

Every rough sleeper in London has a story. This is Stephen’s



Mark Paul
London Letter

The beggars on the Tube are usually polite and some rehearse their stories for whoever will listen

He got on the Tube at Archway in north London as we clacked towards the city. Immediately I recognised his accent – Derry – and glanced up. Just as quickly, I looked back down.

“So sorry to bother you, ladies and gentlemen,” he said in a soft, melodic lilt. His voice was meek, his cadence deliberate. It sounded like a rehearsed spiel.

The man was dishevelled and his clothes were dirty. He was travelling somewhere but, clearly, going nowhere. He was just filling his day making tired pleas to silent, uninterested strangers on a train.

“As you can see, I’m a little down on my luck. I have magazines to sell, guys, and it would be fantastic if you would buy one. I need money for somewhere to stay. Anything

would be appreciated, guys.”

Panhandling on the Underground is common, but hardly the blight some Londoners would have you believe. I take five or six Tubes across the city most days and see a panhandler perhaps three times each week. They are excessively polite. It is a “sales” technique but also means they don’t attract attention. They quickly move off down the carriage if nobody responds.

“Anyone, guys? Okay, thank you so much, have a great day,” he said, shuffling on. “I’m actually an armed forces veteran...”

My head jolted up again. There weren’t too many Derry men in the British army. He slid into a seat, exhausted. Then he got off our carriage at the next stop, Tufnell Park, and on to the next carriage. I watched him through the glass do it all

again. Stop to stop, carriage to carriage, for nothing.

The train sped through the closed Kentish Town station. At Camden, I stepped off and jogged two carriages down and made it through the beeping doors as they slammed shut. Would he get off at the next stop and talk to me on the platform, I asked, explaining who I was. Of course, sir.

Give him cash

We both knew I’d probably give him cash, even though journalists should never give money to the people to whom they speak. It incentivises exaggeration and is ethically dubious. But this man had nothing and I didn’t want to waste his time for yet more nothing. We got off at Euston.

Let’s call him Stephen, although that wasn’t the name he gave me. Stephen was lucid,

“**London is lonely, he said. He wanted to go back to Ireland but it was easier to find money in London begging and selling Dope, a magazine published by anarchists from a bookshop in Whitechapel**

articulate and highly intelligent. He said his age. It was more than a decade older than mine but I wasn’t sure if I believed him. Rough sleepers tend to look older than they are, not younger.

Stephen said he was Catholic. He said he had post-traumatic stress disorder. He said he had watched his two brothers get murdered by the IRA in Derry for being “touts” when he was aged seven.

Check the details

Later that night, I would check the details he gave me against the chronologised records of every killing in the Troubles, on Ulster University’s excellent Conflict Archive on the Internet service.

I found no match. I searched all records over a 15-year time span, overlapping the years he said, in case he had his years

wrong. I wasn’t able to reconcile it with the story he told.

Stephen said he was repeatedly raped by a local priest for four years until he was 12. The community called him a liar, he said.

He ran away to London when he was 13 and sold sex to men on the streets for “quick money”.

He joined the military at 16 and returned to the North and served in the Ulster Defence Regiment for 12 years, he said. He had stability, a wife and seven children. Then after he left the military he said his wife died in a car crash. He had a mental breakdown, “crumbled” and the kids were raised by their grandparents. He returned to London’s streets.

He said he took heroin every day. I asked what he would do with whatever money he scraped together today.

Stephen looked me in the eye and said he would go straight out and score drugs.

London is lonely, he said. He wanted to go back to Ireland but it was easier to find money in London begging and selling Dope, a magazine published by anarchists from a bookshop in Whitechapel. They gave him copies for free each week and he got to keep the proceeds.

I asked Stephen if he felt let down by people in life. I absolutely believed him when he instantly replied: “F***ing right I do”. I gave him some euro notes I had in my wallet and he said he would go to the bank and change them.

“This life is difficult wherever you go. We’re the lowest denominator of human beings,” said Stephen. Then off he went into the crowd. There are 10,000 rough sleepers in London. Each has a story.

Truss launches her PopCon group with star turns from Rees-Mogg and Farage

Mark Paul
in London

Timing not the forte of shortest-serving prime minister in UK history



Timing is not the forte of Liz Truss, the former UK prime minister who still covets the spotlight.

Two days after she entered Number 10, Britain’s Queen Elizabeth died, overshadowing all. The night before the big launch yesterday of her Popular Conservatives grassroots pressure group, it was announced that King Charles had cancer, dooming it to the inside pages.

Yet Truss, the shortest-serving premier in UK history, is nothing if not persistent. The show must go on, and at 11am in an old evangelical church opposite the home office in Westminster, it did. PopCon, as it is already known, welcomed several big names from the Tory right wing for a launch that experts yet more pressure on beleaguered prime minister Rishi Sunak.

Attendees handpicked

Access was tightly controlled, the journalists and attendees handpicked. The venue was meant to be kept secret but it leaked to Mr Stop Brexit, Steve Bray, who has been blaring music from a giant speaker at the houses of parliament for almost eight years. Half an hour before the PopCon event was due to begin, he pitched up outside the Emmanuel Church rattling the windows with Beethoven’s Ode to Joy. Arriving Tories, meanwhile, groaned in despair. Truss bemoans the state interventionist turn she says the Tories have made under Sunak. She has promised PopCon will consistently make the case for

true conservative politics – low taxes, a small state, etc. Her acolytes are true believers, the political proselytisers of traditional Tory values. They gathered at the church entrance beneath the words of Matthew embossed in gold high on the brick wall: “Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out the devils.”

Cast out the devils? With that, in walked Nigel Farage, the right-wing former politician-turned-presenter with GB News and a perennial stone in the Tory shoe. He is despised by the party’s elite but adored by its grassroots. Why was he there? “I’m a journalist now,” he exclaimed, grinning.

This was the launch of the Popular Conservatives. Did he really think the Conservatives are popular, 20 points behind

Labour in the polls? Farage beamed again. “I can see what they’re trying to do,” he said of PopCon. Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg, the Sunak critic and now Trussite, was another of the star turns at the launch. Farage, said Truss and Rees-Mogg are now “isolated” in the Tory Party. Then he predicted its political demise.

A few of the billed stars dropped out at the last minute. Ranil Jayawardena, who was at Truss’s last big show at the Tory conference in Manchester last October, pulled out last night. He echoed Sunak’s language on Twitter by urging Tories to “stick to the plan”, a clear signal that the prime minister’s supporters got to him.

There was also no sign of Jack Rankin, a Tory candidate for Windsor and rising star in

the party. His wife had “gone into labour”, they said. “We mean she’s giving birth,” said Mark Littlewood, inaugural director of PopCon. “We don’t mean she’s gone over to Keir Starmer’s party.”

The sermon

The church filled beyond capacity. An assortment of activists and supporters filled the benches. Former home secretary Dame Priti Patel sat among them as the crowd waited for the sermon to begin. A hush descended prematurely just after 11am. The pregnant silence was punctured by a shout from the crowd: “Here comes the bride.”

Then Truss, beaming her broadest smile, swept into the room. She was followed by Rees-Mogg, former party deputy chairman Lee Anderson, and

Mhairi Fraser, a prospective Tory candidate for Epsom and Ewell, a Tory Surrey heartland.

Littlewood, a right-wing economics guru who was blocked for the peerage proposed by Truss, said PopCon was not about unseating Sunak, but about rallying the grassroots. Rees-Mogg, who grew up in a stately manor in Somerset, railed against elite interference in politics. “The age of Davos man is over,” he said, to thunderous applause.

Fraser hit all the usual Tory right-wing bases in her speech. It even began: “Margaret Thatcher once said...” Anderson, a former coal miner, criticised the primacy of net zero climate policies driven by “out of touch” MPs. Then Truss took to the stage. She spoke well and without notes, as she criticised

■ **Former British prime minister Liz Truss speaks at the launch of the Popular Conservatives movement yesterday in London.**

PHOTOGRAPH: LEON NEAL/GETTY IMAGES

“collectivist ideology” that she argued dominated UK politics. MPs must never be infallible, she said. “We are ejectable – I’ve been at the sharp end of that.”

Outside, Bray cranked up the circus music as Truss’s followers exited the church. They were somewhat roused, entertained, but curiously missing a little of the spark that she engendered at her Manchester bash last October. Time comes for us all, even the right wing of the Tory party.

Britain’s King Charles smiled and waved to passersby yesterday as he was seen in public for the first time since it was revealed he was suffering from a form of cancer and as his estranged younger son Prince Harry flew to Britain to see him.

Buckingham Palace announced on Monday that Charles (75), on the throne for less than 18 months since the death of his mother Queen Elizabeth, had been diagnosed with the disease and would postpone his public engagements to undergo treatment.

The king waved to passersby yesterday afternoon as he was driven the short distance from his Clarence House home in central London to Buckingham Palace. He and his wife, Queen Camilla, then took a helicopter to his Sandringham estate in rural eastern England to begin his recuperation.

Shortly before the king’s departure, Prince Harry, who has fallen out with the rest of the royal family since he stepped down from royal duties almost four years ago, was pictured arriving at Clarence House, and had a brief reunion with his father according to newspaper reports.

However, a royal source said there were no plans for Prince Harry to see his elder brother, heir-to-the-throne Prince William, during his visit to Britain.

The palace has said the king was remaining “wholly positive”, and prime minister Rishi Sunak earlier yesterday said the cancer had been caught early.

Despite the diagnosis, the king is planning to continue with much of his private work as monarch including his weekly audience with the prime minister and dealing with state papers. Mr Sunak said he was in regular contact with the king. “That will of course continue as normal and we’ll crack on with everything,” he said.

The cancer was discovered when the king stayed three nights in hospital last month where he underwent a corrective procedure for a benign enlarged prostate. Beyond confirming it was not prostate cancer, the palace has not given any further details.

Medical matters

The royal family usually keep medical matters private, but the palace said the king had chosen to go public as he was patron of a number of cancer-related charities.

While the king will receive expert private care, his diagnosis will draw attention to Britain’s rising cancer waiting times within the state-run National Health Service. Survival rates for cancer in Britain lag those of other European countries for nine out of 10 of the most common types of the disease. – Reuters



■ **King Charles and Queen Camilla wave to the public as they leave Clarence House in London yesterday.**

PHOTOGRAPH: HENRY NICHOLLS/GETTY IMAGES

EU puts forward new climate targets while ditching herbicide plan

NAOMIO O’LEARY
Europe Correspondent

The European Commission has recommended ambitious new climate targets for the European Union to cut greenhouse gas emissions by 90 per cent by 2040 while ditching references to the role of agriculture and plans to curb pesticide use after protests by farmers.

Commission president Ursula von der Leyen faces a political balancing act on green issues as her centre-right European People’s Party fears a backlash from disaffected rural voters in coming European elections, putting pressure on environmental legislation she previously championed.

The stakes were made clear by commission calculations that a failure to take climate action would cost €2.4 trillion between 2031 and 2050 due to the havoc of extreme weather and other damage, compared to a scenario in which the EU did manage to limit global warming to the 1.5 degrees Celsius promised in the international Paris Agreement. The commission’s proposals for new EU emissions reduction targets, which were unveiled

yesterday and must now be negotiated with parliament, were high in ambition but dropped references to emissions cuts in the agricultural sector.

Ms von der Leyen announced the withdrawal of proposed legislation to half the use of pesticides by 2030, part of efforts to restore the health of soils and reverse a collapse in insect populations.

“Our farmers deserve to be listened to,” Ms von der Leyen told the parliament. “Farmers need a worthwhile business case for nature-enhancing measures. Perhaps we have not made that case convincingly.”

Froze plans

It comes after the commission last week froze plans to require farmers to leave part of their land fallow and allow the recovery of nature, announced as furious farmers began to encircle Brussels with tractors.

Demonstrations by farmers in countries including France and Germany fuelled by anger at rising costs and climate plans have led to a series of concessions from governments, including the reversal of a plan by Paris to reduce subsidies for agricultural fuel. An earlier



■ **Spanish farmers protesting in Burgos, northern Spain, yesterday, over conditions in the agricultural sector.**

PHOTOGRAPH: CESAR MANISO/GETTY IMAGES

draft of the proposed EU emissions targets had stated that agriculture would need to cut non-carbon dioxide emissions by 30 per cent by 2040 compared to 2015 levels, but this was not in the final version.

European commissioner for climate action Wopke Hoekstra told the parliament that a “balanced approach” was required.

“The vast majority of our citizens sees the effects of climate change, does want protection, but is also worried about what that implies for their livelihood,” he said. The commission recommended that the EU cut net greenhouse gas emissions by 90 per cent by

2040 compared to their levels in 1990, which would require a vast overhaul of the continent’s economic and energy systems, particularly in a shift away from fossil fuels.

“Inaction would lead to larger and growing costs for our economy. The costs and human impact of the climate crisis are already evident and they are intensifying, affecting all facets of life, society and the economy,” the commission warned. In a conservative estimate, the size of the EU’s economy would be about 7 per cent lower by the end of the century “in the absence of strong mitigation efforts”, according to the commission.

Ukraine says it has broken up spy ring, but situation ‘critical’ in city of Avdiivka

DANIEL McLAUGHLIN
in Lviv

Ukraine said it had detained five current and former security service staff on suspicion of spying for Moscow, as officials in the frontline town of Avdiivka said the situation in some districts was becoming “critical” amid relentless attacks by Russian troops.

Ukraine’s SBU security service said an employee of one of its regional departments was among those held, along with former officials from Kyiv’s GUR military intelligence agency and foreign intelligence service. The spy network was allegedly co-ordinated by a member of Russia’s FSB security service in Crimea, which the Kremlin annexed in 2014.

The SBU said the “powerful” network spied on the Ukrainian military and arms supplies from western allies; gathered intelligence on energy facilities, including nuclear power plants and geolocated Ukraine’s defences around Odesa on the Black Sea coast.

“According to the investigation, the FSB recruited members of the group using, among other things, threats to kill their families. In addition, for each completed task, the perpe-



■ **Head of security services of Ukraine Vasyli Maliuk: vowed that the SBU would not harass the country’s press.**

PHOTOGRAPH: ANDRII NESTERENKO/AFP

trators received funds from the Russian Federation,” the SBU said.

The agency publicised the case as its chief, Vasyli Maliuk, was summoned to Ukraine’s parliament to report on alleged surveillance of investigative journalists from the Bihus.Info outlet by the SBU’s department for the protection of national statehood.

Mr Maliuk said Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy had sacked the head of that department at his request, and vowed that the SBU would not harass the country’s press.

“Today, we are not just building a renewed SBU but protecting democratic values, including freedom of speech and media independence. For me, personally, this is a top priority from now on,” he added. “This is what makes our country different from authoritarian Russia. And it will be different in future.”

Moscow’s invasion force is mounting heavy attacks in several sectors of the 1,000km front line in eastern Ukraine, where officials in Avdiivka – a devastated industrial town on the outskirts of the occupied

city of Donetsk – said Kyiv’s troops were under severe pressure. “The situation is very difficult, very tense. If we said a few weeks ago that it was difficult but controlled, then now it is really difficult, and we can even say that the situation in some places is critical,” said Vitaliy Barabash, the head of the Avdiivka administration.

‘Take the city’

“Of course, this doesn’t mean that all is lost but the enemy is throwing very large forces at our city. No matter what, they’re trying to complete the task that they’ve been set. Above all, that is to take the city of Avdiivka before the pseudo-elections in the Russian Federation,” he added, referring to presidential elections scheduled for March 17th.

Moscow said its forces had “improved their positions” near Avdiivka and elsewhere in Ukraine’s Donetsk region and shot down seven Ukrainian drones over the Russian border province of Belgorod.

Heavy shelling continued to hit the Kharkiv region of eastern Ukraine, where officials said a two-month-old boy was killed in a Russian strike that also injured his mother and two other women.