

Letters to the Editor



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Brexit conundrum

Sir, The latest YouGov survey (report, Jan 18) found that 56 per cent of the voters surveyed would vote today for the UK to remain in the EU against 44 per cent wanting to leave, a majority of 12 per cent. If this survey represents the view of the British people today, any irrevocable step to withdraw the UK from the EU in compliance with the referendum of June 23, 2016 (with its majority of 4 per cent in favour of the UK leaving the EU) would be exactly contrary to the view of a majority of 12 per cent of the British people on January 16, 2019. Is it not now imperative that this should be tested by means of another referendum before the notice of withdrawal comes into effect?

Another referendum might confirm either the result of the first or the finding in the latest YouGov survey. I know, and regret, that it would be divisive. But it would hardly be more divisive than the present state of affairs, nor more divisive than persisting in so momentous a course of action — if that action were to be shown to be no longer supported by a majority of the British people. LORD ARMSTRONG OF ILMINSTER Cabinet secretary 1979–87, House of Lords

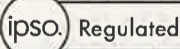
Sir, Your editorial "Parliament Takes Back Control" (Jan 21) states that Britain has "no codified constitution". Is it not time that we developed and codified our constitution? Should we not clearly determine the power and authority respectively of government, parliament and populace, and their processes? NICK HORTIN Houston; Renfrewshire

Term-time holidays

Sir, Lancashire county council wants to fine parents £1,000 if they take their children out of school for a few days during term time ("£1,000 fine for term-time holidays could be illegal", Jan 21). Yet nothing is being done to ensure that the children who are kept permanently out of school to be home-educated are registered with their local education authority. I am not against home schooling but I think there should be a legal requirement for parents to register their children if they intend to educate them at home. Thousands of unregistered children (no one seems to know the true number) are completely under the radar and no one has any idea if they are being educated at all.

JILL HAZELL Bristol

Corrections and clarifications

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Creative subjects and the choice of careers

Sir, Erica Whyman, deputy artistic director of the Royal Shakespeare Company, is right about the Russell Group's list of "facilitating subjects" at A-level ("Snubbing creative subjects 'can limit choice of careers'", Jan 19). The list is too narrow and by implication devalues equally valid disciplines. "Stem" subjects (science, technology, engineering and mathematics), vital as they are, do not erase the value of the arts. As artificial intelligence (AI) cuts a swathe through the jobs market, those with developed creativity, a flexibility of approach and a deep understanding of the aesthetic will be in a much stronger position.

Ironically, many Stem-related roles will disappear rapidly as AI supersedes human capability. The notion of "Steam" — where the arts are seen as integral — has to be the way forward. The Russell Group needs to update its list of facilitating subjects. The undervaluing of the creative arts by some top universities and the Department for Education (despite its soothing words) suggests that many young people are being poorly served. Incredibly, in the age of Silicon Valley and its innovative progeny, design technology is still regarded by some university

departments as "practical" rather than "academic". STEPHEN RATHBONE Academic director, Radley College

Sir, The RSC deputy artistic director says that the arts are "the only subjects in which teenagers are asked to form an opinion". Forming an opinion is a valuable part of education (and science now offers more options in this regard, having moved on from the Newtonian approach). Studying the arts provides opportunities to strengthen the important muscles of creative analysis. Students are not in the world of right and wrong but reliant upon their powers of appreciation, interrogation, self-belief and advocacy. These are the qualities employers value. Arts students are certainly not limited in their career options.

PETER GREEN Head master, Rugby School

Sir, Richard Morrison (Jan 18) rightly points out that government investment in music hubs is reaching only one in 12 schoolchildren. It could be worse. One such hub, London's Centre for Young Musicians, has spawned several county hubs. In my old military school, the Duke of

York's, one in six plays a musical instrument in its military band. Lest this be undervalued, this band produced Thomas Sullivan, father of Sir Arthur (there is a good march tune in most G&S operas), the clarinet virtuoso Henry Lazarus singled out by George Bernard Shaw, the bandleader Debroy Somers and the actor/singer Ramon Tikaram. Some pupils still choose military music careers which lead on elsewhere. And the school's leadership, in significantly improving academic results, has not sidelined music and arts but invested in them. CHRIS CROWCROFT Elstree, Herts

Sir, As an extracurricular Latin teacher I am often required to think creatively to keep my pupils on their toes. Recently, the misinterpretation of the verb *rexit* as "brexit" caused mirth in my class, and consequently a new Latin verb, *bregegre brexi*, ("to leave the EU"), was born. When a pupil endearingly asked whether the Romans would indeed have used it in all its forms, it was agreed *breget* is plausible, *bregit* is possible, however *brexit* is entirely hypothetical. MARY BIENFAIT St Albans

Mental capacity bill attracts criticism

Sir, It is with dismay that we note the lack of improvement within the Mental Capacity (Amendment) Bill. The bill would replace existing deprivation of liberty safeguards with an entirely unfit new system of protection. To avoid the risk of exploitation and abuse it is vital that there are robust safeguards in place.

Alarming, the bill proposes to triple the time that people can be deprived of their liberty without review (from one to three years) while not doing enough to guarantee that all patients have access to independent and impartial advocates. The bill also creates a worrying conflict of interest for care home managers, giving them a greater role in the assessment process. Many vulnerable people will find it hard to express their concerns to a person providing them with care. The result is a rushed, incomplete and unworkable bill that will replace one dysfunctional system with another. COREY STOUGHTON, Liberty; PAUL FARMER, Mind; JEREMY HUGHES,

Alzheimer's Society; MARK LEVER, National Autistic Society; MARK LISTER, POhWER; STEVE FORD, Parkinson's UK; SANCHITA HOSALI, British Institute of Human Rights; RICHARD KRAMER, Sense; SARAH WOOTTON, Compassion in Dying; EMMA THOMAS, YoungMinds; SAMANTHA CLARK, Learning Disability England; RHIDIAN HUGHES, Voluntary Organisations Disability Group; PETER MCCABE, Headway

Productivity point

Sir, Robert Colvile (Thunderer, Jan 21) argues that the public sector is to blame for the UK's poor productivity and highlights a number of issues with the NHS. But it is incorrect to suggest that the NHS's productivity performance is a factor in the UK's sclerotic productivity growth. The Office for National Statistics calculates that, since 2009, NHS productivity has increased by an average of 1.7 per cent a year, while productivity across the economy as a whole grew by just 0.5 per cent a year. ANITA CHARLESWORTH Director of research and economics, the Health Foundation

Empty museums

Sir, I read with interest the proposal to get rid of foreign curators at Italian museums (World, Jan 19). I love Italy and have visited many times. Apart from the real tourist hotspots in Florence, Rome and Venice I have frequently been the only visitor in the local museum. Often a magnificent display is set in vast, echoing (ie, empty) rooms. Italian museums in general do not appear to have "friends" organisations, shops or guidebooks. There is none of that buzz of activity you find in many British museums, with their new exhibitions and programme of events.

There is an emphasis in Italy on the academic value of the museum as the storehouse of objects and a place for serious research, with little attempt to engage the public. One example is the archaeological museum at Syracuse, which I visited in 2017. Buckets were placed around the museum to collect water from the leaking roof while a handful of visitors wandered round, admiring the great classical works of art in this wonderful collection. JULIET SHIPMAN Stroud, Glos

PROHIBITION OR MORE BEER?

FROM THE TIMES JANUARY 22, 1919

The age-long controversy about alcoholic drink seems to be working up once more, after an interval of comparative quiescence. Prohibition in the United States gives the cue on one side; the cry for more beer raised by English workmen is the answer on the other. The contrast is sharp and will, we fear, give pain to the Dean of Durham, from whom we published a letter on Monday, and also to other correspondents who have written in the same sense, but for whose letters we have been unable to find room. The Dean extolled the action of the United

States and contrasted it with the conduct of Great Britain, which has "played too long and too feebly with the problem of alcohol". He did not urge the adoption of prohibition here, and suggested some doubt of its practicability; but he fears that we may sink back from the level we have attained during the war. We are, he thinks, "in sore danger of drifting backwards." His fears are likely to be confirmed by the letter from Mr Clynes to Mr Sexton, published this morning. The Liverpool dockers are demanding more beer, and Mr Sexton, who is the secretary of the Liverpool Dockers' Union, has evidently written to Mr Clynes as an authority on the food supply, which has governed the quantity of beer brewed. The common belief that the Central Control Board has had anything to do with the matter is erroneous. The quantity was cut by the Government to economize food,

and now that the need is passing the cry is rising for more beer. We are not surprised, nor will anyone be who knows our working men.

So much has been said about America being "bone dry", and about the sacrifice made on account of the war, that the public have gained the impression that it is already done. But it has not been done yet. Meanwhile in this country, where we have followed a more moderate policy, there has been wrought the greatest change in the habits of the people ever recorded and the greatest reduction of drunkenness ever accomplished in any country. It has been accomplished by restricting facilities for drink; and the people have submitted to these restrictions with a good grace and wonderfully little grumbling because they thought it reasonable.

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Unsettled status

Sir, Having lived in this country for more than 40 years I am really disappointed that the government felt it necessary to charge £65 for me to stay indefinitely ("Settled status plan 'risks new Windrush'", Jan 21, and report, thetimes.co.uk). The fee may now have been dropped, but surely the government should know who is in this country and how long they have been here? If nothing else, one's national insurance number should tell the government all it needs to know.

I have informed my husband and children that they probably will need to come and visit me in my native country — the Netherlands. ANNEKE MACTHOMAS London SW6

Blind bit of notice

Sir, Satham Sanghera has confused matters (Notebook, Jan 19). I was always told that shutters were for the upper classes, but with added blinds in the summer months to protect valuable antiques inside. The middle classes went for tasteful curtains but on no account were ever to have net curtains because that was "common". HERVEY F BLAKE London NW8

Ma'am's the word

Sir, With regard to his recent motoring accident, it is wrong that the Duke of Edinburgh is considered by some to be uncaring (report and letters, Jan 19). He surely cares about others but is doing what all motor insurers require of their clients: that nothing is said or done that might imply an admission of responsibility. DAVID LINE Ashford, Kent

Background music

Sir, Carol Midgley (Notebook, Jan 21) is right: television background music has become far too intrusive. There are many buttons on my TV remote control — far more than I needed in my 30 years in the BBC as a video editor to make the programmes in the first place. Surely one of these buttons could be programmed to cut the music. Perhaps we could call it the MOB — the Music Off Button.

IAN RUTTER Cookham Dean, Berks

Classy meals

Sir, Further to Libby Purves's article ("We still make a meal out of university and class", Jan 21), some years ago, when the shortlisted candidates for bursar were dined at St Edmund Hall, Oxford, we were served a puzzling cactus. None at high table knew what it was; the principal muttered that they were hoping we could tell them what to do with it. It was certainly a conversation piece, but artichoke was never served again — at least under my bursarship. GEOFFREY BOURNE-TAYLOR Bursar, St Edmund Hall, 1988–2007

Sir, Somerville College undergraduates were lucky to have been served octopus terrine. At Homerton College in the mid-1960s the go-to feast was mutton blanquette, loathed and loved in equal measure. It gave many of us a lifelong aversion to all things "mutton" and anything drenched in a disgusting white sauce. JENNIFER M THORP Ford, Wilts