France and the United States. Whether we like it or not, open/closed is fast emerging as a new political reality around the world.

More importantly, Bagehot made too much of the distinction between those with academic qualifications and those without as a better explanation for political polarisation. His assertion that "exam-passers" gain "access to a world that is protected from the downside of globalisation" will come as a surprise to the army of graduates who grapple with insecure, low-paid jobs, high levels of student debt and house prices that are way beyond their means. Casting all these people as "winners" who play down the legitimate concerns of "losers" understates their legitimate economic worries, as well as the extent to which openness is dominant among under-45s in general, not just among the elites.

We strongly agree with Bagehot that it is important to ensure that the benefits of openness are spread as widely as possible in order to deepen

support for it. But this should not be at the expense of ignoring important truths or more widely ducking a fight that will shape our world for decades to come.

PETER STARKINGS  
Managing director  
Global Future  
London

## Let freedom ring

"Like a mighty stream" (March 31st) implied that Martin Luther King borrowed the phrase "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God almighty we are free at last!" from a novel by Zora Neale Hurston published in 1939, rather than from an "old Negro spiritual". But my high-school choir sang that very same spiritual in 1962. It can be traced to John Wesley Work's collection in 1907, "New Jubilee Songs and Folk Songs of the American Negro". Hurston may well have picked up the line from there.

JOHN KIHLLSTROM  
Richmond, California

You mentioned some of the plagiarism that King has been accused of. But you referenced the quote that Winston Churchill "mobilised the English language and sent it into battle" to John F. Kennedy. Actually, that was how Edward Murrow put it, and how JFK plagiarised it years later when he conferred honorary American citizenship on Churchill. You thus provided an eloquent reminder that words can be well-borrowed, and that we should mind the ubiquitous glasshouses when throwing stones. Or so I think someone once said.

MARC KURITZ  
San Diego

## Beyond porridge

"Steady work" is cited as one factor, in your article on court convictions in Britain, that can stop criminals from reoffending when they leave prison ("Stuck on repeat", March 24th). One charity organisation, called Clink, is trying to help prisoners gain such steady work by running restaurants at some prisons where

the public are the customers. Clink hopes to boost the self-confidence of the inmates and provide them with skills that can be employed in the hospitality and horticultural industries. The prisoners in the restaurants work towards the City & Guilds NVQ in food preparation, service and customer service. They are given full training, support, employment and are assigned a mentor. Education seems to be the answer. More than 800 prisoners have graduated from Clink's training projects. My husband attended one of its restaurants last week; he was considerably impressed with the quality, not only of the food on offer, but of the prisoners themselves.

SYLVIA RING  
London

## Great railway journeys

Your story on "The Malmo-Palermo express" (March 24th) reminded me of an encounter with John Price, the editor of Thomas Cook's railway timetable. Someone wanted to know how to get by train from Oslo to Palermo. Price had the most extraordinary memory. "Well", he said, the concentration etched on his forehead, "you leave Oslo at 22.40, arrive in Copenhagen in time for breakfast. Then you take the 10.15 to Hamburg, have some lunch on the train, be in Hanover in time for tea and then in Frankfurt for a quick bite before catching the 21.19 Italia Express to Rome. You will be in Rome at 14.05 the next day which gives you time to see some sites before hopping on the 17.00 for Palermo."

There was a pause, and for the first time Price referred to his timetable. "My mistake. That Italia Express at 21.19, it leaves at 21.18."

ROBIN LAURANCE  
Oxford

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who used his helicopter to survey the disaster. In fact, there was a more recent example of what Puerto Ricans were entitled to. A month before Maria, Hurricane Harvey hit Houston and within six days the American army's Northern Command had deployed 73 helicopters to the city. Yet a week after Maria, Mr Prouty still had the skies over Puerto Rico pretty much to himself: "There was nothing, no Black Hawk up in the air, no C130." It took Northern Command at least three weeks to send 70 choppers to the island.

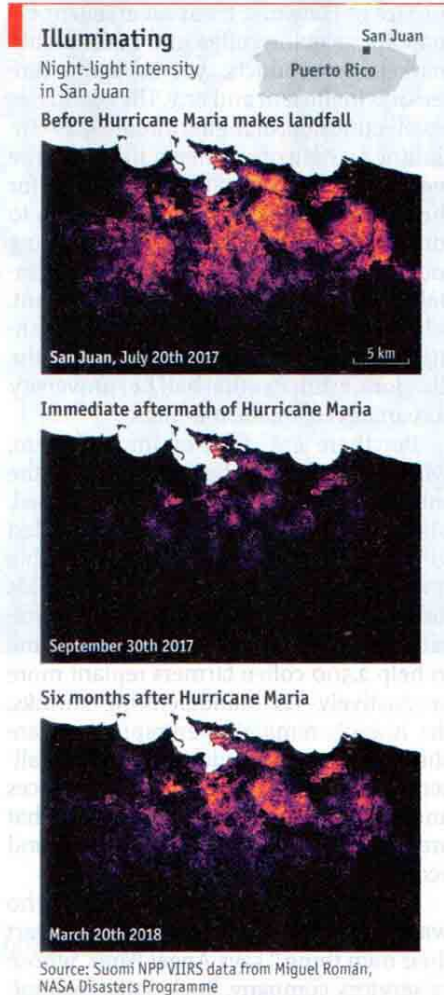
Digging by Politico suggests the federal government sent 30,000 relief workers to Houston within nine days of its hurricane; it sent 10,000 to Puerto Rico. Over the same period, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) approved payments of \$142m to victims of Harvey, and \$6m to victims of Maria. Ms Meléndez says it was two weeks before she heard from FEMA, and two months before the Army Corps of Engineers started dispensing tarpaulins to patch up Ponce's 49,000 damaged houses.

In the coastal town of Punta Santiago, in the poor south-east of the island, Father José Colón says it was two months before he saw any sign of FEMA, when two of its workers came to his church asking for directions. The priest was by then dispensing \$1m of supplies, which he had raised in private donations over the internet. "At least the response from the American people was extraordinary," he says.

Even the most attentive government would have struggled with Maria. FEMA was overstretched in Texas, Florida and California. Puerto Rico, unlike Houston, is rugged, 180 kilometres long, and has worn-out infrastructure and weak institutions. The state-owned electricity monopoly, whose 700 pylons came crashing down, is especially inept. Yet instead of strong leadership, to cut through the difficulties, Donald Trump provided little help. The president at first sought to downplay the disaster, then suggested Puerto Ricans were doing too little to help themselves. Three weeks after Maria, he suggested it would soon be time for the feds to leave. "We cannot keep FEMA, the Military & the First Responders, who have been amazing (under the most difficult circumstances) in P.R. forever!"

**Overseas, not abroad**

He might almost have been speaking of a foreign country. Maybe he thought he was. Before Maria, over half of Americans did not know Puerto Ricans were American citizens. No wonder they were treated like second-class ones. Even now, six months after the disaster, over 50,000 have no electricity and San Juan is prone to daylong power cuts. The poor, whose tin-roofed shacks were most damaged by the storm, have found it especially hard to secure assistance. Of the nearly 1.2m applications



FEMA has received for money to repair damaged houses, it has rejected 60% for lack of title deeds or because the shacks in question were built on stolen land or in contravention of building codes.

The economic toll is enormous. Around 80% of the island's agricultural crop was destroyed, including coffee and banana plantations that will take years to regrow. An estimated 10,000 firms, one in five of the total, remain closed, including a third of the island's hotels. Glinting in the Caribbean sun behind Father Colón a bulldozer was clearing debris from Punta Santiago's once-popular, now deserted, beach. After the storm scores of dead monkeys were washed up on it from a research station on an outlying island. The local fishery has also suffered, its reef having been buried under debris, including a car.

The government forecasts output will shrink by another 11% in the year to June 2018. A burst of growth should then follow—estimated at 8% over the following year—on the back of \$35bn in federal assistance, an estimated \$20bn in private-insurance payments and as Puerto Ricans dip into their savings to repair their houses. Yet even allowing for the effects of that growth, Puerto Rico and the nearby US Virgin Islands will by one estimate lose \$47.5bn in output and employment equivalent to 332,000 people working for a year.

The 3,000 people estimated to have left the Punta Santiago area, mostly for Florida, may not return soon.

Yet the storm has also reinforced two positive trends. One concerns the political effect of the island's swelling population on the mainland, where there are over 5m Puerto Ricans. Most recent departees have headed to Florida, whose Puerto Rican population has surged to over 1m. Given that Mr Trump won Florida in 2016 by a little over 100,000 votes, and most Puerto Ricans on the mainland vote Democratic, this gives them leverage. On a post-Maria embassy to Washington, Ms Meléndez went to see Senator Marco Rubio of Florida to try to capitalise on that. After a round-about discussion about debt relief and aid, conducted in Spanish and English, the pugnacious mayor of Ponce says she slammed her fist onto Mr Rubio's desk. "I said, 'Sir, treat us the same as any other Americans or we are going to tell our relatives in Florida not to vote for you and you will not win another election'."

The second, more important, benefit concerns the creative potential of the destruction wrought by Maria on the island's government and businesses. Saddled with massive debts—including \$70bn to bondholders and another \$50bn in pension liabilities—Mr Rosselló's administration is making deep cuts. Before Maria, it was committed to slashing funding to local governments by \$175m, closing 184 schools and trimming public-sector pensions that, at an average of \$1,100 a month, are not generous. It will now be able to cut during a burst of growth and less steeply, at the discretion of its overseer—a seven-person fiscal control board that was tasked in 2016 with approving the government's budgets in return for negotiating with its creditors. But much more is required.

**Is this the end of Puerto Rico?**

Assisted by federal tax incentives, Puerto Rico's economic model was for decades based on manufacturing, especially of drugs. Its economic collapse was a result of those incentives being taken away by a Republican-controlled Congress, between 1996 and 2006. The debt crisis is an equally predictable product of the government's efforts to sustain its operations, at boom-time levels, with borrowed money. This reflected, beyond foolishness, an assumption that Washington would provide a replacement incentive. The fact that three successive administrations, Democratic and Republican, have refused to do so, even after the horrors of Maria, points to the emptiness of that hope. To climb out of its hole, Puerto Rico needs to become more competitive. Given that it lags the United States by 58 places in the World Bank's ranking of the ease of doing business, it at least has a lot of options, some of which the hurricane has made more palatable.





### Regional elections in Indonesia

## Voting for God

TASIKMALAYA

### No one wants to get on the wrong side of Islamic zealots

INSIDE a grimy, smoke-filled hall in Tasikmalaya, a town in West Java, Ridwan Kamil tries to whip up the crowd. Mr Ridwan is the candidate for governor from the United Development Party (PPP), a mildly Islamic outfit. He is also an American-educated architect and the mayor of Bandung, the largest city in the region. To scattered applause, he boasts about boosting recycling rates and empowering women through interest-free loans. But he also claims that he has encouraged the people of Bandung to visit mosques more often. After his speech his convoy races off to an Islamic school for lunch.

Before campaigning started for regional elections in June, many observers worried that religion would drown out all other issues. The concern stemmed from local elections in Jakarta last year, in which the front-runner, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, a Christian of Chinese origin known as Ahok, was falsely accused of insulting Islam. Huge rallies were organised against him by the “212 Movement”, a coalition of various extremist groups such as the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), which supports subjecting Indonesia to Islamic law. In the end Ahok lost to the candidate supported by conservative Muslim groups.

“Today is different,” says Marsudi Syuhud, the head of Nahdlatul Ulama, the largest Muslim organisation in Indonesia. Although incredibly popular, with 60% approval ratings, Ahok was considered by

many to be a divisive figure, by virtue both of his minority status and of his bluntness, which ran counter to Javanese traditions of deference and circumlocution. None of the candidates in West Java is so inflammatory. But scenes such as those in Tasikmalaya show that, even though hardliners are far less noisy than they were in Jakarta, religion is still playing a pervasive role.

### Teeming and pious

West Java, Indonesia’s most populous province, with 47m people, is considered one of the most conservative parts of the country. In the presidential election of 2014 it plumped for Prabowo Subianto, a former general particularly liked by religious types, rather than the winner, Joko Widodo (known as Jokowi), the more secular governor of Jakarta. Tasikmalaya is known for its many Islamic schools. Candidates have been keen to burnish their religious credentials. Mr Ridwan, for example, has chosen as his running-mate Uu Ruzhanul Ulum, the devout head of the local government in Tasikmalaya.

FPI has tried to stir up religious tensions in the province. According to the Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, a think-tank in Jakarta, it has portrayed several candidates, including Mr Ridwan, as fronts for Christian “domination”, in a country that is nearly 90% Muslim (a common ploy in Asia—see *Banyan*). The group accused the running-mate of Mr Ridwan’s main rival

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of being a “polytheist” because, as head of the local government in another town in the province, he allowed the erection of statues of traditional Javanese puppets.

There has also been an uptick in “black campaigns”, in which anonymous posts on social media are used to paint candidates as not Muslim enough. “They want to drag me down,” says Mr Ridwan, who says that even his 78-year-old mother has received a video via WhatsApp that claimed, falsely, that he had presided over a massive church-building campaign in Bandung. West Javanese spend four or five hours a day looking at social media on their mobile phones, he says. Smears spread like wildfire.

Last week, for instance, pictures began circulating of most of the main candidates for governor in the company of Sukmawati Sukarnoputri, daughter of Sukarno, the first president, and sister of Megawati, the fifth. She was recently accused of blasphemy for reciting a poem that implies that traditional Indonesian hairstyles and songs are preferable to headscarves and the call to prayer. Only the candidate backed by Mr Prabowo’s party and various Islamic groups escaped attack.

Jokowi, who is standing for re-election next year, will be watching West Java closely. He has managed to co-opt some doctrinaire Muslim groups, such as the Indonesian Ulema Council, by appointing senior members to government committees. FPI has lost momentum since its leader, Rizieq Shihab, went on pilgrimage to Mecca and declined to return to Indonesia to face pornography charges. But grassroots activists will not be so easy to quell. A study last year found that more than 40% of those attending after-school Islamic classes supported the idea of Indonesia becoming an Islamic state, and 60% said they would be willing to travel abroad for *jihād*. ■