

## Daily Universal Register

Czech Republic: The first round of the presidential elections commences.

## Nature notes



There is a fascinating report in the January issue of *British Birds* magazine of a robin displaying inappropriately.

In his garden in Taunton, Somerset, AP Radford saw a robin giving a threat display to a group of the reddish-purple flowers of toad lily. In characteristic fashion, it lifted its head towards them, puffed out its red breast feathers, cocked its tail and swayed from side to side. After two minutes it gave up. In 1943, in his remarkable *Life of the Robin*, the great ornithologist David Lack showed that a robin would threaten a mere bunch of red robin breast feathers attached to a wire, with all the rest of the bird removed. It did not need the whole bird to feel that there was a rival in its territory. The red flowers in Mr Radford's garden seem to have inspired the same response in his robin.

DERWENT MAY

## Birthdays today



Jeff Bezos, pictured, chief executive and founder, Amazon, 54; Kirstie Alley, actress, *Cheers* (1987-93), 67; Anthony Andrews, actor, *The Syndicate* (2015), 70; Caroline Ansell, Conservative MP

for Eastbourne (2015-17), 47; Michael Aspel, presenter, *This is Your Life* (1987-2003), 85; Simon Russell Beale, actor, *The Death of Stalin* (2017), 57; Dame Fiona Caldicott, national data guardian for health and care, 77; Prof Richard Carwardine, president, Corpus Christi College, Oxford (2010-16), 71; Sir Suma Chakrabarti, president, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, 59; Melanie Chisholm, singer, Spice Girls, 44; Rt Rev Chris Cocksworth, bishop of Coventry, 59; Lady Cosgrove, a senator of the College of Justice in Scotland (1996-2006), 72; Spencer Dale, chief economist, BP, Bank of England (2008-14), 51; Shirley Eaton, actress, *Goldfinger* (1964), 81; Brendan Foster, athlete, Olympic bronze medallist (1976, 10,000m), and founder (1981), the Great North Run, 70; Baroness Hamwee, chairwoman, London Assembly (2001-08), 71; Anne Howells, soprano, 77; Juergen Maier, chief executive, Siemens UK, 54; Zayn Malik, singer, *Pillowtalk* (2016), 25; Barry Middleton, former captain of the England and GB hockey teams, 34; David Mitchell, novelist, *The Bone Clocks* (2014), 49; Haruki Murakami, writer, *Norwegian Wood* (1987), 69; William Nicholson, screenwriter, *Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom* (2013), 70; Des O'Connor, entertainer, 86; Sir Richie Richardson, cricketer, West Indies (1983-95), 56; Zack de la Rocha, singer-songwriter, Rage Against the Machine, *Killing in the Name* (1992), 48; Prof Gerald Russell, psychiatrist, 90; Liz Sayce, chief executive, Disability Rights UK, 64; Frank Selby, founder of the Rex Features photographic agency, 100; Lady Wilson of Rievaulx, widow of the former prime minister Harold Wilson, 102.

## On this day

In 1970 a Boeing 747 landed at Heathrow airport after its first transatlantic flight from New York; in 2010 316,000 people died in an earthquake in Haiti.

## The last word

"Wine may well be considered the most healthful and most hygienic of beverages." Louis Pasteur, chemist and bacteriologist, *Études sur le vin* (1873).



## Going Green

The Conservatives scent political advantage in new plans for the environment. They are right to do so, but more action and ambition will be needed

For many years conservationists have implored governments to produce a long-term strategy for safeguarding the environment. Michael Gove has now produced one. Theresa May, emerging from a birdwatchers' hide, has heralded it as a promise that Britain's air, water, wildlife and countryside will be better tended after Brexit than before.

The goal is admirable and vital. The prime minister rightly rejects the idea that policymakers have to choose between the environment and the economy. The experience of advanced countries since the war has been that, with sensible laws in place, prosperity and good environmental stewardship can go hand in hand. Mrs May also insists that "conservatism and conservation are natural allies". This should be true, but saying it does not make it so.

The new plan for the environment makes sense politically for a party that must win over young voters who consider themselves green with a small "g". It incorporates good thinking, especially on the need to rid both the economy and the environment of the scourge of throwaway plastic. But it does not go far enough. This is the standard refrain of environmental lobby groups whenever ministers set out to save the natural world, but it is unfortunately applicable.

The government's headline aim is to eliminate "avoidable" plastic waste within a quarter of a century. It has many proposals on how to achieve this but only one firm pledge — to extend the existing 5p charge for single-use plastic bags from supermarkets to corner shops. The context, as Dame Ellen MacArthur has explained, is a consumer economy in which just 2 per cent of plastics are fully recycled, 72 per cent end up in landfill or the sea, and a third of all fish have ingested plastic. In these circumstances a plan based on aspiration rather than action is unlikely to suffice even with all Mr Gove's energy behind it.

Preserving Britain's green and pleasant land, not to mention its coastal waters and the oceans beyond, is the task of individuals, charities and companies as well as government. Behaviour must change. Consumers used to blemish-free bananas will have to tolerate more bruises and commit to more careful recycling. Manufacturers will have to accept responsibility for the full life-cycles of their products and expect customers to vote with their wallets if they fall short. But ministers make the rules and set the timetable, and Mr Gove's should be tougher and tighter.

There is little in his plan for the next 25 years that could not be accomplished in ten. He should

be more willing to require the private sector to act, rather than simply encouraging it. His plan is a respectable first draft, but a second will be needed.

Summarising the chief points of the plan in her speech, Mrs May said that her government would "explore" the idea of plastic-free aisles in supermarkets. It should insist on them. She said that it would "consult" on deposit schemes to increase the return and re-use of plastic bottles. It should mandate them. She said that it would "consider" a surcharge on single-use takeaway coffee cups. The consideration has gone on long enough. The case for such a charge has grown ever stronger since charging for plastic bags has caused their use to plummet. Now is the time for action.

The government should commit to expanding Britain's marine preserves and to policing them properly. It should bring forward the deadlines for phasing out petrol and diesel engines, and it should expand high-tech anaerobic waste incineration capacity to compensate for China's decision to stop importing used plastics. Conservative commitments to the environment have too often unravelled. The government is right to put the issue at the heart of its post-Brexit vision, but voters will not quickly forget broken promises, and the countryside and seas will not easily recover.

## Trumping Tehran

Iran believes it can carry on spreading mayhem by pitting Europe against the US

European Union foreign ministers, including Boris Johnson, met their Iranian counterpart, Mohammad Javad Zarif, in Brussels yesterday. The timing was unfortunate. With some 3,700 protesters arrested, at least 21 killed in clashes and several sexually assaulted, tortured and executed in prison, this was not the moment to stand shoulder to shoulder with the Iranian regime.

There was, however, little choice. The relationship between the West and Tehran has become so entangled that governments are unsure when, how and to what degree they should be applying pressure to this increasingly ugly regime. Today President Trump will decide whether the United States should continue to offer sanctions relief in return for Iran's promise to curb its nuclear activities. In October Mr Trump, a fierce critic of the nuclear accord, refused to certify Iran's compliance with the agreement but stopped short of unilaterally withdrawing from it.

The president may be minded now to end America's involvement in the accord, which was seen under the Obama administration as a triumph of multilateral statecraft. He is concerned

about what will happen after the agreement runs its course, about its restrictions on verifying military sites and about the scope it gives Tehran to cheat its way towards a bomb.

Most of all, Mr Trump is troubled by those elements not bound by the accord. The Iranian Revolutionary Guard is making use of funds freed up by the lifting of sanctions to orchestrate repression at home and military adventures across the region. The agreement is, moreover, narrowly focused on non-proliferation and does not cover Iran's ballistic missile testing.

In short, the deal was based on the hope that Iran would reform and liberalise to such a degree that it would never seek recourse to nuclear weapons. It is difficult to disagree with many of Mr Trump's criticisms. Despite this he would do well to listen not only to the European foreign ministers who are lobbying hard to keep the deal and are resisting any return to a tight sanctions policy, but also to his inner circle, including Jim Mattis, the defence secretary. This is no time to allow Iran to drive a wedge between Europe and America. An adviser to President Rouhani was quoted this

week as saying: "In case the Americans exit the deal, we will react in no time flat." By which he meant: Tehran will immediately block international inspections teams to sensitive sites. An Iranian exit from the agreement could trigger a race for a bomb with Saudi Arabia.

The best course is therefore to compartmentalise policies towards Iran. The deal could be improved without ripping it up entirely, and diplomatic pressure should be applied on the regime to accept tougher verification procedures. Iran's desperation for continuing sanctions relief may outweigh its reluctance to lose face. In parallel, there must be stiffer non-nuclear sanctions for its sponsorship of terrorist groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas. These should be targeted towards Revolutionary Guard commanders and those identified as responsible for the recent crackdown.

The protesters on Iran's streets complain that sanctions money is being diverted from the civilian economy into sinister military operations. They want to live in a society that does not define itself through violence. That is a justified demand and the West is right to support it.

## The Press Imperilled

Amendments to the Data Protection Bill are a threat to journalistic freedom

Peers had a chance on Wednesday night to show their understanding of the competing demands of privacy and unfettered public interest journalism. With due respect, their lordships blew it. In passing two sets of amendments to the Data Protection Bill proposed by Baroness Hollins and others, the upper house has forced the question of press freedom into a debate where it does not belong, and threatened to undermine it in the process.

The vote was a narrow defeat for the government. It should be overturned in the Commons, but if upheld it would commit ministers to a second, exhaustive Leveson-style inquiry into the

press, and heighten pressure on newspapers to submit to state-backed regulation. The first is not needed and the second is not wise.

The revision of the Data Protection Act should have little to do with newspaper regulation. It is a response to the internet age and the rise of social media. Facebook holds the messages, photos and contacts of two billion people, and the potential for this data to be abused is a clear and present danger. Data protection laws as they apply to newspapers, by contrast, are clear and effective.

One amendment effectively seeks to press-gang publishers into joining the state-recognised regu-

lator, Impress. No national titles have joined, in part because regulation of the media in effect by the government is an illiberal idea.

This would not be so objectionable were the existing regulator — Ipsos, the Independent Press Standards Organisation — not doing its job. The body is supported by 95 per cent of national newspapers and does not pull its punches. Lady Hollins believes the failure so far to hold a second inquiry into the workings of the press is a "failure of political courage". Even allowing for this newspaper's obvious interest in the matter, many will agree that it is in fact a victory for common sense.