

# Under The Radar

*While the media landscape is preoccupied by COVID-19, politics and business grinds on. 'Under the Radar' provides a concise overview and thoughtful analysis of critical stories currently being overlooked.*



# Normal opposition resumes

## *What happened?*

Keir Starmer made his first appearance as Labour leader at Prime Minister's Questions. It should have been the most daunting moment of his political career – Tony Blair once admitted that he could never shake the nerves that greeted him before the weekly Westminster showdown.

But this was a different PMQs. Dominic Raab deputised for the PM and Starmer faced an empty chamber, which allowed for sharper debate and less theatrics. Commentators praised Starmer's performance, suggesting the return of responsible opposition that could hold the government to account.

## *What does it mean?*

Starmer's first outing signals the end to a decade of feeble opposition, as he demonstrated a knack for pressing government in the sore spots.

Prime Ministers have had an easy time at PMQs in recent years. Ed Miliband struggled to out-fox David Cameron and often ended up on the wrong end of some sharp jabs; while Jeremy Corbyn didn't really try to land blows on his opponent. Instead, he churned out soundbites for social media.

Starmer's performance signals a return to traditional PMQs and effective opposition. He will lay traps and force the government to say things they would probably rather not. And unlike Corbyn, Starmer is laser focused on the issues making the media tick. This is important because Corbyn failed to hold the government to account for too long.

Admittedly, current conditions favour Starmer. The eerie silence of the chamber forces the spectator to linger on every word, while the typically boisterous Tory backbenches aren't there to disrupt his flow. Even if Starmer can sustain this level of performance, many have questioned whether PMQs even matter. It's an event watched by the commentariat, not the general public.

But this is a short-sighted view. PMQs will be valuable for both Starmer and the public. The format suits his skillset and performances like this should energise his party. In doing so, we should see the return of a grown-up opposition that forces the Prime Minister to raise his game and provide better government.

Trafalgar Strategy's founder and former advisor to David Cameron, Giles Kenningham said: "Under Corbyn, PMQs lost its spark and humour. It should now return to being a more watchable spectacle with both Johnson and Starmer trading blows and punchy one-liners. More importantly, it should signify the return of a decent opposition holding the government to account, which ultimately can only be good news for the British electorate".

# UK hard-pressed to improve media freedom

## *What happened?*

The UK has slipped further down the rankings to 35th in the latest annual World Media Freedom Index. Compiled by campaigning group Reporters Without Border (RSF), the Index is a UN recognised authority on media freedom. According to RSF, 2019 saw a “staggering low point for press freedom in the UK” when journalist Lyra McKee was killed whilst observing rioting in Derry, Northern Ireland.

A look at the full list sees Scandinavia uphold its near-perfect reputation, as in most walks of life, with Norway topping the table for a fourth consecutive year and Denmark and Sweden sitting pretty in the top five. Conversely, the usual totalitarian suspects stack up at the bottom- Kim Jong Un consigning North Korea to a last-place finish.

## *What does it mean?*

Although no cause for major concern, the UK's consistently modest ranking serves as a reminder of the lofty standards set by European neighbours.

Recent skirmishes with the Parliamentary Lobby journalists have seen the government accused of adopting a US style approach to media handling (the US rank 45th FYI) but this pales into insignificance when compared to the genuine lack of safety for journalists in Northern Ireland. Still no one has been brought to justice for the murder of 29yr old journalist Lyra McKee and threats continue to be levied against reporters covering the recent surge of paramilitary groups.

Last summer, then Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt acknowledged immediate action was needed both at home and abroad. The UK hosted delegates from across the world at the FCO's 'Defend Media Freedom Conference' and Hunt pledged to establish a National Committee for the Safety of Journalists. Is there anything to show nine months later? With Hunt no longer in cabinet and a series of unforeseen events swamping the government's in tray the issue of media reform has fallen down the political agenda.

The final word is reserved for China who place a truly shocking 177th out of 180 ranked countries. In the continual debate over the UK's diplomatic and economic relations with the Chinese, concerns over media freedom rarely register more than a murmur. Perhaps this terrifying record, comfortably inferior to the likes of Syria and Rwanda, will turn the heads of those attempting to maintain the supposed 'Golden Era' for UK-China Relations.

# Sweden and Austria go coal-free

## *What happened?*

Sweden has closed its last coal-fired power plant, making it the third country in Europe to go coal-free and opt to generate its electricity from renewable sources. The Scandinavian nation set the target of 2022 but has achieved its goal two years ahead of schedule. The closure of Vartaverket in Stockholm comes as Austria closed its last plant, Mellach near the city of Graz only, only five days ago.

## *What does it mean?*

Two nations abandoning coal power in the space of a week is a clear sign that Europe is making big strides toward complete renewable energy. That takes the total of coal-free European countries to three, with Belgium having shut its last plant in 2016. Norway also has effectively no coal-fired capacity except for a small Russian-operated plant in the Arctic Circle. G8 economies such as France, Britain and Italy plan to follow suit by 2025, while many more are aiming for 2030.

Despite these milestones, there is still a mountain to climb. Germany generates one third of their electricity from coal - more than any other source. All their nuclear plants were decommissioned following the Japanese Fukushima plant meltdown, to be replaced by the devil they knew: coal plants. They plan to stop usage by 2038, which would be too late to comply with the UN Paris climate agreement. Meanwhile, Czech Republic, Spain or North Macedonia and Poland have yet to fully commit to a target. The latter's lack of commitment is particularly concerning as it currently accounts for a third of the EU's coal consumption.

---

*"Austria's efforts have been particularly laudable"*

---

But all this shouldn't detract from the achievements of Austria and Sweden. Austria's efforts have been particularly laudable: in the mid-noughties they burnt around 1.3 million tons of coal a year; now they're on course to ditch fossil fuels and become carbon neutral by 2040. This wouldn't have been possible without the government's aggressive pursuit of a renewable energy-first policy since 2015 – it proves that where there's a will there's a way.

# What Trafalgar Is Reading

50 years of progress—and setbacks—since the first Earth  
Day

[National Geographic](#)

“Since the first Earth Day in 1970, the United States and nations around the world have made significant progress in protecting the environment. However, there is much work to be done, and new challenges have emerged.”

- National Geographic examines the progress and setbacks across a 50 year timeline.

Trump and Biden launch battle over China that could  
define 2020 election

[CNN](#)

“But whoever wins the political confrontation over China, one thing is clear: It will cause a further deterioration of what experts say is the world’s most important economic, diplomatic and security relationship.”

- Stephen Collinson analyses how China has become a key feature of the presidential election.

---

But if you must read about Coronavirus

Government launches string of bizarre coronavirus  
ads designed to get shared online in repeat of general  
election strategy

[iNews](#)

“The strategy is a repeat of the techniques used during the general election campaign, when the Conservative party put out deliberately bad social media posts with childish fonts and garish colours, so that people would be more likely to share them.”

- Hugo Gye reports on the government’s coronavirus awareness campaign which includes insight from Trafalgar Startegy’s founder Giles Kenningham.



## What we do

CORPORATE  
COMMUNICATIONS

CAMPAIGNING

CRISIS  
MANAGEMENT

PUBLIC  
AFFAIRS

LITIGATION

DIGITAL

CHARITY

For more information about Trafalgar Strategy  
and our services, get in touch:

Email:

[info@trafalgar-strategy.co.uk](mailto:info@trafalgar-strategy.co.uk)

Phone:

+44 (0)207 043 1308

Or visit:

[www.trafalgar-strategy.co.uk](http://www.trafalgar-strategy.co.uk)

Twitter:

[@trafalgarstrat](https://twitter.com/trafalgarstrat)