

# Grumpy Old Men 2021

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## January 2021

The last Grumpy's session touched on several motoring issues this time, more than one of us wished we had known how long this situation was going to drag on so we could have made a statutory off-road notification for our unused cars and saved a fortune over the year in vehicle excise and insurance. Too late now we suppose.

Once again our favourite "smart" motorways are back in the news and we're heartened that there's now a growing chorus of criticism from authoritative bodies at their danger and that they should be scrapped.

It's also noted that the larger numbers of cameras on the motorways are leading to more summonses for moving traffic offences. Drive carefully - Big Brother is watching you (and if there's a red cross over your lane, move out ASAP!).

Those of us drivers who haven't yet gone electric might be affected by standard premium unleaded petrol being replaced at the pumps by E10 unleaded which contains up to 10% Bioethanol. Modern cars can cope well with this but those running older or classic cars may find it hard to find a suitable fuel.

We also had discussions about the coding error which led to the erasure of hundreds of thousands of police records and whether it's likely that any of these can be recovered, the apparent injustices in the application of the legal aid system, and prospective changes to the trespass laws which will make it easier to prosecute travellers who set up illegal camps.

We also discussed the apparently low number of NHS hospital beds per unit of population, internationally and historically.

So, that's the world put to rights for another two weeks.

Nick

## February 2021

We started our meeting with complaints about potholes. Not the activity of climbing through caves but the state of our roads. We liked the report of residents of one street having a public birthday party with candles to celebrate the first year of one reported but unrepaired pothole.

Whilst on the subject of roads - In London up to one million minor traffic offence fines are handed out each year by local authorities and now the government want it extended over the rest of the country. A mixed reception by The Grumpies - but if it will reduce local tax that could be advantageous.

The regular moan about “Smart Motorways” continues and we note that accidental deaths reached 14 in the year 2019. This being the highest since the controversial motorways were introduced in 2006. The 2019 toll compares to 11 in 2018 and 5 in 2017. But at a recent hearing a coroner referred Highways England to prosecutors for a possible corporate Manslaughter charge.

The Grumpies are in favour of Bees – and are therefore annoyed at the news that Bee-killing pesticides have been allowed back on our fields for temporary use. [This previously banned pesticide is so potent that just one teaspoon is enough to kill over one billion bees!]

We have all had our jab or have booked for it and therefore we have some sympathy for Mr Charlie Mullins who owns the Pimlico Plumbers with 400 employees and now says: “No Jab No Job”. On a show of hands we are all in favour of an “Inoculation Passport.” Mr Craig Glenday, Editor of the Guinness World Records, said the pandemic had inspired people to tackle new challenges. More than 5,200 British people tried to set Guinness World Records during the last year of a lock-down. Successful attempts included:

- The quickest time to drink a litre of gravy one minute 4.9 seconds.
- The fastest motorized and garden shed. At 106.1mph.

It would seem that the Prime Minister's love of grand and very expensive projects has fuelled yet more wildly ambitious plans from Downing Street. First Boris Johnson had a vision for a bridge to connect Scotland and Northern Ireland. Then came the idea for four tunnels converging on an underground roundabout under the Isle of Man. Perhaps inevitably the scheme triggered more criticism, comments of Batshit & Round the bend were two of the printable remarks.

A discussion of our school days in the last century was prompted by the news that a primary school has recently ditched the names of Sir Walter Raleigh, Lord Nelson and Sir Frances Drake for its school houses after a former pupil claimed using them supported institutionalized racism. The houses will now bear the names of modern activists Malala Yousufzai, Greta Thunberg, Marcus Rashford and US Poet Amanda Gorman.

We ended back on the road with news that charging an electric car battery from 10% to 80% cost as much as £40.56 at some public plug in points. This is almost six times what it would cost to charge the same car at home a typical car price of £7.25.

David

## **March 2021**

Two Zoom meetings in March 2021.

We usually start with a vote on who should be “put on the bus” - this is a list of public figures who have met with our disapproval for some good reason. The bus in question is to take them away. As the list now has 83 names perhaps it should be a fleet of double deckers.

The nominated candidates were: [84] Nadine Dorries MP - one of the ministers of health and her nomination was in part for the debacle over the proposed pitiful 1% pay rise for nurses. [85] Frances Stanley a director at Newmarket racecourse and the National Horseracing Museum. She became a director of CH&L Limited, a company incorporated in January last year which was awarded a fourteen-million-pound contract by the Department of Health and Social Care as it scrambled to acquire supplies of PPE for NHS staff. By pure coincidence the health secretary, Matt Hancock received a £5,000 donation from her husband Peter Stanley in 2019. Recently she blamed “unforeseen logistical circumstances” for the failure of CH&L Limited to deliver isolation gowns for healthcare workers.

At our second meeting the passenger [86] is Sir Robert Devereux who is among the dozens of top bureaucrats sitting on pension packages of more than £1million. This civil servant, with the biggest pension pot in Whitehall, is the mandarin responsible for making us all work longer before we can retire. The permanent secretary of the Department for Work and Pensions, who is in charge of the state pensions system, will retire with a pot worth £1.8million.

The subject of profit-making companies being subcontracted by the government was a recurring feature in our discussions of recent newspaper items. For example: Serco's shareholders will pocket millions after delivering a contact tracing system that has failed. We agreed with the former permanent secretary at the treasury, who said it was extraordinary that no one in government seemed shocked by the £37billion cost of Test and Trace. (Over two years.) Does this win the prize for the most wasteful and inept public spending program of all time? Serco is one of 217 companies that has worked on NHS test and trace. It made revenues of nearly £350m from contracts to work on the system in 2020. Serco work involves running around 25% of test centres and 50% of contact tracing operations. Serco's CEO Rupert Soames [who is paid £5M.] had the audacity to say that their involvement in Test and Trace has been 'a remarkable success'.

We applaud a High Court judge who said the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) 'acted unlawfully' by not publishing details of 504 of the 535 contracts awarded in the height of the Covid pandemic last year.

We noted the story that 58 GP practices [with over 500,000 patients] have been sold to a US owned insurance company giant Centene. We speculate what is to come?

A Grumpy shared a video clip of an Irish priest who was given an almighty shock when his sound system blasted out rap music during a live streamed Mass.

An electric car has topped the list compiled by experts of the ten worst motors ever invented. The Reva G-Wiz has the 'performance of a sleepy vole' and 'the structural integrity of your slippers' according to Auto Express. [Are the Grumpies turning into Jeremy Clarkson?]

A fortnight later and again we were discussing the Home Office's Immigration record. We considered how to stop adult migrants claiming to be children, the huge increase in foreign criminals who have not been deported, and why the Home Office is still "not fit for purpose."

Turning to local rubbish – we were pleased to learn that Gedling Borough Council approved plans for free bulky waste collection for all pensioners all year round.

As with some MPs we demand action over the army's aging armoured vehicles saying some of them date back to when Elvis was the Christmas number one record spot.

David Colyer

## **May 2021**

Our choice this month for the person who has displeased us and should be "put on the bus" is Mr Robert Joseph Roberts the Member of Parliament for Delyn since the 2019 general election. He reportedly sent sexually suggestive text messages to a female staff member which resulted in him being referred to the British House of Commons Complaints and Standards Committee and was "strongly R=rebuked"; for his conduct. This week, an independent panel found that Roberts had acted inappropriately after he sought to engage in a relationship with a male member of his staff; he subsequently lost the Conservative whip but did not resign his seat.

As usual we discussed newspaper reports:

1. Criminals escaping with just "a slap on the wrist"; surged by a fifth last year as prosecutions plummeted. Figures show there were 167,000 'out of court disposals' last year, up 18% compared with the previous 12 months. This surge was driven by a one third increase in 'community resolutions', such as schemes which allow the offender to say sorry rather than go to court.
2. An Oxford college has rejected woke calls to tear down the statue of Cecil Rhodes and will instead spend money on improving the data they experience of ethnic minority students. Oriel college decided not to remove the statue amid fears of costly legal action which could take years.

3. Shops are moving to kill off the traditional paper receipt with a switch to electronic alternatives sent to mobile phones and e-mail address. Retail bodies are urging chains to sign up to the paperless pledge which they argue is a green measure. It could save stores millions of pounds by avoiding the need for till receipts. Holland and Barrett, River Island and Dunelm are the first chains to sign up the beat the receipt campaign. Retailers will commit to only offering any paper receipt if one is requested, with a target date of 2023 for the change.
4. A U.S. study of 16,732 women over 60 found walking up to 4500 steps a day even in short bursts rather than all in one go. - significantly reduces the chance of death from all causes. Compared with taking no steps at all, every additional 1000 steps were associated with a 28% decrease in death.
5. Another U.S. Study followed 10,700 adults over 24 years and found watching just one or 2 hours a day was associated with a 7% sharper decline in memory tests than those who avoided TV. While another study which had participants undergo an MRI brain scan between the ages of 30 and 50 found that those who watched a lot had lower volumes of grey matter.
6. The subject of "smart motorways" again - Driving with a burst tyre or smoking engine is safer than stopping on smart motorways. Speaking to MPS, head of the AA, Edmund King told of horrific distress calls patrols get from drivers who break down on the controversial roads. His alarming comments came during a transport committee hearing as it probes into the safety of smart motorways began.
7. Here is a tale that Beatrix Potter would have struggled to illustrate. Grey squirrels face being given contraceptive pills coated in hazelnut paste to keep their numbers down and to add insult to injury, the government plans to reintroduce them near extinct pine marten-their natural predator-as an even harsher method of population control.
8. Prison guards have been told they must refer to inmates as 'prisoners' and drop the terms 'residents' or 'clients'; Alex Chalk, the prison's minister has instructed civil servants and employees across the system to adopt 'plain speaking terms'; in preference to 'woke' Language. Prisons and probation services should no longer use such terms as 'supervised individual', or 'service user'.
9. An iceberg bigger than Majorca has split from an ice shelf in Antarctica.

David Colyer.

## June 2021

**Bus list addition: Peter Cruddas** is a businessman and long-time Conservative Party donor. He was the man at the centre of the cash for access scandal in 2012, where he reportedly promised secret meetings with top Conservative politicians in exchange for donations to the Tories. Yet despite an independent watchdog advising against it, Prime Minister Boris Johnson made Peter Cruddas a Lord. Just days later, Peter Cruddas donated half a million pounds to the Conservative Party.

Discussion points:-

- Plans to share the medical histories of millions of patients in England with tech giants have been suspended amid privacy concerns. From September 2021, NHS Digital wish to start collecting patient data from GP medical records in England. They say it is to help improve health and care services by allowing better planning and helping with research. However, it will be shared with some private sector organisations. If you wish to opt-out, you can find full details of how to do so here: <https://fullfact.org/health/nhs-data/>
- A firm has been told it was wrong to sack a worker who went to the pub while off sick and now faces having to pay him compensation. Unless employees have specifically been forbidden from going for a drink when they are on the sick and they are free to do as they like an employment judge ruled it followed a claim for unfair dismissal.
- A TV advert was banned for promoting stereotype of women cleaning.
- Halogen and fluorescent light bulbs are to be banned from September in a switch to 'green' LED. Alternatives the move will reduce and the UK's CO2. emissions by 1.26 million tons a year equivalent to removing 500,000 cars from the roads, it is claimed. New laws will see fluorescent bulbs phased out from 2023.
- A member of the notorious Rochdale child grooming gang who made a girl of 13 pregnant claimed yesterday that he had not committed "that big a crime" Adil Khan, who was jailed for eight years has renounced his Pakistani citizenship as he fights efforts to kick him out of Britain. He claims that deporting him back to his native country would breach his human rights.
- Our Chief Grumpy received an invite to join the Next-door App for your neighbourhood, it misrepresents as a private forum. A little research shows that this is used for gossip, scams and trolls in Holland and the USA. Perhaps the UK will be different?

David Colyer

## July 2021

The GOM are still meeting twice a month on zoom to discuss the news, air their views and disapprove, Care to join us?

Topics of interest during last month's meetings included

- Global tax-dodging by large international companies may become a thing of the past
- The story of the army's troubled Ajax tank
- A parking space near Hyde Park has been sold for £200,000
- A bottle of 250 year old Old Ingledew whiskey has changed hands for £100,000
- An old favourite here - more evidence that "smart" motorways are dangerous
- Rochdale has the highest rate for Driving Test failure in the UK. Harsh examiners or poor drivers?
- E10 petrol is now the standard grade (containing up to 10% Ethanol), all cars built since 2011 are compatible
- Wood burning stoves may become illegal in cities to further reduce pollution
- Who would be a student these days? Still paying tuition fees and accommodation costs while being confined to halls of residence, and getting very little face to face tuition.

It's a funny old world!

## August 2021

The venerable and highly respected society of Grumpy Old Men met as usual on Zoom this month to consider and comment on any items of news or opinion that had piqued their interest. This as always led to extensive and lively debate.

Among the subjects that caught our attention this month were:-

- It's been a bad year for French wine producers in the Rhone valley, where grape harvests are down to 20% of normal due to exceptionally hard frosts.
- The UK state pension is the worst in the developed world according to the OECD
- Printer ink is a precious commodity, costing the equivalent of £1,300 per pint!
- And finally - during a tour on HMS Victory, a French tourist asked "So, were these the actual cannonballs fired at the battle of Trafalgar?" The tour guide replied "No Madame, your navy still has those...."

## September 2021

The Grumpys are now regularly meeting twice a month, once in person at the Willowbrook and once in image by Zoom. Subjects under discussion (and ridicule) remain as varied as usual. During recent sessions we have covered amongst others:-

- The return of the pint, pound and gallon, non-decimal units of sale may be re-legalised.
- Driving licenses to become digital, no more cards with photo ID, everything on an app.
- E10 petrol should be cheaper than E5 used to be, it contains 5% less taxable material. Why does it cost more at the pumps?. Also, evidence is mounting that lower KPL can be expected. (Sorry, MPG!)
- 6 in 10 drivers in an RAC poll say that "Smart" motorways should be scrapped. Meanwhile National Highways still claim that they are safer than standard motorways with continuous hard shoulders.
- Gas storage - why did the government allow British Gas to close down a large storage facility in 2017, responsible for 70% of the UK's gas reserves.

Oh well, I suppose it can only get worse.

## October 2021

The Grumpy Old Men continue to have two meetings a month, firstly at the Willowbrook, and later by Skype, which this time enabled one of our members to join us while on holiday in the South of France.

As usual we had a good selection of news items to debate, including:-

- Railway executives of the nationalised rail operator have received a pay rises amounting to a 5.7% increase whereas the railway workers are in the middle of a two-year pay freeze
- A Middlesbrough councillor has been absent from his post while attending to his property in France. He is resisting calls to resign despite his long absences and the difficulty of contacting him
- As ever, we discussed the difficulty of getting a face-to-face appointment with the doctor
- We are also finding it difficult to renew driving . Apparently staff at the DVLA claim that working at home is feasible in most circumstances, and some strongly resist returning to the office. In dispute over Covid safety protocols and supported by the Public and Commercial Services union there have been 58 days of strikes over the last six months.licences
- Good news on the medical front, in early results a newly developed strain of modified bacteria is effective against the antibiotic-resistant Staphylococcus which causes infections from catheters and breathing tubes. Clinical trials may begin in 2013.

- Good news also that there is now in trial a new vaccine against malaria. Developed by GSK, the vaccine is on test in Ghana, Kenya and Malawi where 800,000 children have been vaccinated, and a 30% reduction in risk of severe malaria has been observed.

## **November 2021**

The Grumpy's met twice as usual, once Online and once Inpub.

Our illustrious convenor had, as usual, had assembled a lot to discuss, ranging from:-

- Under-reporting of sewage discharges by water supply companies, who are now facing tens of Millions in fines, and a scheme to levy a tax on their-pre tax profits to pay for overdue infrastructure renewal.
- The news that 5,000 new companies registered under the government's furlough scheme and receiving £473M in payments were all registered to only five addresses (something fishy there perhaps ?)
- A new brewery in Woking? Apparently 300 gallons of home-brew was confiscated from inmates at Her Majesty's Prison Coldingley over a 12 month period. Brewed from fruit, water and sugar in plastic bags the resulting "hooch" can be as strong as 14% alcohol.
- There are warnings that forthcoming changes in legislation will mean that the use of mobile phones while driving will become more restrictively controlled, and fines can increase to £200 and six points on your license. Generally thought by the Grumpys to be a good thing.

These and more kept us entertained, and looking forward to the next meeting, which in December will include a Christmas meal.