

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR



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UN summit at risk from US

From Captain P. R. D. Kimm, RN (ret'd)

Sir, It is reported that, in advance of next month's United Nations summit, John Bolton, the new US Ambassador to the UN, has tabled 750 amendments to the draft proposed by the Secretary-General for the agreement of the summit.

Without question the UN is in great need of reform, but many of Mr Bolton's amendments would appear to be so destructive of its status as to suggest that the United States has lost patience with the whole concept of a world governed under principles of multilateral consensus.

If this is so, it is a grave matter indeed. A "Pax Americana", however stable and benevolent, would be a global dictatorship under another name; but far more worrying would be the situation which would arise should another superpower emerge to challenge US pre-eminence.

Her Majesty's Government would seem to be faced with a decision of great difficulty but of profound importance. Should we continue to stand by our great ally, right or (in this case I profoundly believe) wrong, or use our still considerable international influence to support the concept of a revived United Nations?

PETER KIMM
Emsworth, Hampshire

Diesel fools

From Mr Tony FitzHugh

Sir, I gather that 400 times a day someone in the UK fills a diesel vehicle with petrol, with very expensive and uninsured consequences. This is a problem that the motor industry should have solved years ago.

For example, the pump nozzles and fuel tank filler necks could have a cross-section that is round, triangular, square, pentagonal and so on, according to the fuel type. A plug-in piece of plastic would convert all existing cars at minimal cost.

TONY FITZHUGH
Reigate, Surrey

Judges clarify

From Ms Sue Pheasey

Sir, I understand that judges ask obvious questions (Comment, August 30) not because they are ignorant, but so that necessary information can be documented for future reference.

Although Pelé and sofa beds are unlikely to be forgotten, other celebrities or fashions are forgotten. Because British law relies heavily on precedent and case history, clarification may prove necessary as time goes by.

SUE PHEASEY
Solihull, West Midlands

Exams: criticise the system, not the students

From Mr Norman Isaacs

Sir, Alice Miles (Comment, August 31) contends that our exam system teaches neither anything useful nor "the good stuff".

My son, aged 15, has just taken GCSE exams in French and religious studies: his ability to converse with an authentic accent on a range of everyday topics and to write fluently and accurately in French is impressive, while his knowledge of the tenets and practices of a variety of faiths is extensive.

His recent studies in history have given him an understanding of the present conflict in the Middle East and the collapse of communism, his grasp of mathematical concepts frequently takes my wife, who has a maths degree, by surprise, while in English he has learnt to appreciate Larkin as well as Shakespeare, not to mention good and bad journalistic styles and techniques. I see him, in fact, as becoming ever more usefully equipped to lead a full and rounded life, whatever path he eventually chooses.

What requires correction is not a system that fairly tests

knowledge and the candidate's ability to use it, but the evaluation of the achievement. If grade boundaries were raised in order truly to reflect levels of attainment, young people need no longer feel that they themselves are being devalued.

NORMAN ISAACS
Wimbledon, London
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From Mr Robert Dewar

Sir, I agree with Alice Miles that the current exam system does nothing more than test the ability to conform; there is no room for originality of thought.

For many years I've deplored the trend towards ever earlier vocational training. My brother, who is a successful nuclear engineer, envies me my old fashioned, non-vocational schooling, which taught me pleasure in breadth of learning. In his own words he has "nothing more than training for a career", whilst I enjoy the infinitely more rewarding advantages of having received an education.

Conformity is needed; it is

the glue in society. But the current exam system rewards nothing else. A string of A's is no measure of a child's education.

ROBERT DEWAR
High Wycombe
Buckinghamshire

From Mrs Khorsheed Dinshaw

Sir, As usual at this time of year the news media are full of negative comments on exam results.

Most children have no choice but to work within the system we currently have. As the mother of a child who has recently received her GCSE results, I find it disheartening that there is little recognition of the genuine hard work that has gone into achieving these results.

The fact that the system is flawed should not stop us from celebrating our children's successes. Indeed, to denigrate their achievements year after year is no incentive to their pursuing excellence as they go further in life.

KHORSHEED DINSHAW
Gerrards Cross
Buckinghamshire

Language classes

From Mr Michael Sansbury

Sir, You assume (leading article, August 26) that languages must form part of every child's secondary education, but many of us, even after lengthy school courses and holidays abroad, achieve no great proficiency in, say, French. Some linguistic aptitude is needed for success beyond very simple conversation.

Falling numbers for languages in GCSE, A level and at university show that valiant and costly efforts to teach languages to all pupils in comprehensive schools have achieved limited and diminishing success, despite the introduction of GCSE, much easier than the old GCE O level in which coursework could not be substituted for written papers.

Yes, introduce children to foreign languages at elementary school, but identify those who show interest and aptitude. These will benefit from more challenging courses at secondary level; others will be better served by a course of European studies including basic conversation in a language or two. Some form of selection will be essential to reverse the current decline.

MICHAEL SANSBURY
(Head of German, Solihull School, 1975-97)
Solihull, West Midlands

Discipline and familiarity

From Mr Andrew Dow

Sir, The phenomena of dressing down in the office (report, August 25) and of calling strangers by their first names (letters, August 30, etc) are minor symptoms of a larger problem in society today: lack of discipline.

For some time we have been reluctant to impose or to accept discipline, or to reap the benefits of self-discipline.

We allow ourselves to be led by superficial politicians. We fail to reject the obsessions of the media, advertising, show-business and sport with unimportant achievement, vulgar behaviour and the trivialities of celebrity. We fail to accept

personal responsibility and instead seek to place blame and receive compensation. We seem happy to raise a generation of whingeing ninnies, averse to risk, ignorant of initiative and strangers to self-reliance.

We tend to ignore the thousands of dedicated and selfless people who silently do so much good in this world.

In this context, the action of Barclays to stem the tide of poor personal appearance, and the reactions of some of your correspondents to uninvited familiarity, are welcome signs that, maybe, the tide is turning.

ANDREW DOW
Newton-on-Ouse
North Yorkshire

Animal testing

From Dr Rudolf Cardinal

Sir, Mr Adolfo Sansolini (letter, August 27) says that animal researchers fear an open debate about animal experimentation. Yet they publish their methods and results openly in scientific journals. It is more likely that they are reticent about the details of their Home Office licences for the same reason that prime minis-

ters are reticent about the details of their summer holiday: they do not fear open debate with law-abiding citizens who oppose their work, but rather attack by terrorists acting in the name of this opposition.

Reducing animal experimentation is an admirable goal, and one shared by researchers. Yet without it our society would not be able to provide our current standard of healthcare and drug safety, or develop new treatments for many diseases.

Preparation for bird flu

From Mr Jeremy Azis

Sir, The head of the British Veterinary Association says that the arrival of avian flu is inevitable (report, August 26).

Much of the recent media focus has been placed on the emergency acquisition of vaccines (though there will never be enough of these to cover the whole population) and the lack of a specific vaccine for the new strain of avian flu. Based on my company's pandemic emergency training and simulation work in Australia, I believe that much more emphasis should be placed on training emergency management organisations throughout the UK to improve understanding of the particular characteristics of a flu outbreak and how the various organisa-

tions involved should work together to combat the disease.

Prompt, informed, co-ordinated implementation of well-planned control measures by trained staff throughout the UK at the beginning of an outbreak could reduce considerably the chances of an epidemic developing.

The Australian authorities have shown a forward-thinking approach to preparing for this problem at both state and federal level (following the Sars outbreak several years ago) and there are many lessons that could be emulated with profit here in the UK.

JEREMY AZIS
(Managing Director,
VectorCommand Ltd)
Havant, Hampshire

Study in crime

From Mr Henry Wilson

Sir, You report (August 29) that burglars are most likely to have security equipment to protect their property. When I worked for Chubb, the safe maker, my boss told me to assume that criminals knew as much about our products as we did — and would often buy them to increase their knowledge.

I found this to be true when, while I was working as a trainee in our West End offices, someone lobbed a brick through the showroom window and stole a wall safe.

HENRY WILSON
Ilminster, Somerset
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Simple shopping

From Mrs Barbara Self

Sir, Libby Purves (Comment, August 23) and Mrs Nargis Walker (letter, August 29), who deplore our shopping culture, should remember that no one is holding a gun to their heads.

BARBARA SELF
Sutton-in-the-Isle
Cambridgeshire

Youth hostels

From Mr Colin Logan

Sir, The chairman of the Youth Hostels Association (letter, August 26) has not addressed the underlying issue of the possible large-scale closure of youth hostels.

If the YHA were to close 80 of its operations (letter, August 20) then it would radically alter the character of the organisation.

The association's trustees must prune the network of unsuccessful youth hostels, they must slash costs and they must promote the movement assiduously, but society needs a strong YHA, not an emasculated one.

C. D. LOGAN
(Chief Executive, YHA,
1992-2000)
Deganwy, Conwy

Electric defence

From Mr Claude Swain

Sir, You report that the next generation of Army vehicles could be battery powered (report, August 25).

Is this because there will be no more petrol by the time they are delivered?

CLAUDE SWAIN
Chandler's Ford, Hampshire

Brainy males?

From Dr Paul Weston Smith

Sir, There is a simple explanation for the difference in the way men and women use their brains (letters, August 30). Women are obsessed with process, men are obsessed with outcome. This is why women watch soaps, which are endless, and men watch the news, which has outcomes.

It also explains why, when a couple go out for an evening, the husband is waiting in the car in the drive with the engine running whilst his wife is still deciding what colour coat to wear.

PAUL WESTON SMITH
Cossall, Nottinghamshire

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CONSERVATIVE LEADERSHIP

■ "If the Tories choose the person who ideologically agrees with them the most rather than who could win an election, they will yet again be onto a loser"

Lisa Marie Jones, Shrewsbury

WEARING THE VEIL

■ "Matthew Parris finds it offensive that a woman covers herself to preserve her dignity. I find it offensive that women feel forced to wear skimpy clothes"

Kamran Hussain, Doha, Qatar

SU DOKU

■ "I have to do a Su Doku in the morning — it's like taking a shower for my brain. A great way to clear the cobwebs and start the day"

C. Frean, Bedford, Massachusetts