

Letters to the Editor



Letters to the Editor should be sent to letters@thetimes.co.uk or by post to 1 London Bridge Street, London SE1 9GF



Newspapers in peril

Sir, As the editor of the *Maidenhead Advertiser* and *Slough and Windsor Express*, independent weekly local newspapers, I am deeply concerned by the prospect of the costs sanctions contained in section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act 2013 being brought into force.

If triggered, the provisions would mean newspapers that decline to sign up to a state-recognised press regulator would be ordered to pay both sides' costs in court actions for libel and privacy cases — even if they win. For an independent publisher like us, the costs would be ruinous. The regime would constitute a potentially fatal blow to local newspapers, which are now operating in the most difficult economic climate they have ever known.

All the editors I have spoken to about this issue, regardless of whether they work for titles owned by small or large companies, agree that section 40 is a bad piece of law which, if enacted, would be immensely harmful to local newspapers and to local democracy.

At the *Advertiser*, we strongly believe that there is just no need for more state intervention into press regulation. Life is tough enough for local papers and any further burden such as section 40 could just be the final nail in the coffin for an industry that contributes so much good to public life.

MARTIN TREPTE
Editor, *Maidenhead Advertiser*

Decline in nursing

Sir, The steep decline in nursing degree applications ("Nursing degree applications fall by a fifth", Dec 17) is an indictment of the government for ceasing to fund students in nursing, midwifery and allied professions via bursaries. Ministers said that ending the bursaries would free up 10,000 more training places. Predictably, this short-sighted plan seems to have backfired. This is bad news all round: we will have to hire more nurses from abroad to fill the gap, which is a drain both on their countries of origin and on school places and housing here.

This false economy is a disincentive to those young people here who wish to serve. Small wonder that our youth are disaffected.

VERA LUSTIG
Walton-on-Thames, Surrey

Corrections and clarifications

● We stated (On This Day, Dec 10) that the Nobel peace prize would be presented by King Harald V of Norway. The prize was presented by Kaci Kullmann Five, who chairs the Norwegian Nobel committee.

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If the NHS is so good, why isn't it copied?

Sir, Mark Littlewood is to be congratulated for introducing a degree of reality into the debate about the NHS ("If the NHS is the envy of the world, why don't any European countries copy it?", Business, Dec 20). Is it really beyond our politicians to set aside party differences and establish a far-reaching and independent commission to examine the health and social care needs of the UK over the next 30 years? Such a commission should examine how care is successfully delivered and funded elsewhere, and ask searching questions as to whether we can reasonably expect the NHS and local government to match the best that is available, or if different delivery and funding solutions are needed.

WILL LIFFORD
East Keswick, W Yorks

Sir, The elevation of our NHS to "holy cow" status is over-simplistic (letter, Dec 22). By the same token, Mark Littlewood's article treats the NHS as a business, equating it to food supply and clothing. Surely the due is in the title — it is a service not simply a business. That said, this is not the same as regarding it as a sacred cow. As a large, complex organisation there are doubtless areas that can be (and are being) improved without abandoning the principle of universal healthcare. Having this year been diagnosed for a second time with cancer I have been extremely grateful that during all this time, with five operations, six weeks as

an in-patient, six weeks of radiotherapy and countless tests and clinics, I have never once had to worry once about my ability to pay for this excellent treatment.

By contrast, during my working career I lived abroad in a number of countries, notably the US, which did not have a comparable healthcare system, and where the ability to pay was a very real issue.

The time we should really worry is when the first question you are asked when visiting your GP is not "what is your date of birth?" but "what is the long number on your debit card?".
JOHN YOUNG
Richmond, N Yorks

Sir, Mark Littlewood concludes that "To believe that the centralised, state-run National Health Service is the best possible mechanism for curing the sick and keeping people alive is simply at odds with the facts", yet puts forward few facts to justify this assertion. The "factual evidence" he provides is a comparison of the extent of expected life expectancy in various countries after diagnosis and treatment for cancers. He notes that if the NHS could replicate the performance of the Netherlands, Germany and Belgium, death rates would fall and up to 14,000 fewer Britons would die each year. The UK, he says, "is about on a par with the Czech Republic and Slovenia, countries where average income is less than half ours".

What he omits to say is that life expectancy as a whole is lower in Germany, Denmark and Belgium than in the UK, that these countries spend a higher proportion of their GDP on healthcare than the UK does; and that life expectancy in Slovenia and the Czech Republic is significantly lower than that achieved by Britons.
ALEXANDER JOHNSTON
Syston, Leics

Sir, Mark Littlewood asks questions that need answering, but J Wesley Harkcom (letter, Dec 22), along with many politicians, seems not to understand why the public are so loyal to the NHS. In 2014-15 the NHS gave superb care to my wife in her terminal illness, all the way through the ambulance service, Truro A&E, the neurological surgery unit at Derriford in Plymouth, the multiple services provided by Truro hospital, the neurological rehabilitation unit in Hayle, St Austell Hospital, Mevagissey surgery and the many Cornwall social services who, together with the NHS, enabled my wife to stay at home, enjoying life to a remarkable extent, until her death.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that our very good experience is common. This explains the public's loyalty to the NHS. Misunderstandings get in the way of the sensible debate suggested by Mark Littlewood, who understands this loyalty.
GERALD HINGLEY
St Austell, Cornwall

'Failure' of the FCO

Sir, It is incredibly frustrating that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Thunderer, Dec 20, and letter, Dec 23) does not appear to have learnt any lessons from the time my sister Rachel Chandler and her husband Paul were kidnapped by Somali pirates, in 2009. In these situations families need urgent advice as to how to proceed. It does not need vast expense to be incurred, just good common sense based on knowledge of these situations. The most important thing that Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe's family needs is the honest truth, which we rarely or never get. One falsehood or downright lie destroys the family's trust totally. The arrogant disdain and total falsehoods we

received from some officials is a stain on the whole civil service. I am certain that those 80 per cent of British nationals surveyed who are said to be satisfied or highly satisfied with the service they receive from the FCO never had any dealings with any but the very lowest echelons of this ivory tower in King Charles Street.
STEPHEN COLLETT
Ixworth, Suffolk

Great War truces

Sir, There is much anecdotal evidence for "live-and-let-live conventions" and truces during the First World War at times other than the festive season (report, Dec 20, and letter, Dec 23). I remember reading an old copy of the *Windsor Magazine* from about

1920 which included a story entitled "Old Fritz", written by a British veteran. The eponymous character was a portly middle-aged German soldier on a quiet sector of the front during the early years of the war. He could clearly be seen in the distance by British soldiers each morning, bringing a small milk churn up to the enemy line. By common consent, no sniper ever took a pot shot at him.

The tale ended ominously: how long did the "old cove" survive after the author's company was rotated one night and replaced by another?
CHRISTOPHER GOULDING
Newcastle upon Tyne

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1914 THE FIRST WORLD WAR 1918

ON THIS DAY DECEMBER 25, 1916

THE THIRD WARTIME CHRISTMAS

While few yesterday could sincerely wish their neighbours "a merry Christmas" and festivities were never more subdued, there was a fine spirit abroad. Those who denied themselves accustomed luxuries looked forward to a Christmas yet to come where the cloud of sorrow shall have been dispersed. Where there were vacant chairs wives and mothers let their thoughts look ahead to the return of the men who

had gone out to battle. Somehow the knowledge that the nation is at last really uniting to win the war brought confidence and hope, which gave the third war Christmas its own quality and its own cheerfulness.

In the early hours of the morning a sudden wind arose, followed by a fall of snow. At daybreak roofs and gardens in the suburbs had a thin white covering, like an old-fashioned Yuletide. The snow did not last but the cold morning did not prevent a fine swimming race in the Serpentine for the Peter Pan cup.

Above all it was a stay-at-home Christmas Day. The only crowded trains were the leave trains from France. Four came into Victoria during the early part of the day and hundreds of trench-stained men stepped gleefully into the London streets prepared to enjoy every hour of a well-earned holiday. It was noticed that some went straight from the station to the afternoon service at Westminster Abbey. There was a reverse side to the leave picture. Several trains took away men whose days of freedom were completed.

The happiest homes were those where soldiers were enjoying leave. There — if the money could be found — no compunction was felt over feasting on turkey and the luxuries of the season. For the lonely soldiers many entertainments had been arranged. In every YMCA hut in London soldiers and sailors were welcomed to dinner and tea.

On Christmas Day the interned German civilians were allowed to receive their wives and children. At the Alexandra Palace 10 days before and after Christmas have been set apart for visits. Entertainments have been arranged by the inmates, and as there are not a few men of means among them, they have been able to supplement the official rations. Many thousands of women and children visited on Saturday, when festivities were permitted to be kept up until 11 o'clock at night.

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Arthurian mystery

Sir, Anyone with knowledge of the historical background to Arthurian legend will be mystified by Professor Anderson's implication that Arthur was a medieval ruler (letter, Dec 22). The most widely accepted theory is that the "real" Arthur (if indeed he even existed) was not a king but a charismatic Romano-British war leader who died in battle early in the 6th century — some 700 years before we are told the Latin word *camelotian* first appeared.

ROGALIND KERVEN
Author, *Arthurian Legends*
Morpeth, Northumberland

GP funding lottery

Sir, The GP funding formula is not fit for purpose ("Patients suffer in GP funding lottery", Dec 22). Doctors need to be paid for what they do, not for having patients on their books. The unfortunate truth is that such a model would drive efficiencies and create more appointments. More work would equal more money — a concept yet to see the light of day in the NHS — but the government would be left with a hefty bill (and historically it has been reluctant to pay).

DR ALEXANDER BARBER
Camberley, Surrey

Fracking consent

Sir, The High Court has ruled that fracking may go ahead in Ryedale in North Yorkshire (report, Dec 21). Let us hope that 2017 marks the turning of the tide, and instead of importing more and more gas from abroad we can gradually become self-sufficient again. If fracking stops us from turning to Russia for gas in the next decade it will be an added benefit.

RAY COPE
Former director of the Gas
Consumers Council, Langford Beds

Passenger safety

Sir, Frances O'Grady is right to argue that two seconds is insufficient time for a train driver to check 24 cameras for passenger safety before driving away (Dec 23). But, by the same logic, two seconds must also be too short for a guard or train manager to carry out the same checks. Surely the real solution is to adjust the performance standards and schedules to allow 10 or 15 seconds for proper monitoring, who does the checking is a subsidiary issue.

MALCOLM OLIVER
Edinburgh

Bedtime at Ikea

Sir, I can completely understand the trend towards sleepovers in Ikea ("Pack it in, Ikea tells sleepover pranksters", Dec 23). On each occasion that I have entered an Ikea store, and got stuck in its one-way system, it has seemed unlikely that I would get out again before bedtime.

CHRISTOPHER WHEELDON
Worcester Park, Surrey

Extraordinary eggs

Sir, I was passing a cottage a few days ago and outside was a board with these words: "For Sale Osgarmic Eggs." As I am in my seventies I thought I must stop and buy as many as possible. I always keep a £10 note in the ashtray of my car, but sadly on this occasion it was empty.

T J BELL
Midsomer Norton, Somerset