Showdown over disaster aid

A fight between President Donald Trump and Democrats over hurricane relief for Puerto Rico is imperiling a widely backed disaster aid bill that is a top priority for some of Trump’s Southern GOP allies. The amount of money in dispute is relatively small, but Trump feels antipathy toward the US territory’s government and Senate Republicans are taking a hard line in denying Democratic demands for more aid for Puerto Rico.

Tech glitch causes airline delays

A technical glitch at an outside aviation company led to delays at major US airlines. The issue was resolved quickly, but it led to travel disruptions. Delays that began appearing first in Chicago, New York, Miami and Boston spread to Dallas, Atlanta, Detroit and Washington, DC. The Federal Aviation Administration said several airlines had problems with a program called Aerodata, which is used to plan weight and balance for flights.

MPs reject alternatives

MPs have rejected all four alternatives to Prime Minister Theresa May’s EU withdrawal deal after Parliament took control of the Brexit process for the second time in a week. A proposal from Europhile Tory grandee Kenneth Clarke for a customs union arrangement with the EU was rejected by only three votes, while a demand for a second referendum was defeated by 12 and a Norway-style deal put forward by Nick Boles by 21.

May backs chief whip

Downing Street has said Theresa May continues to have full confidence in her chief whip, Julian Smith, after he publicly criticised the Government’s approach to Brexit and accused Cabinet members of the “worst example of ill-discipline in British political history”. In a highly unusual move, May’s enforcer criticised the government’s strategy after the Prime Minister lost the Commons majority in the 2017 snap election.

Xi says trust key to NZ ties

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern has described meetings with the Chinese leadership as warm and constructive. She met with President Xi Jinping, who described New Zealand as a sincere friend but one with whom there would have to be mutual trust to create new opportunities in the future. Negotiators working on the upgrade of New Zealand’s free-trade deal with China have been told to get on and reach a deal.
REST OF THE WORLD

Move to strip Guaido’s immunity

Venezuela’s chief justice has asked lawmakers to strip opposition leader Juan Guaido of immunity, taking a step towards prosecuting him for alleged crimes as he seeks to oust President Nicolas Maduro. Supreme Court Justice Maikel Moreno said Guaido should be prosecuted for violating a ban on leaving the country for a tour of Latin American nations that back a change in Venezuela’s government.

Deadly days before IS defeat

An international aid group says 31 deaths were recorded in the final week of March among people making their way out of the last sliver of territory held by the Islamic State group and towards a camp for the displaced. The International Rescue Committee said the highest weekly death rate reflected the desperate conditions of the mostly women and children who left the village of Baghouz for al-Hol camp.

UK

Train station toilets free to use

Toilet charges have been scrapped at all of Britain’s busiest railway stations. London Liverpool Street, London King’s Cross and Edinburgh Waverley became the last of 20 Network Rail stations to make their toilets free to use. The public sector body previously charged up to 50p per person to use the facilities.

EU election prep begins

Officials have been given the green light to begin preparations for European elections in May as a “contingency” measure. David Lidington, effectively the deputy prime minister, said returning officers would be reimbursed by Whitehall for “reasonable” expenses incurred to prepare for the May 23 poll, which takes place almost three years after the UK voted to leave the European Union.

AUSTRALIA + NEW ZEALAND

Last coalition budget before vote

Federal Treasurer Josh Frydenberg is set to deliver the first surplus budget in 12 years, plus a raft of pre-election sweeteners, on the back of strong coal and iron ore exports. Frydenberg will hand down his first budget on Tuesday night, just days out from Prime Minister Scott Morrison calling a federal election for May 11 or 18.

Record deluge leaves huge mess

A week after the region was hit by record-breaking rainfall, West Coast residents are continuing to grapple with the aftermath of flooding and bracing for weeks of clean-up work. Rubbish from an old landfill site near the Fox Glacier has spread downstream and along kilometres of coastline, while 20 residents near a burst stopbank have spent another night out of their homes, and a day waiting for answers.
Tech glitch causes major airline delays

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The issue was resolved quickly, but it led to travel disruptions. Delays that began appearing first in Chicago, New York, Miami and Boston spread to Dallas, Atlanta, Detroit and Washington, DC.

The Federal Aviation Administration said several airlines had problems with a program called Aerodata, which is used to plan weight and balance for flights. The FAA said the issue was resolved.

By midday, 3400 US flights had been delayed, according to tracking service FlightAware, but it was unclear how many were related to the technical issue.

The FAA advised travelers to contact airlines directly for flight information and updates. Airlines said travelers should check online for the latest updates on flights.

American Airlines said the technical issue affected a few of its regional carriers that operate American Eagle flights.

Southwest Airlines lifted an internal ground stop after about 40 minutes. Nearly 1000 Southwest flights had been delayed by midday, according to FlightAware.

Some United Airlines regional carriers were hampered by the issue, which resulted in delays for select United Express flights, the company said. About 150 flights were impacted, according to United.

“Some flights that were affected have departed, and we’re working to get all affected flights back on schedule,” United said.

Delta said that the outage prevented some of its Delta Connection flights from leaving on time. The airline did not anticipate flight cancellations.

Showdown over disaster aid looms

A fight between President Donald Trump and Democrats over hurricane relief for Puerto Rico is imperiling a widely backed disaster aid bill that is a top priority for some of Trump’s Southern GOP allies.

The amount of money in dispute is relatively small, but Trump feels antipathy toward the US territory’s government and Senate Republicans are taking a hard line – for now – in denying Democratic demands for more aid for Puerto Rico, which was devastated by back-to-back hurricanes in 2017.

Democrats are threatening to block the GOP bill in a showdown Senate vote. What would happen next is unclear, but top Senate Democrat Chuck Schumer of New York appears confident that a successful filibuster won’t kill the bill outright, but instead drive Trump and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell toward compromise.

The $13.5 billion Senate measure mostly mirrors a $14.2 billion measure passed by the House in January, combining aid to Southern farmers, California communities devastated by last summer’s wildfire, and rebuilding help for hurricane-hit states such as Florida, Georgia and North Carolina.

Democrats want to add almost $700 million more to unlock further disaster aid for Puerto Rico and several states, and to help them rebuild badly damaged water systems. Democrats are also seeking language to force the administration to release billions of dollars in rebuilding funds that have already been approved.

McConnell, R-Ky., however, has maneuvered to shut off any opportunity for Democrats to amend the bill.

“I think that’s a mistake. I think we have a good package that the House would accept. If we could bring it onto the floor and have a vote on it I think it would pass,” said Sen. Patrick Leahy of Vermont, the Democrats’ point man on the legislation.

“These are Americans who are suffering. I think we ought to be able to come together on it. So I think it’s unfortunate to have just a take-it-or-leave-it bill.”
UK

MPs reject all four Brexit alternatives

MPs have rejected all four alternatives to Prime Minister Theresa May’s EU withdrawal deal after Parliament took control of the Brexit process for the second time in a week.

A proposal from Europhile Tory grandee Kenneth Clarke for a customs union arrangement with the EU was rejected by only three votes, while a demand for a second referendum was defeated by 12 and a Norway-style deal put forward by Nick Boles by 21.

Boles immediately declared he would no longer sit as a Conservative MP, blaming the party for refusing to compromise on a means of leaving the European Union.

SNP MP Joanna Cherry’s proposal to give MPs the power to block a no-deal Brexit by voting to revoke Article 50 was rejected by a margin of 101 votes.

Earlier, Speaker John Bercow had selected the four motions to be put to a vote.

Brexit Secretary Steve Barclay told MPs the default outcome was now a no-deal Brexit on April 12, but said it was still possible to leave with a deal – and avoid holding European Parliament elections in May – if the Commons approved an agreement this week.

Cabinet was poised to meet again, for five hours, to thrash out a way forward.

Barclay told MPs: “This House has continuously rejected leaving without a deal, just as it has rejected not leaving at all. Therefore, the only option is to find a way through which allows the UK to leave with a deal. The government continues to believe that the best course to take is to do so as soon as possible.”

The Democratic Unionist Party, meanwhile, insisted it would continue to vote against May’s deal.

The party’s Brexit spokesman, Sammy Wilson, said: “The implications for Northern Ireland are far, far too serious. ‘First of all, it would take us away from the country that we fought to stay part of. ■

UK

May backs chief whip despite criticism

Downing Street has said Theresa May continues to have full confidence in her chief whip, Julian Smith, after he publicly criticised the Government’s approach to Brexit and accused Cabinet members of the “worst example of ill-discipline in British political history”.

In a highly unusual move, May’s enforcer spoke out to suggest that ministers had pursued the wrong strategy after the Prime Minister lost the Conservatives’ Commons majority in the 2017 snap election.

Smith said the result of the poll meant that May simply did not have enough MPs to back a harder version of Brexit.

A spokesman for the Prime Minister said May continued to have full confidence Smith as chief whip, but declined to discuss whether she had been warned about his remarks in advance of the broadcast.

The comments were published by the BBC amid speculation that Parliament may force the PM to seek membership of a customs union with Brussels in order to pass her deal, which would mean ripping up one of her key red lines.

“The thing that people forget is that the Conservative Party went to get a majority in order to deliver Brexit (and) failed to get a majority,” the chief whip said.

“The Government as a whole probably should just have been clearer on the consequences of that. The parliamentary arithmetic would mean that this would be inevitably a softer type of Brexit.”

While the strategy was apparently misjudged, Smith said he was “frustrated” by MPs who “don’t see the light as clearly as I do”.

May’s deal has now fallen three times in the Commons, with Tory MPs among those who voted against it on each occasion.

However Smith highlighted that a lack of discipline extended all the way to the Cabinet, with ministers “sitting around the Cabinet table ... trying to destabilise her (May)”.

Prime Minister Theresa May addresses the House of Commons. - PA

Prime Minister Theresa May. - PA
Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern with Chinese President Xi Jinping. - AP

AUSTRALIA + NEW ZEALAND

**Scaffolding collapse leaves one dead**

A worker has died and another has been critically injured after scaffolding collapsed at a construction site in Sydney.

The two people were trapped under rubble, a Fire and Rescue NSW spokesman said.

One man was rescued from the Macquarie Park worksite and rushed to Royal North Shore Hospital in a critical condition.

Another man was pronounced dead at the scene.

Vision that appears to have been filmed shortly after the incident shows tonnes of steel, concrete and meshing strewn over the construction site.

Workers can be seen scurrying to safety as pieces of debris are heard falling to the ground in the vision, obtained by Nine News.

Four Fire and Rescue crews, 10 ambulance crews and two helicopters responded to the scene.

Construction company Ganellen said it was helping emergency services at the accident site at the Lachlan's Line project.

"This is a tragic incident and our deepest sympathies go to the young man's family, co-workers and friends," a spokesman said in a statement.

"Another injured worker is receiving treatment in hospital and our thoughts and best wishes are with him. All others on site have been safely accounted for."

NSW Police have established a crime scene and will prepare a report for the coroner.

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**Xi says trust key to New Zealand ties**

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern has described meetings with the Chinese leadership as warm and constructive.

She met with President Xi Jinping, who described New Zealand as a sincere friend but one with whom there would have to be mutual trust to create new opportunities in the future.

Negotiators working on the upgrade of New Zealand's free-trade deal with China have been given a message from the top to get on and reach a deal, following Ardern's brief but busy visit.

After a meeting with Premier Li Keqiang, the prime minister said they had agreed to hold the next round of FTA upgrade talks and get a deal done as soon as possible.

Xi said Ardern had on many occasions expressed a commitment to China-New Zealand relations, recognising she was still dealing with the aftermath of the Christchurch shootings.

"You come to visit us when there are unusual circumstances and urgent tasks at home. Your presence here fully reflects the importance placed by yourself and your government on China-New Zealand relations," he said.

Ardern's visit, he said, proved "special commitment", and he expressed his "deep sympathy".

But for any new opportunities, he said, the two sides "must trust each other, pursue mutual benefit and strive to open up new grounds" in the bilateral relationship.

The two leaders discussed Huawei's potential involvement in New Zealand's 5G network – initially rejected by the GCSB due to security concerns.

Ardern said she didn't see Xi's comments as an expression of mistrust: "I wouldn't describe it that way at all."

She said she explained the legislation governing Spark's bid to use Huawei as part of the 5G rollout, and where the process was at.

When asked if China had indicated its likely response if the bid was ultimately rejected, Ardern said that was "not the nature of the conversation at all."
Move to strip Venezuela’s Guaidó of immunity

Venezuela’s chief justice has asked lawmakers to strip opposition leader Juan Guaidó of immunity, taking a step towards prosecuting him for alleged crimes as he seeks to oust President Nicolás Maduro.

Supreme Court Justice Maikel Moreno said Guaidó should be prosecuted for violating a ban on leaving the country for a tour of Latin American nations that back a change in Venezuela’s government. Guaidó is also accused by Maduro’s government of inciting violence linked to street protests and receiving illicit funds from abroad.

Guaidó – who has immunity from prosecution as head of the National Assembly – continued his calls for Maduro to step down and accused the socialist leader of using the constant blackouts blanketing the country as political capital. The opposition leader says years of neglect by the government had left the grid in shambles and has urged Venezuelans to take the streets until Maduro leaves power.

“We must unite now more than ever,” Guaidó said at a Caracas university. “We must mount the biggest demonstration so far to reject what’s happening.”

Since a massive power failure struck March 7, the nation has experienced near-daily blackouts and a breakdown in critical services such as running water and public transportation. Classes have been intermittently suspended for nearly a week, while workdays tend to end in the early afternoon so millions aren’t stranded due to cuts to the Caracas metro service.

At the same time, frustrated residents are increasingly unable to find water, make phone calls or access the internet.

The judge’s move came a day after Maduro announced the nation’s electricity was being rationed to combat daily blackouts.

Deadly final days before Islamic State defeat

An international aid group says 31 deaths were recorded in the final week of March among people making their way out of the last sliver of territory held by the Islamic State group and towards a camp for the displaced.

The International Rescue Committee said the highest weekly death rate reflected the desperate conditions of the mostly women and children who left the village of Baghouz for al-Hol camp.

The IRC said a total of 217 people died while evacuating Baghouz in the final weeks of the battle. Most were toddlers suffering from malnutrition. The camp holds 70,000 people.

The IRC figures could not be independently confirmed.

Venezuelan opposition leader Juan Guaidó. - AP

A boy carries a child in the al-Hol camp in Syria. - AP
In case of Brexit delay, EU election prep begins

Officials have been given the green light to begin preparations for European elections in May as a "contingency" measure.

David Lidington, effectively the deputy prime minister, said returning officers would be reimbursed by Whitehall for "reasonable" expenses incurred to prepare for the May 23 poll, which takes place almost three years after the UK voted to leave the European Union.

The UK would be required to take part in the elections if a delay to Brexit is sought by the Government.

Lidington stressed that "it remains the intention for the UK to leave the EU with a deal and not take part in the European parliamentary elections in May".

But in a letter to the Electoral Commission, Lidington said: "I am able to confirm that Cabinet Office will reimburse reasonable spending by returning officers on contingency preparations for European Parliament elections."

Advice issued to returning officers, the local officials responsible for running elections around the country, said that the rejection of Theresa May's Withdrawal Agreement by MPs on Friday meant "the opportunity to guarantee that the UK would not participate in EP elections has been removed".

A Cabinet Office spokeswoman said: "Today we have confirmed that Government will reimburse returning officers for reasonable spending on contingency preparations for the possibility of European Parliamentary Elections."

"Returning officers are independent and responsible for the planning of polls in their own electoral area. We have not instructed them to start preparing for EP elections, but as a responsible government, we have given them this assurance so they are able to make their own decisions about contingency planning," she said.

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Train station toilets become free to use

Toilet charges have been scrapped at all of Britain's busiest railway stations.

London Liverpool Street, London King's Cross and Edinburgh Waverley became the last of 20 Network Rail stations to make their toilets free to use.

The public sector body previously charged up to 50p per person to use the facilities.

Network Rail chief executive Andrew Haines said: "Passengers have told us that toilets are an important issue for them and taking this step is just one of a number of small measures we are taking to put our passengers first, by helping to make their journeys a bit more hassle-free."

Anthony Smith, chief executive of independent watchdog Transport Focus, said: "Scraping toilet charges is a welcome step for passengers. Toilets are a priority for improvement at stations according to our research and will signal the end of fumbling around in your pocket for change to spend a penny."

Other improvements being made at Network Rail stations include the introduction of water fountains, better and more seating, and reducing clutter on concourses.

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Record deluge leaves huge mess behind

A week after the region was hit by record-breaking rainfall, West Coast residents are continuing to grapple with the aftermath of flooding and bracing for weeks of clean-up work.

Rubbish from an old landfill site near the Fox Glacier has spread downstream and along kilometres of coastline, while 20 residents near a burst stopbank have spent another night out of their homes, and a day waiting for answers.

Mike Bilodeau lives near Ōkārito area beach about 30km north of the Fox rivermouth. He said the sight of the once-pristine sand was enough to bring him to tears.

He said the beach was strewn with rubbish including bottle tops, jugs, buckets, shredded plastic bags, car parts and “everything, big and small”.

Locals and tourists have rallied together to clean up the mess, along with the West Coast Regional Council, Department of Conservation and Westland District Council. Contractors have also been working to reinforce the landfill and prevent any more rubbish from floating out.

But clean-up efforts were hampered by more rainfall, and Bilodeau said people were concerned about the many areas of coast that they cannot reach on foot.

He was due to meet with the authorities this afternoon to discuss what more could be done – including funding options to get crews “on the ground”.

“One of these places that we’re trying to get into to get the rubbish, it’s not accessible by road so you either have to walk in, or you have to get helicoptered in,” he said.

“We’re trying to get helicopters and crews of people to get down there and just pick up massive amounts of rubbish.”

Another Ōkārito resident Cliff Goodwin was also hoping helicopters and “big infrastructure” would be deployed to clean up the rubbish.

He said it would be virtually impossible to clean it all up on foot, even on the accessible beaches, as the rain keeps washing out more rubbish.