

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Theresa May and the demands of leadership

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Sir, The criticism of Theresa May by Iain Martin (“We have the weakest PM in living memory”, Comment, Dec 7) suggests that he has not yet grasped the full implications of Brexit. The cabinet, like the Tory party and the country as a whole, is in a stand-off between those who want the UK out of Europe whatever the cost and those who see their future and that of the UK as within Europe. We have, as Clare Foges points out (Comment, Dec 4), become a nation of two mutually uncomprehending tribes.

How can anyone manage a cabinet that is peopled by two different parties with such sharply opposed views? Mrs May must either throw her lot in with one of the two tribes or continue to sit on the fence in the hope that it will all work out in the end.

A general election is the last thing the Conservative Party wants. It will surely follow if Mrs May sides with either of the teams in her cabinet or if the men in grey suits mount a putsch.

The boil that David Cameron tried to lance by calling a referendum has turned into a carbuncle, infecting not just the Tory party but the nation as a whole. The people must be given a second chance to make their choice once the terms of a deal with the European Union are known.

John Mann

Chagford Cross, Devon

Sir, Iain Martin writes of the “weakest PM in living memory” but the tragedy is that this is compounded by the lack of quality to replace the incumbent. In normal circumstances the electorate would have a clear choice: vote in the opposition. But the EU referendum has torpedoed this because both major parties seek to implement the will of the people. Both parties are also preoccupied with internal dissension and unable to devote proper attention to that which is best for country rather than party. The question arises: why have Tony Blair and other politicians not seen fit to create a new political party to exploit this vacuum?

Iain Slinn

Easter Kinkell, Highland

Sir, As Simon Nixon observed (Business, Dec 7), it has taken a botched election, the support of the DUP, and the Irish border question to bring us to the brink of the first of the hard decisions on Brexit. It has become clear that the price of our own political union is to stay with the EU customs union, which after all was our original reason for joining with Europe. If and when the hardline Brexiteers accept this, we can move on to the next critical decisions, which are probably whether to stay in equally vital collaborative arrangements on security, defence and technology.

Arthur Dicken

Prestbury, Cheshire

Sir, Ed Conway (Comment, Dec 8) identifies the many ways in which the UK is a “disunited kingdom”, including diverse legal systems, cultures and economies. Rather than allowing the UK to break up, should we not move towards a federal UK, one able to respect this divergence?

Nicholas Sundin

Politics student, Newcastle University

Sir, As the headline says, “the time has come to acknowledge that Theresa May is

unsuited to leadership and must be replaced urgently”. Why has it taken Iain Martin so long to acknowledge what many of us have known for months?

David Middlemiss

Beverley, E Yorks

FOLIC ACID FOR BREAD

Sir, We urge the British government to introduce mandatory fortification of flour with folic acid on a UK-wide basis. This would prevent neural tube defects in babies and lead to long-lasting improvements in the health of our population. Governments in Scotland and Wales are united in calling for this important change and we have an opportunity to ensure that all women and babies across the UK can benefit.

One in ten women of childbearing age in the UK is not receiving sufficient folic acid from her diet; this figure increases in the most socio-economically deprived areas. Set alongside this is the high rate of unintended pregnancies in Britain each year and the increasing prevalence of neural tube defects in England and Wales. There is very clear evidence that fortification will prevent approximately half of all neural tube defects. If the UK government decided to add folic acid to flour it would prevent countless family tragedies.

Professor Lesley Regan, president, Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists; Professor Neena Modi, president, Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health; Gill Walton, CEO, Royal College of Midwives; Jason Waugh, president, British Maternal and Fetal Medicine Society; Dr Asha Kasliwal, president, Faculty of Sexual and Reproductive Healthcare

POPE AND PRAYER

Sir, I think the Pope has got it slightly wrong (“Pope gives his blessing to change in Lord’s Prayer”, News, Dec 8). The Greek word *peirasmos* does not necessarily mean temptation to sin. It can also mean something like testing, trial or ordeal. As an Orthodox believer and Greek student I interpret the conclusion of the Lord’s Prayer as meaning “Do not bring me into (a time of) trial — but (if You deem it necessary), (then) save me from the Evil One.”

Times of trial are valuable for spiritual growth, if we can endure them without losing faith in God. The Devil can exploit ordeals by making us more prone to sin; hence, we ask God to give us the strength to resist his promptings.

Rosemary Bancroft-Marcus

Author and DPhil, Oxford

FREEDOM TO DEBATE

Sir, As a British academic who worked in Africa (Uganda and Nigeria) in the immediate aftermath of colonial rule, I might have expected to have encountered the hatred of “subjugated” peoples whose “fundamental freedoms” had been “abused” (“Scholars and the debate about colonial rule”, letter, Dec 8). But I did not and nor, I think, did Englishmen who worked in India.

As a historian, I deplore the practice of reducing a huge and complex subject to simple denunciation. Self-righteous rants have no place in academic scholarship.

Christopher Wrigley

Chorleywood, Herts

Sir, The letter from 182 academics contained the statement that editors of scholarly journals have “an ethical duty to reject works advocating the violation of human rights”. It would be hard to find a more perfect example of the poisonous sanctimony and hypocritical virtue-signalling that is rapidly shutting down many areas of debate in western academic circles.

Jeremy Tyrer

Lindfield, W Sussex

HELLENIC TEASER

Sir, A dichotomy of opinion has emerged on the letters page as to whether computer programming or the study of Greek is the more important in developing one’s intellect and mental capacity (letters, Nov 29 & Dec 2, 4, 8). As an avowed champion of the latter (though not denying the former), may I make a plea for a weekly Greek Crossword in *The Times* to improve our minds and to complement the existing and utterly splendid weekly Latin Crossword?

Michael Glasby

Edinburgh

READ ALL ABOUT IT

Sir, A political sex scandal splashed across the front page of *The Times* in 1830 set a precedent for sensational page one news long before the 1966 “revolution in newspaper history” (“Nitpick papers: historian tears strip off Dickens film-makers”, Dec 2).

The crusading *Times* Editor Thomas Barnes (“the most powerful man in the country”, according to the Duke of Wellington) took the bold step of running the cabinet minister Lord Ellenborough’s divorce trial across almost the entire front page on April 2, 1830. It was the latest in a string of sordid scandals involving elite public figures, at a time when political reformers and the media were keen to expose moral corruption in the establishment — much like today. While most 19th-century newspapers usually printed only adverts on the front page, Barnes broke with tradition with a single column on Queen Caroline’s adultery trial in July 1820, and after that occasionally ran coverage of major news stories across part of page one, usually on parliamentary debates.

In making the shocking Ellenborough divorce front-page news, Barnes was cleverly echoing the national mood of outrage against elite privilege. A small but significant landmark in history, paving the way for Britain’s vital Fourth Estate.

Dr Susan Law

Author, *Through the Keyhole: Sex, Scandal and the Secret Life of the Country House*

MIDDLING TALENTS

Sir, Jenni Russell is quite right (“I’m a second-rate pianist — and proud of it”, Dec 7). I took up the cello in my late thirties and played in a very amateur string quartet. We once competed against another similar quartet in a village eisteddfod. The judge opened her remarks by saying “If a thing’s worth doing, it’s worth doing badly”. I have cherished her quoting G K Chesterton ever since.

Helen Beach

Epsom, Surrey

Sir, As a 67-year-old returnee to my recorder and paint brushes I am in complete agreement with Jenni Russell (and have just achieved *In the Bleak Midwinter* without a pause).

Elizabeth Nicholson

Pitlochry, Perthshire

MAN V MACHINE

Sir, Peter West (letter, Dec 8) is wrong to suppose that computers’ great strength at chess is based on memory. It is their ability to calculate so accurately and quickly that produces their advantage over humans. In terms of general understanding and strategy of the game, areas where memory can play an important part, humans are still far superior.

Michael Brigden

Bath

MARVELLOUS MARIS

Sir, The Second World War played a key role in the creation of the UK's most popular potato variety (report, Dec 8). Postwar interest in food security and nutrition led to big investment in plant breeding, and Maris Lane in Cambridge became the potato industry's Bletchley Park. The resulting Maris Piper potato has been a major provider of vitamins and nutrients to the British diet ever since.

Dr Rob Clayton

Director, AHDB Potatoes

Theresa May

Brexit

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ihatearmchairexperts 26 minutes ago

Theresa May's success or not will be judged by history. Assessments by individuals who are privileged to write for newspapers or by people who manage to get their letters published are insignificant!

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A Firswell 5 hours ago

Who does the imbecilic Middlemiss suggest as PM? Seriously-WHO?

[Peter Wright](#) 7 hours ago

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Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists; Faculty of Sexual and Reproductive Healthcare

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