



# THE SUNDAY TIMES



## Judges praise juries amid Labour's plans to overhaul trials

EMILY DUGAN

Special Correspondent

When Nickle George saw a man riding what appeared to be his missing bike down a West London street near his home, he ran after him. As the man pulled up at a pedestrian crossing, George said

he grabbed the bike, explained it was his and rode it away.

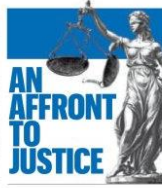
It was September 2023 and the account given by the man George found on the bike in Unbridge was very different. He told police that George had threatened him with a knife and taken his bike. George was charged with robbery.

Last week, more than two years after the incident, George's trial came before a jury at Isleworth crown court. Under proposals by David Lammy, the lord chancellor, leaked to The Times, this is one of

tranche of cases that would now be sent to a judge to decide alone, in order to tackle a record backlog in the criminal courts.

In an unusual move, judges at Isleworth on Thursday appeared to criticise the plans by praising juries for their "essential" service after delivering their verdicts.

Lammy is expected to announce reforms to the court system and jury trials on Tuesday, saying changes are necessary to make the system work for victims of crime. The crown court backlog has



reached more than 78,000 cases. The Ministry of Justice (MoJ) has refused to say whether Lammy will press ahead with the leaked reforms or weaken the policies.

George, 26, told the court his bike had gone missing from his front garden two months earlier. It was distinctive – a blue and black Carrera mountain bike, with different front and rear tyres and only one brake.

When he saw an identical-looking bike being ridden near his home he was sure it was his.

The man who accused George is white. George is black. When CCTV was disclosed it showed George running up to the cyclist, holding on to the bike and having a conversation, pointing at the back tyre before riding away on it. No knife was found on George and there was no sign of one in the footage. George was found not guilty by a unanimous verdict.

Thanking the jury, Judge Valeria Swift said: "This is an important case for Mr George. Every case is important to the people involved

in them. I don't know if you've heard in the media that the government is considering doing away with juries. Now that you've experienced it you might form your own view."

On the same day at Isleworth crown court last week, other judges appeared to comment on the planned reforms.

A jury that had just found a man guilty of stealing an iPhone was told by Judge Robin Johnson: "For serious crime, those of us who sit Continued on page 5 →

## PM's attempt to rescue budget after Reeves row

Starmer vows to tackle cost of living as Tories report chancellor to financial watchdog

Harry Yorke, Gabriel Pogrud and Josh Glancy

The prime minister will intervene in the cost of living crisis tomorrow in an attempt to shore up his chancellor who is engulfed in a damaging row about what the told voters about the state of the economy.

No 10 and the Treasury fear that the "retail offer" in last week's budget – cuts to energy bills and the freezing of rail fares and prescriptions – has failed to cut through to the public. The consumer policies have been drowned out by rows over cash for benefit claimants and whether the chancellor misrepresented the spending watchdog.

Sir Keir Starmer will vow to scrap "misguided" regulations and root out unforeseen costs in "every corner of the economy", warning that "excessive" red tape is piling costs on to big projects, such as energy plants, which ultimately lead to higher consumer bills.

He will confirm he is implementing reforms to the way nuclear power plants are built, after a government taskforce found that Britain was the most expensive place in the world to build nuclear power.

Starmer will announce that Peter Kyle, the business secretary, has been asked to take the same deregulatory approach to all large

infrastructure projects, which it is hoped will speed up delivery and save the government billions of pounds. The prime minister will praise Rachel Reeves's budget for delivering "economic stability" and setting the stage for the government's future growth plans.

However, it will be seen as an attempt to pivot away from the row over whether Reeves exaggerated the parlous state of the public finances to build public support for her £26 billion of tax rises in the budget.

Reeves had claimed that a downgrade to the UK's predicted economic productivity would make it hard for her to meet her fiscal rules. On Friday, the chairman of the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) revealed that a forecast of higher wages – which she had not mentioned – would help her meet the rules. In other developments:



● Sir Mel Stride, the shadow chancellor, has written to the Financial Conduct Authority urging it to investigate "potential market abuse" arising from "misleading" pre-budget statements by ministers and briefings by officials.

● The U-turn on income tax was a "political decision", senior government figures acknowledge, as it emerged that No 10 conducted private polling showing it would have provoked a public outcry.

● A former No 10 economic adviser under Starmer has warned the budget will hit workers' take-home pay and their pensions, while businesses will face even higher staffing costs.

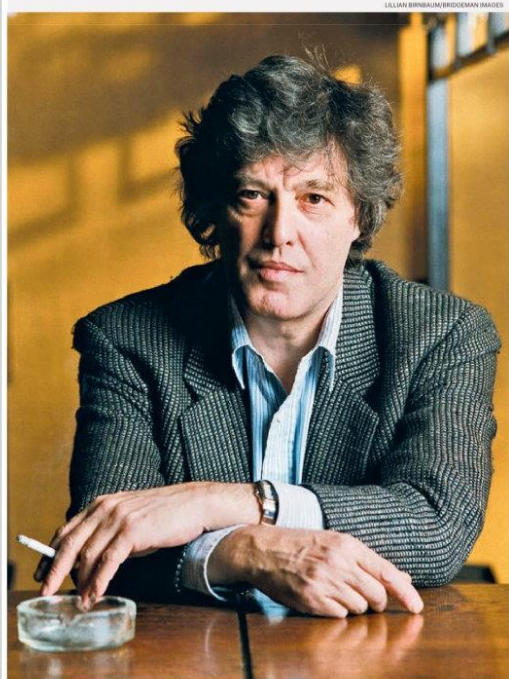
● A More in Common poll finds 51 per cent of Britons do not think their energy bills will be cut.

● The survey shows that 58 per cent of voters believe Reeves's freeze on income tax thresholds breaks Labour's manifesto promise, up from 47 per cent who thought this before the budget.

The row over Reeves's statement erupted when the OBR revealed that the chancellor had received better than expected forecasts – a £4.2 billion surplus – four days before a Downing St address in which she signalled that a productivity downgrade by the watchdog had led to a worsened financial

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## TOM STOPPARD 1937-2025



Sir Tom Stoppard, 88, the celebrated playwright and screenwriter whose works included *Jumpers* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, died at his home in Dorset, his agent said. Full story, page 3

## Mahmood intervenes in Maccabi controversy

Gabriel Pogrud  
Whitehall Editor

The home secretary has entered the controversy over West Midlands police using "false evidence" to ban fans of Maccabi Tel Aviv from a game in the UK last month.

Home Office civil servants spoke to their Dutch counterparts last week on the orders of Shabana Mahmood. They are examining the British force's characterisation of the violence that broke out when Maccabi played Ajax a year ago.

West Midlands police secured a ban on Maccabi fans attending a fixture against Aston Villa, citing intelligence information later described as "untrue" or misleading by Dutch police.

The intelligence alleged that up to 600 Maccabi supporters had targeted Muslim communities and that others had thrown innocent members of the public into canals in the Dutch capital. It said that 200 fans were linked to the Israel Defence Forces and that 5,000 officers were needed to respond to the violence.

The claims formed part of the West Midlands police case that it would be a high risk if fans were to travel from Israel. It said the easiest solution was to ban them.

The Dutch police rejected the claims in an interview with The Sunday Times last week, leading to fresh scrutiny over the decision, which was condemned by Downing Street at the time as antisemitic but which the government failed to overturn.

Last week, Lord Crier, a Labour peer, described the ban as "an evil plot" by "a bunch of bigots and racists" to "turn Birmingham" into a "no-go area for Jewish people".

Nick Timothy, the Conservative MP for West Suffolk and a Villa Continued on page 2 →

## Universities cosy up to Reform

Charlie Rowan and Gabriel Pogrud

The vice-chancellor of Cambridge has said her university is trying to build bridges with key people from Reform – and that "we've had people" from a Trump-style backlash against elite institutions if Nigel Farage's party forms the next government.

Professor Deborah Prentice revealed that counterparts at Russell Group universities had been "meeting with key people from Reform" and that "we've had people" making last week. Prentice, a psychologist who serves as the principal administrative and academic officer of the university, said it was "very clear" that Farage intended to model his approach to education on Presi-

dent Trump's administration, which has withheld billions of dollars in federal funds from universities after political disagreements over anti-semitism, immigration and free speech. In Reform's manifesto-style "contract" at the last election, Farage similarly vowed to cut funding to universities that undermine "free speech".

Prentice said at a meeting of the university's council, its main decision-making body attended by college heads, academics and student representatives, that a Reform figure recently used a meeting with vice-chancellors to indicate it would "get rid" of the Office for Students, the university regulator which has been the target of criticism.

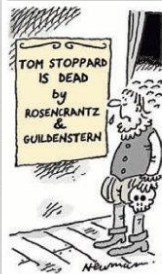
Prentice joked: "The crowd had

to suppress some cheer – but what the UK example reminds you is you have to worry about what's coming next... there should be no cheer."

A transcript of the discussion last Monday was leaked to The Sunday Times.

Baron Smith of Finsbury, the newly elected university chancellor who represents the university publicly, said before last year's general election: "I worry if Reform does get into a position of authority or power, we may see the same phenomenon happen here in the UK." The peer said he was concerned as "populism is always driven by a wish to kick the elite". Cambridge, founded in the 13th century, routinely tops global rankings. It came equal 4th with Oxford in The Times and Sunday Continued on page 2 →

## NEWMAN'S VIEW



## Synagogue hero may quit UK

David Collins Northern Editor

Yoni Finlay, the Manchester synagogue attack hero who was accidentally shot by the police, is considering moving to Israel to keep his four children safe.

Finlay was one of eight men who barricaded the doors of Heaton Park synagogue to stop Jihad al-Shamie, an Islamist terrorist, from getting inside, saving countless lives, on October 2.

In his first interview, Finlay, 39, said that he senses a difference in how the Jewish community in Manchester and across Britain is treated since October 7, 2023, when Hamas attacked Israel.

"There is so much anger," he said. "It's become hard to recognise the UK any more, with the hate marches and the chanting.

People angry at Israel shouldn't turn that into hatred of Jewish Words have impact, actions have consequences. And this sort of terrorist attack is the consequence.

"It would be really upsetting to leave Manchester. This is my home town. But I can't bring my kids up in this environment."

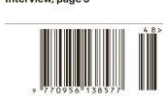
He also described how he held the door of the synagogue closed while Shamie tried to pull it open from the other side. "I believe there is light and there is darkness, and there was a huge amount of darkness that day," he said. "I have never been that close to evil. You could feel it radiating off him."

Melvin Cavit, 66, and Adrian Daulby, 53, two worshippers, were killed during the attack. Shamie was shot dead by police at the scene. Daulby was killed by a

stray police bullet that first passed through Finlay. Cavit was stabbed by Shamie. The Independent Office for Police Conduct is investigating the police response.

Finlay, who needed seven hours of surgery, does not blame the officer who fired the shot. "I wouldn't want anybody to lose their job. We would like the police to run towards danger to protect us. They were doing everything they could to try to stop a terrorist trying to kill us."

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November 30, 2025

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**Travel**

Getting to the heart of  
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# Around the houses

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THE SUNDAY TIMES

# Cruise

## Remote beauty

Explore Australia's Kimberley region  
— one of the world's most astonishing  
wildernesses — by ship **12**



## Cruise South America

The Peruvian Amazon teems with wildlife, jungle food and empowered communities but few tourists, says *Mike MacEacheran*

# The only way to see Peru's mighty Amazon



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Black Friday offer: Available on select cruises departing after 30 Nov 2025 through to 30 Sep 2027. Offer excludes full length Grand Voyages and cruises lasting less than five days. Onboard credit is available in the following amounts: US\$100 per person for 6-day cruises, US\$150 per person for 2025 Alaska cruises or 10-20 day cruises, US\$200 per person for 21+ day cruises, and US\$250 per person for Legendary Voyages. Roundtrip Dover cruises; US\$200 per person on 8-day cruises, US\$300 per person on 10-20 day cruises, US\$400 per person on 21+ cruises. Black Friday offer ends 4 December 2025. Read Have It All package terms and conditions before booking.





Marañon, Samiria and Yanayacu Yacapaná. These lesser-known tributaries help peel away the dense layers of jungle, sneaking silently through the territory of jaguar and tapir, leading to tiny uncharted communities with the air of a boat carrying an Amazonian explorer like Percy Fawcett or Teddy Roosevelt. Twice a day, we anchor and are transferred to inflatable boats to travel even deeper.

My four-night journey begins 60 miles from Iquitos in the harbour town of Nauta, a springboard for exploring the Pacaya-Samiria National Reserve, the same size as Wales and where we are to spend the best part of the voyage. The boat moves slowly through riverscapes of rustling canopies and half-drowned trees; the colours are a brushstroke of psychedelic, memory-searing green.

Unlike Brazil, which claims the bulk of the Amazon, Peru delivers a more intimate jungle experience, far from civilisation. Luxury cruisers have only really welcomed tourists in the past two decades. Aqua Expeditions, now part of the French-owned Ponant, launched in 2007. Aqua Nera debuted in 2021, and in summer this year, Abercrombie & Kent launched its own luxury vessel, the 22-passenger Pure Amazon. Clearly, they're sensing how special these river lands are for safari tourists sick of the crush elsewhere. Apart from Aqua Nera's sister ship, Aria Amazon, the only other vessels we see are dugout canoes.

For the most part, we're alone. The trip is available year-round – during the June-to-October low water season (better fishing, more jungle hiking, fewer mosquitoes), as well as the river's November-to-May peak, when



thunderstorms crackle and the pungent earthy perfume of bathtub-warm downpours hangs on the air. And that seasonal deluge means you sail closer to the riverbanks and there are more hidden creeks to explore by skiff. In this part of Peru, the river is the road.

At the water's highest, the bird-spotting opportunities are rife and rich. On our first dawn ride into the reserve, the rainforest reflects the daily realities of some of the world's most bonkers birds. Canopies shade horned screamers, which look like turkeys dressed for Halloween. Parakeet-green foliage rises ten or more storeys, with beanstalk-thick kapok trees providing perches for black-collared hawk and harpy eagle. A cocoi heron flaps past with a croaky Sid James laugh. A ringed kingfisher – mohawk-haired, vested like a punk – lands nearby. “We call it the machinegun bird,” says George Davila, another of the ship's naturalists. With its rat-at-tat trills, it could hardly have been called anything different.

I'm also here to see something else. Sloths have become a bit of a social media phenomenon and their appeal has helped drive the push for Amazon cruises from tour operators. The rainforest's mulberry trees and cecropia are their perfect habitat and, that afternoon, there are far more sloth confrontations than I'd bargained for. The three-toed creatures take the prize when we see an upside-down mum and baby eyeball us idly as if we're the freak show. If I were in charge of Peru's marketing, I'd make far more fuss about them.

The river, meanwhile, is as brown as oxtail soup. Although the Amazon famously cocoons jaguar, ocelot and capybara (note, mammal sightings are slim), it is the animals in the water that leave the biggest impression. In the right places, you can track down dolphins across the British Isles, but see a pod of pink-headed ones and I'd advise you to

stay off the drugs. Not here in the Amazon. On every boat ride, the water is full of thrashing flukes and curious beaks, the soundtrack of blowhole surface farts.

Hours of wildlife watching and canoe paddling in the sticky heat justify the air-con extravagance of Aqua Nera. I'd argue it's the Amazonian equivalent of the Royal Yacht Britannia. With a sleek ebony hull and polished decks, the riverboat has a style that hints at the pared-back elegance of a floating palace. There are hints of a rubber plantation owner's estate home inside, but with dark wood and dim lighting, it's more suggestive of a swanky nightclub.

During my voyage, the social heart of the 20-suite vessel isn't the deck hot tub, cinema lounge or billiards room. It's the bar, with pampering crew. Each night, I sip cocktails from the deck, watching dozens of bats take flight as my skin recovers from another day in the hot sun. You realise, thrilled, that a pisco sour will taste better nowhere else.

And below deck, the jungle food is as much of an adventure. Caigua? A slipper-shaped cucumber. Snake fruit? A sweet and sour banana. Callampa? A wild umbrella mushroom. It's all delicious, if worth googling. One lunchtime, the chef waltzes from the kitchen to give a hands-on lesson in making ceviche. My fellow passengers – including a Mexican banker, a Manhattan media executive and a Texan sex therapist – hustle for second helpings. On other days, lunches and dinners run to five courses. I had no remorse eating a slab of grilled paiche.

Every year, riverbank erosion causes the Amazon to widen, meaning that serving locally caught fish is easy, but communities frequently have to move further inland to avoid their houses being swept away. When we pass the most rudimentary of these settlements, it feels ridiculous to be sailing past drinking pisco sours in air-cooled comfort. Even so, Aqua maintains that each village is only visited once or twice a year and reaps tourism's financial rewards. Locals are enlisted as guides, materials supplied to schools and communities empowered through handicraft sales.

It certainly feels that way when we stop on our last day at one with little more than 20 or so stilted huts. At the

bare-bones school, we meet the teacher and children (most in donated Real Madrid and PSG football tops), then it's on to chats with farmers at the cassava plantation, where heavy rains make the root veg swell to blimp-shaped balloons. The village smells of woodsmoke and mangoes ripen in the trees. It's a privilege to step into this world, like finding myself in a Simon Reeve TV documentary.

As if to underline the importance of our presence, Aqua Nera's onboard paramedic joins our visit and dispenses a supply of necessary medicines. A wozy señor has his blood pressure taken and stronger medication is prescribed. “He'll be OK,” says Davila.

It's not quite how I'd imagined my last afternoon on the Amazon: sitting in on a doctor's clinic under a cacao tree. But right now, it is enough to know that moments like this don't happen that often in travel, and for a privileged few it is a snapshot of yesterday's Amazon that can still be encountered so vividly today.

*Mike MacEacheran was a guest of Aqua Expeditions, which has three nights' all-inclusive from £3,800pp, including activities, departing October 2026 (aquaexpeditions.com). Fly to Lima and then Iquitos*

**Clockwise from main: a floating house in Iquitos, Peru; spot a jaguar in the jungle; the Aqua Nera riverboat on the Amazon; the cathedral in Iquitos**

The time between reeling the fish in on my rod and realising I wish I hadn't: one second. It's the height of piranha season here on the Peruvian Amazon and the red-bellied blighter at the end of my line has devoured the baited chicken and is jiggling wildly. Now, it's whipped itself into the muggy air, flopped onto the boat's deck – whack! – and is flapping around, teeth primed to shred at will. Flip-flop or toe flesh, it's all fish food to this spleen-coloured beastie.

“These are little vampires,” warns our naturalist guide Vladi Mafaldo, scooping him up to show its arrow-tipped gnashers. “Really vicious.” It may sound a little Hollywood – around us, the river gurgles with a mob of the predators, bats take flight as the light fades – but Mafaldo reassures me that having one dancing in your boat is a common problem to have. The lethal-looking scavenger eyes me, slithering. I eye him back, sweating. I quickly understand why these fish inspire B movies. It writhes, then lurches back into the black water. Moments later, another one crash-lands on our boat.

Maybe it's something to do with the lack of other tourists, but you soon learn in the Peruvian Amazon that you're never really alone. It's alive with tooth, talon and claw. There are more types of piranha in Peru (the red bellied being the most common, which is why we're fishing for them) than you have fingers and toes, but there's also green anaconda, spectacled caiman and the carnivorous, armour-scaled paiche. One of the largest freshwater fish on the planet, it's the size of a nuclear warhead. Already I was worried I'd return more mosquito bite than man.

I've come to Peru to sail on Aqua Nera, a luxury riverboat, and whether you're a fish fan or not, it's a spectacular way to travel. Over the course of multi-day expeditions, it patters slowly westwards down the Amazon from Iquitos, the world's largest city inaccessible by road, and on to headwaters such as the

