For this Sunday, February 24, 2019, the Today's Issues group will discuss two articles from the February 21 issue of the New York Review of books:

Page 4, Hari Kunzuri, "Heroic Failure: Brexit and the Politics of Pain"

Page 12, Michael Tomsky, "The Dems Take Charge," about the Democrats taking control of the House of Representatives.

The group meets at 9:30 on Sunday mornings in the parlor of the Religious Education building (the white house) next to the church. Please do the reading and join our lively discussion.

A copy of the readings is attached.

Fool Britannia
Hari Kunzru FEBRUARY 21, 2019 ISSUE
Heroic Failure: Brexit and the Politics of Pain
by Fintan O'Toole
London: Head of Zeus, 217 pp., £11.99 (paper)

Stuart Franklin/Magnum Photos
Protesters outside Parliament on the day the House of Commons rejected Prime Minister Theresa May's Brexit deal with the EU, January 15, 2019
From the ill-conceived Brexit referendum onward, Britain's governing class has embarrassed itself. The Remain campaign was complacent, the Leave campaign brazenly mendacious, and as soon as the result was known, most of the loudest advocates for severing ties with the European Union ran away like naughty schoolboys whose cricket ball had smashed a greenhouse window. Negotiations have revealed the pitiful intellectual limitations of a succession of blustering cabinet ministers, the leader of Her Majesty's Most Loyal Opposition doesn't appear to want to oppose, and the prime minister has engineered her own humiliation by starting the countdown to Brexit without a plan that could command wide support, resulting in the heaviest parliamentary defeat in history. Despite breaches of campaign finance limits and lingering questions over the source of the Leave campaign's financing, not to mention growing evidence tying it to the same web of influence operations that promoted Trump's candidacy, there is no equivalent to the Mueller inquiry to bolster public confidence that the organs of state are capable of warding off corruption.

Britain is a country under self-inflicted stress, gripped by fear of the unknown. Remainers and Leavers—two tribes that have taken on the mythic stature of Roundheads and Cavaliers in a second civil war—are clinging together like drowning swimmers, each side convinced that the other is provoking an epochal disaster, neither side understanding why the other won't submit to its version of reason and allow itself to be guided back to the surface. As the deadline approaches and the clock runs down toward the "No Deal" outcome that was supposed to be

unthinkable, the divided nation faces what is, by any standards, a major political crisis. However, as British people like to remind one another, we are supposedly at our best in a crisis.

On December 16, the former Brexit secretary Dominic Raab tweeted, “Remainers believe UK prosperity depends on its location, Brexiters believe UK prosperity depends on its character.” Faith in Brexit does indeed seem to correlate with belief in the existence of national character, an innate and invariant set of shared qualities that apparently includes an aptitude for governance. On December 30 an editorial in London’s Sunday Times spluttered:

After more than four decades in the EU we are in danger of persuading ourselves that we have forgotten how to run the country by ourselves. A people who within living memory governed a quarter of the world’s land area and a fifth of its population is surely capable of governing itself without Brussels.

The many unanticipated problems with Brexit are diagnosed by the Sunday Times writer as a loss of confidence, perhaps accompanied by a faulty memory—something happening not just to people but to “a people.” The implication of the indefinite article, with its baggage of Romantic Nationalism, is clear. Britons, as Rule Britannia triumphantly puts it, “never, never, never shall be slaves.” The underside of nostalgia for an imperial past is a horror of finding the tables turned. For the more unhinged Brexiteers, leaving the EU takes on the character of a victorious army coming home with its spoils. In December 2017 Edward Leigh, a rosy-faced Tory backbencher, suggested in the House of Commons that an important negotiating point should be that the British “take back control of our fair share of [the EU’s] art and wine and not leave it for Mr. Juncker to enjoy.”

The battle over Europe has been fought not over the technicalities of the “Irish backstop” (maintaining the open border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland), NHS funding, or traffic flow through Dover, let alone harmonized airline regulations or the trading benefits of a Canada-plus model (along the lines of the one Canada signed with the EU in 2016, following seven years of negotiation), but through Spitfires, Cornish pasties, singing “Jerusalem” on the last night of the Proms, and what the Irish historian and journalist Fintan O’Toole calls “the strange sense of imaginary oppression that underlies Brexit.” O’Toole’s Heroic Failure: Brexit and the Politics of Pain is an acid and entertaining examination of what he calls, after the scholar Raymond Williams, the “structure of feeling” that has made the project of leaving the European Union politically possible.

O’Toole knows England (and Brexit is primarily an affair of England, the English, and Englishness) as only a member of the former subject races can. He starts his book with an account of arriving in 1969 to live in London as an eleven-year-old Irish Catholic boy, explaining how his family’s experiences, good and bad, complicated the cartoonish opposition to Englishness that characterized popular Irish nationalism: “The English were scientific rationalists; so we Irish had to be the mystical dreamers of dreams. They were Anglo-Saxons; we were Celts….In other words, I know exactly what an either/or identity looks and feels like.”

O'Toole has not come to gloat, though many others around the world are doing just that. He writes in the tone of a disappointed friend, perhaps one sitting in a front room with other friends and family, conducting an intervention.

One prong of O'Toole's approach is psychological. He quotes Herbert Spencer on self-pity as a person's pathological "dwelling on the contrast between his own worth as he estimates it and the treatment he has received." This disparity is founded on an underlying narcissism: "One who contemplates his own affliction as undeserved necessarily contemplates his own merit…there is an idea of much withheld and a feeling of implied superiority to those who withhold it." The other prong is historical. Starting from "the sheer exhilaration of being English for a young, white, privileged man during and after the war," O'Toole tells the familiar story of an imperial decline that has gradually ratcheted up the tension between this "deep sense of grievance and a high sense of superiority." As early as 1962, the travel writer James Morris lamented the passing of a "feeling of happy supremacy," which meant that "frank pride of country has all but gone by the board, and patriotism is very nearly a dirty word."

In Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy, one of a body of thrillers that are also among the most acute literary portrayals of the British establishment's experience of postwar decline, John Le Carré's hero, George Smiley, goes to see Connie Sachs, a motherly drunk who was once a secret service librarian and is now a repository of institutional secrets. "Poor Loves," she says of George and his colleagues, her "boys." "Trained to Empire, trained to rule the waves. All gone. All taken away. Bye-bye, world." Many of those who took it away were, of course, foreigners, particularly those former colonial subjects who unaccountably agitated for decolonization. Their arrival "over here" was one of the most visible changes to postwar Britain, and as O'Toole points out, the rhetoric—"swamping," being a stranger in one's own country, strain on public services, and so on—that was once used to demonize new arrivals from the Commonwealth has been repurposed for use on EU migrants. O'Toole argues provocatively that the decline of what might be called traditional British racism made room for a new anti-Europeanism, as if there's a fixed national quantum of xenophobia that must find an object if the United Kingdom is to maintain its integrity.

Though the Suez Crisis and imperial decline loom large in the imagination of Brexit, O'Toole writes that it's "the war" that is "crucial in structuring English feeling about the European Union." For half a century, English soccer fans have lamely taunted their more successful German counterparts by chanting that their country has won "two World Wars and one World Cup." Since the 1960s, comic books with names like Commando, Warlord, and Battle Picture Weekly have kept World War II alive in the minds of British boys with violent stories of "daring bomber raids over Germany, through close-combat jungle fighting against hard-as-nails Japanese, and depth-charge blasted submarine warfare, to hard-hitting battles across North Africa, Italy and northern Europe." The need for an enemy and the narrative of the plucky island nation resisting invasion is summed up by the famous David Low cartoon, first published in the Evening Standard in June 1940, of a Tommy standing amid crashing waves, shaking his fist at a stormy

sky. “Very well, alone” is the caption, and it inaugurates a continuing psychodrama of resistance that sets Britain apart from its European neighbors.

Crucially, the equation of a “European superstate” with a project of German domination is part of what O’Toole calls the “mental cartography” of English conservatism. In 1989 Margaret Thatcher showed François Mitterand a map (taken out of her famous handbag) outlining German expansion under the Nazis, in order to demonstrate her misgivings about German reunification. On January 7 of this year, the pro-Remain Conservative MP Anna Soubry was forced to pause a live TV interview outside Parliament as protesters sang, “Soubry is a Nazi, Soubry is a Nazi la-la-la-la.” The European Union is, to these people, just a stealthy way for the Germans to complete Hitler’s unfinished business.

Of course, the British population did suffer in World War II. Aerial bombardment, rationing, and the other dangers and privations that are remembered under the journalistic heading of “the spirit of the Blitz” swim through the murkier psychological currents of Brexit like red-white-and-blue carp. If wanting to remain under the Teutonic yoke of the European Union is evidence of a loss of national character, then perhaps a fallen England deserves to be punished. As O’Toole suggests, invoking the popularity of the book Fifty Shades of Grey, a strain of masochism (le vice anglais) is as much a part of Englishness as warm beer or ruling the waves.

As the possibility of No Deal looms larger, the government is planning to import emergency supplies of food and medicine, and police are being deployed in expectation of civil unrest in Northern Ireland. These are not the “sunlit uplands” that our dollar-store Churchills promised. Faced with the possibility that the coming hour will not be our finest, some Brexiteers have switched to promoting the benefits of communal suffering. Perhaps renewed bombardment will turn out to be character-building. Perhaps the Euro-Luftwaffe will drop the “friendly bombs” that John Betjeman once willed to fall on Slough, to “get it ready for the plough.” On December 16, Anthony Middleton, a former special forces soldier turned TV personality, tweeted:

A “no deal” for our country would actually be a blessing in disguise. It would force us into hardship and suffering which would unite & bring us together, bringing back British values of loyalty and a sense of community! Extreme change is needed! #nodeal #suffertogether.

Though widely derided, this opinion is, in certain circles, something of a commonplace. In his yearning for a cleansing fire to burn away the disloyal and revive a lost organic community, Middleton displays a disturbing protofascist mindset. The idea that the suffering of No Deal Brexit would be fairly shared is, of course, transparently absurd. A primary driver of Brexit, both among ordinary voters and among the political and business elite, is the desire to circumvent “regulation” in the form of European legislation on workers’ rights and safety, and to prevent appeals to the European Court of Human Rights. Brexit would cement the changes that took place after the 2008 crash, which was the pretext for a reduction of the social safety net under the guise of so-called austerity. The aim is to remake Britain as a “buccaneering” (for which read

“predatory”) low-tax, high-risk place, a sort of reset to the pre-1945 world, before the inauguration of the welfare state and postwar social democracy. Nothing about the political complexion of its proponents suggests an ambition to build community of any kind.

Yet the desire named “Brexit” may not straightforwardly be for victory and the spoils of victory, but for its very opposite. O’Toole surveys the English cult of heroic failure, exemplified by the charge of the Light Brigade and the evacuation from Dunkirk, as well as such mythologized figures as Scott of the Antarctic and Gordon of Khartoum. He sees the exaltation of effort and vain self-sacrifice as “an exercise in transference,” arising paradoxically out of British power. The British of the Victorian period “needed to fill a yawning gap between their self-image as exemplars of liberty and civility and the violence and domination that were the realities of Empire.”

On this reading, the secret libidinal need of Boris Johnson, Jacob Rees-Mogg, Michael Gove, and their colleagues is actually for their noble project to fail in the most painful way possible. The immolation of national wealth and prestige on the altar of Brexit would be an imperial last stand, a way to recapture the spirit, if not the material conditions, of the Victorian apogee of British power. In this way, Brexit would provide a resolution to a problem that, in O’Toole’s diagnosis, has dogged the “poor loves” of the English ruling class since decolonization: “Its promise is, at heart, a liberation, not from Europe, but from the torment of an eternally unresolved conflict between superiority and inferiority.”

For many commentators writing at the time of Britain’s entry into the Common Market in 1973, dominance in Europe was to be compensation for the loss of empire. “What about Prince Charles as Emperor?” asked Nancy Mitford, facetiously expressing the secret belief of many British people that Europe could be a new vehicle for old global ambitions. The discovery that the role of “first among equals” wasn’t on offer led to a loss of enthusiasm for Europeanism, which suddenly appeared in a different and sinister light, as a form of subordination to old enemies.

How has what is essentially an English psychodrama turned into an international crisis? Against Dominic Raab’s John-Bullishness about the verities of national character, we might put W.H. Auden’s tongue-in-cheek notion that this character has been formed by place, or, more precisely, by geology. His 1948 poem “In Praise of Limestone” is a mock encomium to a soft and porous rock and the soft and porous men formed by its landscape. Auden’s self-ironizing “we, the inconstant ones” skewers perfectly the limitations of an elite that has historically adopted what O’Toole calls “a studied ennui, a pose of perfect indifference”:

…the flirtatious male who lounges
Against a rock in the sunlight,
never doubting
That for all his faults he is
loved; whose works are but

Extensions of his power to
charm…

Or the “band of rivals” who are

unable
To conceive a god whose
temper-tantrums are moral
And not to be pacified by a
clever line
Or a good lay…

This patrician fecklessness is one of the most enduring modes of British upper-class charisma, a way to signify superiority over the rule-governed, bean-counting strivers of the bourgeoisie. O’Toole correctly identifies it as a type of camp, allowing mistakes to be laughed off and ignorance to be presented as a virtue, evidence that one is not “touched” by the matter at hand. The English public’s fatal attraction to this posture has been responsible for many otherwise inexplicable political careers. Boris Johnson’s improbable upward trajectory is, for example, entirely due to his pitch-perfect performance in the stock role of the rakish comedy toff, a figure whose avarice and incompetence is indulged because it is somehow enjoyable to watch him getting away with things. It is no accident that the paradigmatically childish image of “having one’s cake and eating it” has been central to Johnson’s promotion of Brexit. As O’Toole notes, even his racism is couched in the language of the nursery. His notorious reference to “flag-waving picaninnies” with “watermelon smiles” is like a phrase from the kind of old-fashioned children’s books that are being quietly withdrawn from the library.

It is Britain’s misfortune to have been ruled by such people, entitled men who don’t feel they need to master a brief and sneer at those who have to endure the consequences of their actions. The form of patriotism they have promoted with their shallow, friable charm is less a spur to excellence than a form of historical arrested development, an adolescent inability to live in the world as it is, rather than a version of it misremembered from schoolbooks. O’Toole lays much of the blame for the fiasco of Brexit on the failure of the political elite to address the rise of English nationalism, which grew in intensity during the early 2000s, partly in response to Scottish devolution. Englishness—“its roar,” as the poet Thom Gunn wrote, “unheard from always being heard”—has, with good reason, become associated with ugly racism and xenophobia. Particularly strong outside London, English nationalism has also become an identity of resistance to globalization, a process that has accelerated the disconnection of the capital’s fortunes, which are dependent on finance, from those of the rest of the country. Brexit has offered a credible political vehicle for the assertion of “Englishness” against a “Britishness” that has lost its emotional appeal, a sudden scream after a period of what O’Toole calls “silent secession.”

The English, whose opinions have been formed by the shallow charmers and their enablers, seem fundamentally unable to conceive of a relationship with Europe that is not one of either subjection or domination. They will try, one way or another, to regain what Enoch Powell called “the whip hand,” even if they have to immiserate the country to do it. The principle of equal partnership on which the European Union is predicated is somehow psychologically unavailable, a possibility that is not fully believed or understood. The prolonged agony of Brexit has given ample proof that, as Auden wrote, “this land is not the sweet home that it looks,/Nor its peace the historical calm of a site/Where something was settled once and for all.” In the next few weeks, we will find an answer to his lingering question about its identity:

A backward
And dilapidated province,
connected
To the big busy world by a tunnel,
with a certain
Seedy appeal, is that all it is now?

—January 24, 2019

The Dems Take Charge
Michael Tomasky FEBRUARY 21, 2019 ISSUE

Sarah Silbiger/The New York Times/Redux
Democratic representatives Katie Hill, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Lauren Underwood, and Angie Craig, Capitol Hill, January 2019

I doubt that it was even noticed much beyond Washington, but a meeting on January 10 between Treasury Secretary Steve Mnuchin and members of the House of Representatives gave a pretty good sense of how the next two years are likely to proceed, and how different they will be from the two years just past.

Mnuchin was summoned to explain the administration’s actions regarding Oleg Deripaska, the Russian oligarch who is a former associate of Paul Manafort and whom the FBI tried (apparently without success) to turn into an informant about ties between the Kremlin and the presidential campaign of Donald Trump. Last spring, the Treasury Department added three Deripaska-owned companies to its list of sanctioned foreign entities as punishment for Moscow’s interference in the 2016 election. In December the department reversed course after obtaining an agreement from Deripaska that his ownership stakes in the companies would be reduced to less than half. One of them is the world’s second-largest aluminum producer, and the sanctions listing had roiled the global metal markets. Deripaska lobbied the department heavily, and House Democrats wanted Mnuchin to give them a classified briefing about the decision.

First of all, the mere fact that the meeting even happened is a sign of change. Republicans would never have asked Mnuchin to account for such a move. Second, it played out in the tense, cat-and-mouse way that we can probably expect to see repeated many times. Mnuchin, according to The New York Times, was forced to wait in a congressional auditorium for nearly an hour as members cast votes on unrelated matters. When he finally did testify, Democrats say, he told the House members utterly nothing of value. “This, with stiff competition, mind you, was one of the worst classified briefings we’ve received from the Trump administration,” said Speaker Nancy Pelosi afterward. “The secretary barely testified. He answered some questions, but he didn’t give testimony.”1 (The following week, the House voted to prevent the sanctions from being lifted, but the Senate effort to do so failed by three votes.)

The Mnuchin briefing happened one day after Pelosi and Senate Democratic leader Chuck Schumer accused President Trump of throwing a tantrum during a White House meeting about the government shutdown, which he denied in his usual flamboyant way (“Cryin Chuck told his favorite lie when he used his standard sound bite that I ‘slammed the table & walked out of the room,’” Trump tweeted). The negotiations, such as they are, over the shutdown are in great flux as I write, but they have already intensified the tone of intractable rancor that was expected to govern relations between the executive and legislative branches before it even happened.

The day of that White House meeting, the House found time to cast one policy vote, giving itself the right to intervene legally in litigation over Obamacare following the December ruling by Reed O’Connor, a federal judge in Texas, that the Affordable Care Act was unconstitutional. The measure passed 235–192, with three Republicans—two from upstate New York, one from eastern Pennsylvania—joining all 232 Democrats in support. It was a mainly symbolic vote, but a potentially important one for the 2020 elections: with it, Pelosi put 192 Republicans on record as in essence favoring the overturning of the Affordable Care Act. Supporting the act and expanding health care access was, of course, the Democrats’ top winning issue in last year’s elections.

It’s safe to say that none of these events would have unfolded as they did if Republicans had retained control of the House. The government shutdown would probably still have happened in December, but I think chances are good that it would have been resolved quickly had Republicans retained full control of Congress (this would have required Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell’s acquiescing to Trump’s caprice, which is not without precedent). But in general, it’s a new world out there, and one for which the president appears to be woefully unprepared. All signs are that Democrats will move aggressively on both investigations and policy—even as the policies they end up pursuing will inevitably reveal the very real splits within their caucus.

The mechanics of a transfer of power are daunting. Pelosi moves from the minority leader’s office in the Capitol to the more spacious and conveniently located Speaker’s office. Committee majorities and minorities switch places, and the staffs of the incoming committee majorities

roughly double in size while the new minority staffs are cut in half. Committee assignments must be parceled out to the new members, an especially sensitive matter this year as the activists of the newly energized left work to see that their members don't get sidelined.

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, the media star of the left contingent, lost out on getting a seat on the powerful Ways & Means Committee to the Long Island congressman Tom Suozzi, who is beginning his second term and is a member of the more moderate New Democrat Coalition. According to the left-leaning website The Intercept, of the twenty-six Democrats newly given seats on the Appropriations, Energy and Commerce, and Ways and Means committees, thirteen are members of the Congressional Progressive Caucus and fifteen are in the New Democrat Coalition (a few members are in both groups).2

Months before the new Congress was seated, on January 3, the presumptive chairs of the most important committees began mapping out their strategies for legislative priorities and the kind of oversight they would conduct. Then, once the election results were official, the incoming chairs started taking action. New York's Jerry Nadler, for example, the new chairman of the Judiciary Committee, wrote at least five different letters last year to various executive branch agencies, including the Department of Justice, the FBI, and the Department of Homeland Security, on topics ranging from immigration to voter suppression to allegations of obstruction of justice.

Judiciary is one of the three main committees to watch on oversight matters. The other two are the Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence and the House Oversight and Reform Committee. The former is chaired by California's Adam Schiff, a ubiquitous and reassuring presence on cable news programs these last two years. The latter is headed by Elijah Cummings of Maryland, who likewise has been a stalwart opponent of the Republicans, for example by fighting their repeated dead-end attempts to blame Hillary Clinton for the deaths of four Americans at the mission in Benghazi, Libya, in 2012.

Nadler, Schiff, and Cummings now have enormous power—large investigative staffs that can sniff around and the ability to subpoena administration officials. Nadler will be the busiest of the three, as he has the largest portfolio; falling under his purview are not only the hot-button topics of obstruction of justice and impeachment proceedings, if things reach that point, but also all issues involving voting rights, civil rights, abortion rights, guns, intellectual property, and antitrust issues. I've known Nadler since 1987, when he was a New York state assemblyman and I was a young reporter at the (pre–Jared Kushner) New York Observer. One of our earliest conversations involved his keeping me on the phone for a good forty minutes as he told me every twist and turn in the story, which had become West Side lore, of how Ruth Messinger won her first school board election. I was there in 1992 on the night when the New York County Democratic Committee endorsed him to succeed Ted Weiss in Congress after Weiss passed away. Nadler has an acute legal and political mind; the committee could scarcely be in better hands.

Cummings's investigative mandate, as "Government Oversight and Reform" suggests, is quite broad. Last year after the election he sent fifty-one letters to the White House requesting information on, in the words of a CNN reporter, "everything from the Trump administration's handling of immigration to security clearances to the travel of Cabinet secretaries."3 Cummings's committee will likely also take the lead on investigations into the Trump administration's violations of the emoluments clause, which bars officials from receiving money from foreign entities, and the ways the president and his family members have handled their business transactions while in the White House. House Republicans were resolutely uninterested in turning over these rocks. Given that Trump has taken only token steps to distance himself from the Trump Organization, one can assume that Cummings's investigators will find plenty to work with.

As for Schiff, he will be overseeing a dramatic remaking of the Intelligence Committee, which was used by the previous GOP chairman Devin Nunes to produce pro-Trump propaganda, such as its April 2018 report clearing the Trump campaign of any wrongdoing. Schiff will have wide-ranging jurisdiction, and he will use it. According to a report by the Brookings Institution's Margaret L. Taylor in early January:

His already-high profile on Russia issues, combined with the investigative powers he will have as chair and his willingness to hold public hearings, could mean he becomes the go-to articulator of the importance of core American values like the rule of law, election integrity, respect for human rights, and anti-corruption, as well as broader foreign policy challenges like the rise of authoritarianism around the world. Such a role would be unprecedented for the HPSCI chairman who traditionally focuses on more mundane agency oversight topics in closed settings.4

Schiff will also have the authority to look into Trump family finances and possible links between the president's foreign policy and his family's global financial interests in places like China, with which the administration is in sensitive negotiations even as the Chinese government recently granted Ivanka Trump initial approval for sixteen trademarks.

The investigations will hardly be limited to those three committees, or to matters, such as Russia, that we normally think of as Trump scandals. Nadler is likely to hold hearings on the border crisis and the family separation policy, hoping to learn how the policy was arrived at and implemented, whether normal processes were short-circuited and regulations skirted. Financial Services Chairwoman Maxine Waters and others will quickly turn their attention toward Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross, who has been the subject of a series of stunning scoops by Forbes reporter Dan Alexander detailing fishy stock transactions and an allegation that Ross, who is worth some $700 million, bamboozled a few million out of a former equity fund business partner.

Foreign Affairs Chairman Eliot Engel, who has long represented parts of the Bronx and Westchester County, vows to get to the bottom of the secret Trump–Putin dialogues and "the

mysteries swirling around Trump's bizarre relationship with Putin and his cronies," as he put it in a statement. Education and Labor Committee Chairman Bobby Scott wants to look into Education Secretary Betsy DeVos's rollback of many regulations on for-profit colleges. Natural Resources Committee Chairman Raul Grijalva has a few questions for the Interior Department. A number of chairs are itching to get testimony from Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen on the ongoing border crisis. Ross, by the way, is expected by many observers to resign in the near future, and one senses that several of his cabinet colleagues may follow.

In addition, of course, there exists a world beyond the Trump administration. What kinds of hearings might the Democrats hold, for example, on Facebook, whose executives have serially lied, first to themselves and then to the rest of us, about the hijacking of their platform during the 2016 election and later about their denial and lack of response? I reached out on this question three times to the spokesman for New Jersey's Frank Pallone, the new chairman of the Energy and Commerce Committee, and received no response. I'll hope for now that that is a reflection of general chaos and disorganization rather than an unwillingness to take on a company that in 2018 made almost 70 percent of its donations to Democrats.5

Tom Brenner/The New York Times/Redux
Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, Capitol Hill, January 2019

And all this is mere backdrop to the real investigation, the one being conducted by Robert Mueller, which may wrap up (it is said) as early as February. Then the question will arise of whether Mueller will issue a report, and whether it must be made public. There is no statute that compels a written report, though it is widely expected that Mueller will prepare one. The administration will presumably fight to keep it private, as William Barr indicated during his Senate confirmation hearing for attorney general. But here, too, the new sheriffs in town will make a difference: Nadler has said he would subpoena any report and see that it is made public.

Whether the House pursues articles of impeachment against Trump will depend on the evidence, but also on public opinion on the matter—specifically, public opinion among swing voters in swing states and districts. Speaking on PBS's NewsHour on Election Day, Pelosi said that impeachment "would have to be bipartisan, and the evidence would have to be so conclusive." If she stands by that, it establishes an awfully high bar: Republicans will not peel away from Trump unless evidence of high crimes is overwhelming and shocking.

Pelosi's posture suggests she will be protective of her majority, of vulnerable House Democrats in 2020 (the party swung forty-one districts from red to blue last November, but many of those victories were quite narrow), and of the eventual Democratic presidential nominee's chances in swing states. Other Democrats, like freshman Rashida Tlaib of Michigan, with her famous vow to "impeach the motherfucker" on her first day as a member of Congress, will not see things quite that way. This has the potential to cause some ugliness within the caucus.

On substantive policy matters, the touchiest topics are likely to be the much-discussed Green New Deal and Medicare for All. On the former, Ocasio-Cortez, who so far has proven quite adept at converting her arguably outsized celebrity into real leverage, led the way in forcing Pelosi to reconstitute a special committee on the climate crisis, which existed the last time Democrats had the majority and which the Republicans disbanded.

Pelosi named seven-term Florida congresswoman Kathy Castor to lead the committee. As I write, the committee hasn't been officially formed, no other members have been named, and a lot of details about its scope are murky (a source said the membership would be announced by the end of January). It will not develop a Green New Deal agenda per se, and it will lack subpoena power. Castor took some flak for investing in a mutual fund that is mostly made up of holdings in electric companies that use fossil fuels, but she says she sold that off and will accept no contributions from the energy industry. She's been praised by the major environmental groups. She represents the Tampa area, where the coastline—and the economy—have been ravaged by the red tide outbreak and which is highly vulnerable to hurricanes. The situation into which she's been thrust represents the perfect opportunity for a heretofore low-profile member to grab a bit of the spotlight.6

On Medicare for All, the House is simply split. A bill cosponsored by 124 Democrats was introduced in the previous Congress. It's not yet clear how many new members will sign on to it. The freshmen who get the most press, like Ocasio-Cortez, are all firm supporters, but most newly elected members did not campaign on Medicare for All—for practical purposes, the same thing as single-payer health care. This is worth keeping in mind. You would think from what you see on cable news that the entire Democratic freshman class is forming Grundrisse study groups. In fact, at least as many moderates as leftists won seats—probably more, depending on how one classifies them. One congressional expert after the election counted forty-two new Democratic members who opposed single-payer and sixteen who supported it. This was admittedly an anti–single-payer source. Other counts put the pro–single-payer number a bit higher, above twenty. In sum, roughly half the caucus, maybe a little more, backs Medicare for All.

There's no sign that Pelosi has much taste for single-payer. She believes, and correctly so, that Democrats won by defending Obamacare. Democrats who agree with her will push to expand it, but this will be largely up to the states as they decide whether to accept Medicaid expansion. A handful of states are expected to do so in 2019: Idaho, Nebraska, and Utah as a result of ballot initiatives, and perhaps Kansas, Maine, and Wisconsin, which elected Democratic governors.7 Congressional Democrats will first try to stabilize Obamacare insurance markets, perhaps by expanding subsidies for people in the individual market where premiums remain prohibitively high. They may try to craft some kind of compromise that stops short of Medicare for All but allows a Medicare buy-in for people over fifty or fifty-five, or for people with inadequate coverage options. But this does not seem like an issue on which the left is of a mind to compromise. Ultimately the party will have a health care policy when it has a 2020 nominee, and the policy will be whatever he or she wants it to be.

Those are the contentious issues. On everything else the party is more or less united.

Pelosi gave the symbolic title of H.R. 1 to a large bill devoted to democracy, transparency, and voting rights. The bill calls for expanded ballot-box access, national automatic voter registration, establishment of independent redistricting commissions, restoration of the sections of the Voting Rights Act the Supreme Court has struck down, and other measures. It will work its way through the committee process, chiefly Nadler's Judiciary Committee, and presumably pass soon, probably on strict party lines.

An infrastructure bill has a chance of attracting some Republican support. On the cable news shows, talking heads nod in earnest agreement when someone cites infrastructure as the one area on which the two parties can agree and pass something. I consider that an optimistic reading of the situation. Infrastructure today is like what arms control was during the cold war—everyone is for it in principle, but they must regrettably oppose this particular version. Democrats want to spend far more than Trump does. During the campaign, infrastructure to Trump essentially meant privatized toll roads. It's hard to see real common ground between the parties, although a Democratic bill would probably get some backing from a few Republicans in swing districts.

Such a Democratic bill, though—or a "Democrat" bill, according to Republicans who persist in using Joe McCarthy's old ungrammatical pejorative—will never make it through the Senate. Mitch McConnell will see to that. He will never let anything through the Senate that would allow the Democrats to lay claim to any sort of victory. He proved this most recently on the shutdown. In December, he supported a spending resolution that included no money for a border wall. But by January, because the House Democrats were for it, he was against it.

House Democrats shouldn't worry about this. They should just pass legislation on the minimum wage, overtime pay, college debt relief, and so on, and let McConnell block it all. Then they have to work to explain why these bills aren't passing—and that Trump would veto them if they did. The only path to victory in 2020—after what I fear may be a nightmarish presidential primary in which candidates and their backers will turn comparatively small differences into life-or-death matters, far worse than 2016—will involve making sure voters know that these commonsense measures, which 60 to 70 percent of the American people say they want, are not happening because one party is making sure they don't.

The Democrats' last big freshman class, the so-called Watergate Babies of 1974, has gone down in history for its numerous legislative accomplishments and, more than that, for changing the culture of Congress for the better. The class is remembered, though, not because of that one election, but because it had staying power—Democrats picked up even more seats in 1976—and saw tough legislative fights on issues like clean air and water through several Congresses. This class's ambitions will require no less.

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