



ESTABLISHED 1855

A knee-jerk defence of the struggling NHS

Donald Trump is not making his long-delayed visit to the UK any easier. Last year he was denounced for retweeting an anti-Muslim video from a far-Right British organisation and he then pulled out of a planned trip to London to open the new US embassy.

Nonetheless, at Davos, Theresa May – who had criticised that earlier tweet – reissued her invitation to the president to come to Britain later this year, only to be confounded once again by Mr Trump’s tweeting. In order to make a point about healthcare in America, he issued a message saying “thousands of people marching in the UK because their U (universal) system going broke and not working.” There has been outrage at the president’s apparent insult to the NHS, with ministers falling over themselves to say how much they love it. Mrs May said she was “proud” of it.

Only in Britain is it necessary to fetishise the way we deliver healthcare. In Nigel Lawson’s words, the NHS is the nearest thing we have to a national religion and woe betide anyone who criticises it, especially if he is a foreigner. To do so is a heresy even if it is true – especially if it is true.

The fact is the NHS is going broke, or at least it does not have enough money to function properly – something even most of the Cabinet seems to agree on. In many ways it is not working either, or not as well as it should. Thousands did march last week, principally to complain that the Government was not funding the NHS sufficiently. But so voracious is its appetite and so great expectations and demand that it is hard to know how much extra would ever be enough.

Instead of treating any criticism of the NHS as an assault on national amour propre, the country would be better served by politicians who stopped pretending it is the “envy of the world” and put in place a plan for its survival for another 70 years.

Mr Trump was wrong to single out the NHS as though it is a unique example of a universal health service. Many countries have them; and they are better than the American system, which leaves so many people out in the cold. But it would work so much better if we were prepared to adopt more systematically the best practices from around the world and even from within the NHS itself. In view of the problems it is facing, not least with elderly care, pretending that it is a word-beating system that should be immune from criticism is an act of wilful national denial.

Freedom of the press

Theresa May is worried about the future of the press. Newspapers are central to our democracy yet face commercial pressures greater than at any time in their history. But while the Prime Minister’s concern is well intentioned, we need to be convinced that a government review is what is required. The danger with any state inquiry into the press is that it risks becoming a way of controlling or influencing it.

There are several measures the Government could take that would help revive newspapers – and especially local publications – without a review. First, it could reverse the tendency for councils to make most of their decisions behind closed doors and allow their deliberations to be reported on fully.

Second, public servants, such as the police, military and others who in the past were happy to talk to newspapers, should be encouraged to do so once more. Since the Leveson inquiry into newspaper ethics, these contacts have almost ceased, to the detriment of good public discourse.

Third, the threat of another Leveson inquiry should be lifted and a measure passed by the Lords to force newspapers to sign up to a state-backed regulator faced down in the Commons. Fourth, the BBC should be pressed to restrict its incursion into the territory of local papers.

The government review is to examine the best sustainable funding models to underpin quality journalism; but at the risk of sounding churlish, we question whether that is the state’s job. Competition for advertising revenues from new media is enormous. But in an era of “fake news”, many people trust the press more, provided it can function freely and without favour.

The best of Essex

When the oyster smack Vanguard set out from Burnham-on-Crouch for Dunkirk, it had never taken to the open sea before. The 45ft vessel was built to manoeuvre in the rivers of the east coast, and would have rolled intolerably in a fresh breeze. But Vanguard’s shallow draught and open deck close to the waterline made her ideal for picking up soldiers from the beach. Under attack from the air, it helped to ferry 600 men to the larger ships standing off the shore. It saw a sailing ketch from Burnham founder on the beach. A fellow oyster boat from those Dunkirk days was later broken up. The brave little Vanguard alone survived, to be discovered in a Canvey Island boatyard being cannibalised for firewood. A group of enthusiasts is now working to restore it. It shows what Essex at its best is made of.



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Politicians shouldn’t forget so soon the value of the Royal Marines

SIR – You report (February 4) on the proposed cuts to the Royal Marines. I served 25 years with the Marines. During this time I was appointed chief instructor, Special Forces, not long after they embarked on joint training for basic selection. This gave me a great understanding of what the Marines are capable of, as well as of the requirements of the Special Air Service (SAS) and the Special Reconnaissance Regiment.

Few people know about the make-up of these regiments, but the Marines play a key role in all of them. The Special Boat Service is made up almost entirely of Marines, as well as up to half of the Special Reconnaissance Regiment and, along with Commando-trained gunners and Royal Engineers, much of the SAS. These young Marines usually leave the forces after between five and 10 years. Some, before doing so, have a stab at selection for the Special Forces. If we weaken the Marines, we cut off lifeblood to the Special Forces too. Politicians do not appreciate the

years of work – dating back to the Second World War – that have gone into creating this very adaptable group of soldiers. This was apparent in 1981 when John Nott, the defence secretary at the time, came to RM Poole in Dorset. His aim was to disband either the Special Boat Squadron (as it was then) or a squadron of the SAS.

He was simply looking at the figures, not the combat indicators: the Argentine government had been sabre-rattling for a while, yet Britain was making cuts. Ironically, by 1982, he was desperate for the Special Forces to save his face when Argentina occupied the Falklands.

Just because 35 years have passed, that does not mean we can revert to cuts. If anyone tries to tell me that the world is safer now than it was 1982, I know which medical department I will recommend.

Michael McCarthy
Poole, Dorset

SIR – In 1950, the US defence budget was being pruned savagely from its

wartime highs. Inter-service rivalry was inevitable. General Omar Bradley (who brought into being the 82nd Airborne Division) doubted that there would be “a future need for amphibious missions” – and believed the marines could be much reduced.

When US forces had almost been driven off the Korean Peninsula, General Douglas MacArthur launched an amphibious landing at Inchon behind the enemy. Its success paved the way for pushing the North Koreans beyond the 38th parallel.

Had General Bradley and his supporters had their way, this operation would probably have been impossible. Those who ponder cutting the Royal Marines and their landing ships should read some history.

David L Ross
Tiverton, Devon

SIR – Cancel the Trident upgrade and spend the money on our conventional forces, including the Marines.

William Cook
Blandford, Dorset

Suffragette violence

SIR – It seems somewhat ironic that we should be celebrating the suffragette movement’s success in achieving votes for women (report, February 6) when bombs were planted to further their cause, yet we condemn as terrorists other people for trying to further their deeply held convictions by violence.

LM Mears
Cambridge

SIR – Many people are celebrating the activities of the suffragettes in getting women the vote in 1918. This may have been the case, but not in the way they think.

In 1968, the 50th anniversary, I was taught about the suffragettes at school, only to be corrected by my grandmother, a former suffragist.

“Mrs Pankhurst, dreadful woman,” she told me. “If it hadn’t been for her, we would have had the vote in 1910.”

Gordon Le Pard
Dorchester

SIR – The most important way of commemorating the Representation of the People Act 1918 and subsequent legislation is to make a lifelong habit of always using one’s vote.

Christine Whild
Abingdon, Oxfordshire

Cluttered pavements

SIR – In recent years there has been a proliferation of broadband cabinets located directly in the curtilage of pavements. These pose a real hazard to disabled people, runners and cyclists where the pavements are dual use.

The Government needs to take immediate action to prevent further despoilment of pavements, especially before the planned roll-out of fibre-optic broadband to houses.

If we are to have a truly people-friendly environment, all those boxes will one day have to be relocated somewhere more sensible. I hate to think of the cost of doing so. At least stop the potential escalation of such future expenditure now.

Robert Hale
Evesham, Worcestershire

Lobster slush

SIR – With great respect to Don Webber (“The kindest way to cook your lobster”, Letters, February 5), who first puts a live lobster into the freezer, the RSPCA is hardly an authority on cooking. The best way to turn your expensive lobster into a tasteless mush is to boil it from frozen.

Nicky Samengo-Turner
Hundon, Suffolk

A crackdown by the security minister on Russian oligarchs shows their activities are flagrant

CON COUGHLIN



As with most television dramas, there are aspects of the plot line of the BBC’s *McMafia* series that stretch the bounds of credulity. The notion that a public school-educated wimp like Alex Godman (played by the underwhelming James Norton) could find himself caught up in a network of villains comprising Russian oligarchs, Indian drug-dealers and Israeli money-launderers all seems a bit far-fetched. Real-life oligarchs associated with Vladimir Putin’s Kremlin, surely, are more preoccupied with maintaining their interests in Russia than breaking into new markets such as the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent.

But then, to judge by the grave warnings issued by Ben Wallace, the security minister, we do need to pay far closer attention to the antics of Russian oligarchs. Mr Wallace knows a thing or two about the threat Russia poses to our security from the time he spent serving as a Scots Guards officer



Fruits of their labour: picking bitter Seville oranges in January for export to Britain

Seville oranges are not just for marmalade

SIR – Philip Hale (Letters, February 5) wonders how else he can use Seville oranges, apart from making marmalade.

It is quick, easy and very worthwhile to make wine.

Terry Lowe
Dorking, Surrey

SIR – Bitter oranges would originally have been used in duck à l’orange, which I made recently with a mallard.

I serve Seville orange butter sauce

with Brill. I even dry strips of the peel for adding to beef casseroles.

Suzanne Wynn
Blagdon, Somerset

SIR – Mr Hale could try freezing the zest and juice of Seville oranges for use later in the year.

This can be used in place of lemons in puddings and cakes.

Seville orange meringue pie is delicious.

Barbara Thomas
Southampton

Anna Soubry stood on a Tory Brexit manifesto

SIR – I am surprised at Anna Soubry’s reaction to Brexit negotiations (“Anna Soubry threat to quit Conservative Party,” report, February 6).

Before the referendum, we were told by the Government that to vote Leave would involve leaving the customs union and single market, and that the results would be catastrophic.

Nevertheless, the country voted to leave the EU. Both major parties accepted the result and began implementation of the process. Those who still refused to accept the result could challenge this by voting again in the last election for one of the parties that had not accepted the result.

Did Anna Soubry not accept the implications of that referendum when she stood as a Conservative candidate at the last election?

Elizabeth Davies
Corsham, Wiltshire

SIR – Does Anna Soubry not realise the

irony in pining for a “One Nation” Tory party while preferring to be governed by 27 nations?

Helen Roberts
High Peak, Derbyshire

SIR – Anna Soubry wants hardline Brexiters flung out of the Conservative Party because they are “not Tories”.

As an ordinary party member, I know whom I would rather see flung out.

Mark Hudson
Ashford, Kent

SIR – Following Anna Soubry’s declaration that she could not be a member of the Conservatives under the leadership of either Jacob Rees-Mogg or Boris Johnson, may I be the first to offer to pay her subscription to the Liberal Democrats.

Philip Fawkes
Bank, Hampshire

Enjoying McMafia? The real thing is on here

A crackdown by the security minister on Russian oligarchs shows their activities are flagrant

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But then, to judge by the grave warnings issued by Ben Wallace, the security minister, we do need to pay far closer attention to the antics of Russian oligarchs. Mr Wallace knows a thing or two about the threat Russia poses to our security from the time he spent serving as a Scots Guards officer

in Germany. And he wants to crack down on the wilder excesses of oligarchs who operate in the UK.

In what officials are calling a “full spectrum” attack on those suspected of corruption or links to organised crime, Mr Wallace intends to use orders to seize their assets. This could have a serious impact on the capital’s property market given that, in recent years, an estimated one in 10 homes in prime central London have been bought by Russians.

Mr Wallace’s initiative is also well-timed, as the issue is prominent in many people’s mind as they seek escape from dull winter nights by watching *McMafia*. This stringent approach, moreover, is vital if the British authorities are finally going to get a grip on the more nefarious activities of some of Mr Putin’s acolytes.

Previously, most of the attention has been on the murders and deaths in unexplained circumstances that have afflicted UK-based members of the oligarch community, who seem unusually prone to falling from hotel balconies or dying suddenly after ingesting suspicious substances. A recent report suggested American and British intelligence officials believe 14 deaths in the UK could be related to Russian assassins.

But British security officials have also expressed concern about the relative ease with which Russian businessmen who are known to have close ties with Mr Putin are able to operate in the City of London. For

example, Sir Mike Penning, a former defence minister, has tabled two parliamentary questions to Chancellor Philip Hammond and Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson about the implications the flotation of a Russian energy company on the London Stock Exchange (LSE) at the end of last year might have for our national security requirements.

Raising foreign capital has become an obsession for the Kremlin since Russia was hit with sanctions following its annexation of Crimea. So Britain’s security establishment, which regards Mr Putin’s Russia as posing a grave threat, was surprised at the ease with which Oleg Deripaska, the Russian billionaire who is a good friend of Mr Putin, was able to float his energy company, En+, in the first major Russian flotation following the imposition of sanctions in 2014.

Mr Deripaska, one of Russia’s wealthiest men, is best known in Britain for inviting George Osborne for drinks on his yacht in 2008, sparking accusations – furiously denied – that the former chancellor (who now edits the Russian-owned *Evening Standard*) was seeking a donation for party funds.

Apart from being Russia’s largest energy supplier, En+ owns Rusal, the country’s major aluminium producer. Rusal produces high grade aluminium powder of the type used in the manufacture of Russian warplanes and missiles, such as the Buk anti-aircraft missile system which is blamed for shooting down Malaysia

Old-age malnutrition

SIR – You report (February 5) that increasing numbers of NHS patients are recorded as suffering from malnutrition at the time of death.

My mother died on Boxing Day in a wonderful nursing home in Rugby. My visits often coincided with her meal times. I would take over from the carer, and it would often take 30-40 minutes to get half her puréed lunch into her as she was so frail. It is impossible for busy nurses to devote this much time to feeding one patient.

In the Sixties and Seventies my aunt was employed as an auxiliary nurse.

Her sole job was to make sure the patients were clean, comfortable and fed. One does not need a nursing degree to help people in this way – just patience and kindness.

Eleanor Taylor
Rugby, Warwickshire

Political civil servants

SIR – Juliet Samuel (“Instead of attacking mandarins, Brexiters must make their case”, Comment, February 5) is, as usual, generally right.

However, we need to be realistic about institutional attitudes in favour of the evolving European Union, ingrained by training and absorption in the civil service over the past 40 years.

Speeches on the EU (Withdrawal) Bill made by former secretaries to the Cabinet (heads of the Civil Service) make my point. Lord Butler even stated that repealing the 1972 European Communities Act “strikes a dagger to my soul”.

On Sunday, BBC Parliament screened *Inside Number 10*, in which Lord Armstrong of Ilminster described how he’d have resigned over Brexit.

Key civil servants, such as Con O’Neill, John Robinson and Eric Roll, were personally totally committed to the European Project, as shown by recorded interviews for *The Price of Victory* (BBC, 1983) and Hugo Young’s book *This Blessed Plot*. For example, in 1971, one civil servant said: “This is the end of British democracy ... but if it is properly handled the people won’t know what’s happened until the end of the century ... By then I’ll be dead.”

During the enactment of the Referendum Act in December 2015, I obtained an assurance on the floor of the House from the Government that “information” authorised by statute would be impartial. However, White Papers written by civil servants (including Lord Macpherson, the Permanent Secretary to the Treasury until March 2016, who yesterday invoked “speaking truth to power”) became Project Fear.

Sir William Cash MP (Con)
London SW1

Put it in plastic

SIR – As someone who is proud to have worked in the packaging industry, I am astonished at the unscientific claims by those who seek to persuade us that plastic packaging need be bad.

Modern packaging using plastics has helped reduce food spoilage in the industrialised world to around 2 per cent, in contrast to 30-50 per cent in developing countries.

I wish to have presentable food that can be stored safely. Plastic packaging delivers just that.

AV Freer
Leicester

SIR – In December 1970, as a student temporarily employed by Royal Mail, I was called upon to deliver a chicken on my round, with nothing but the address label tied around its neck.

It was at least dead, and I remember hoping that this was indeed the condition in which it entered our national postal system.

JD Newman
Hinckley, Leicestershire

Airlines flight 17 over Ukraine in July 2014.

Mr Deripaska is estimated to have raised around \$1 billion from last November’s float. En+ later announced that it had used almost the entire amount to pay off debts it owed to the government-owned VTB Bank. The bank is one of many Russian financial institutions subject to US sanctions, so one accusation that can be levelled is that, by allowing the En+ flotation on the LSE to go ahead, Britain has inadvertently helped Russian banks to evade sanctions.

British security officials, though, who continue to take a close interest in Rusal’s relationship with the Russian military, are equally concerned about the apparent lack of oversight applied to what was clearly a contentious financial undertaking.

As one Whitehall security veteran told me: “The really worrying aspect of this affair is that no one seems to have considered the national security implications of allowing this flotation to go ahead.”

Now that politicians of all stripes – Liberal Democrat MP Tom Brake has also raised the issue in the Commons – are questioning the flotation, perhaps more care will be taken in future when considering Russian activity in the City.



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