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Wednesday 12 March 2008

Letters: Children's happiness

Children's happiness lost among the targets and tick-boxes

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Sir: I am pleased to read that the Association of Teachers and Lecturers is concerned about children's happiness (report, 11 March). So many Government targets and tests culminating in examinations at 16 put

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pressure on pupils, reducing the opportunities for teachers' creativity. The national curriculum regards education as a means of turning out people fit for employment rather than developing children's potential. Are children being treated as numbers to enable the nation to compete with developing nations such as India and China, rather than treating them as human beings?

Mike Pictor

Cheltenham, Gloucestershire

Sir: I have recently registered as a childminder and have been reading lots of the government material about young children. This literature is full of words such as "achieve", and laced with jargon, but very short on ideas of love, contentment or happiness. I searched the Sure Start introduction to the "Birth to Three Matters" Framework and the words "happy" and "enjoyment" do not appear once.

Children are now so many boxes to be ticked. There are no boxes for happiness. What doesn't get measured doesn't happen. It's no surprise that children are unhappy. The powers that be don't care if they're happy, only if they've gained certain skills by a certain age.

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You don't read a book to enjoy it any more, you read it to achieve early reading skills. The whole of pre-school and school is now like this, and – surprise, surprise – it's not a very enjoyable way to be brought up.

Susan Taylor

Leeds

Sir: One of the main elements causing the pressure on children in our schools is the persistent emphasis on competition. So what has the Government done? It has produced a "Children's Plan, dedicated to making England the best place in the world for our children to grow up". Says it all, doesn't it?

Graham Griffiths

Bury, Lancashire

Coal power imperils climate strategy

Sir: If John Hutton is signalling he will allow a set of new and entirely unabated coal plants to be built, the UK's climate strategy will be up in smoke ("Back to black", 10 March).

Building new coal plants now without carbon capture from the outset will do nothing to curb coal plants being built in China. It will do nothing to help the dramatic scale-up of renewables to meet a target announced just a month ago. It will not boost energy efficiency nor will it bring carbon capture technology a day closer.

Above all, it will threaten to push us beyond dangerous climate tipping points, putting the poorest and most vulnerable around the world at risk and threatening our long-term economic wellbeing. Gordon Brown must step in and say no to unabated new coal plants and yes to a clean, green energy future.

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Sir: Once again, the Government has fuelled expectations of a "green budget"; but whether or not any rise in the rate of Vehicle Excise Duty (VED) is deferred, it looks set to be no more than a tax-hiking ruse disguised as greenery. A leaked Treasury memo has detailed how the zero-carbon VED cut will disappear as soon as eligible vehicles become available. This kind of cynical exploitation of environmental concerns in order to justify stealth taxes is becoming a serious obstacle to public acceptance of green taxation.

John Hutton's backing, reported in this paper, for the proposed Kingsnorth coal power plant, couched in the language of "clean coal", and "carbon capture and storage ready", is yet another ruse. This is not "clean coal". It will emit 10 million tonnes of carbon pollution into our atmosphere every year. There is no obligation upon the developer to make the plant CCS ready to any stipulated standard or by any

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designated date, nor is it yet known if the taxpayer or the developer will have to pay for the retrofitting.

This decision abdicates Britain's responsibility as an international leader on climate change, it makes a mockery of our national carbon pollution reduction targets and it will give away the UK's economic advantage on CCS to other countries, as we procrastinate for years around the Government's CCS pilot project competition, which has upset both industry and environmentalists by its lack of ambition.

We need a new political vision if we are successfully to challenge the climate crisis whilst still enhancing our economy and ensuring Britain's future energy security. Unabated coal is yesterday's technology. We must instead embrace change and choose 21st-century solutions to a 21st-century problem.

Peter Ainsworth MP

Shadow Secretary of State for the Environment, House of Commons

Sir: The Government is quite right to support the building of the first of a new generation of supercritical coal-fired power stations at Kingsnorth in Kent.

It is not worried by "fluctuations in the supply" that your editorial so misleadingly refers to, but the massive 22GW electricity capacity shortage that is predicted for 2016 – about 30 per cent of present UK capacity. Of this shortage, 11GW comes from old and less efficient coal-fired power stations that must close because of their emissions by 2016.

The Government is replacing old and dirty coal power stations with new ones that produce 20 per cent less CO₂. Furthermore, these new plants will be carbon-capture ready.

Rather than mothballing this technology as you suggest, and pretending that we can get by without fossil fuels, we should recognise that they will continue to play a part in a diverse energy supply for a very long time

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(250 years in the case of coal), and we should encourage the development of carbon capture technology, which includes replacing old power stations with ones that can actually use it.

Carbon capture and storage is not unproven – 1 million tonnes of CO₂ are buried in the Norwegian Sleipner gas field every year and similar amounts are used to recover oil in Canada. Your newspaper could help the environment more by bringing lost opportunities for carbon storage to the public attention, such as BP's Decarbonised Fuel-1 project, rather than by doom-and-gloom headlines.

Dr Manus Hayne

Department of Physics, Lancaster University

Palestinian sadness at killing of students

Sir: As a Brit based in the West Bank city of Hebron and working as a human rights observer, I can say that the recent murder of the Mercaz Harav yeshiva students in Jerusalem has been greeted with sadness by Palestinians here.

Such acts are illegal under international law and any loss of life in this conflict is tragic. Most Palestinians do not want to see the cycle of violence and bloodshed continue.

But for many Palestinians, the condemnation of the yeshiva killings by the international community, compared with what they view as international silence over the blockade and the deaths of 100-plus Palestinians in Gaza including some 25 children, reflects that their lives are worth less than those of Israelis.

Donald Macintyre ("Tearful eulogies for the victims, anger at the weakness of Israel's leaders", 8 March) rightly points to Mercaz Harav as being the spiritual backbone of the Jewish settlements in the occupied West Bank.



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In Hebron, where 20 per cent of the city is under Israeli control, some 40,000 Palestinians have every aspect of their daily lives controlled by the presence of 400-500 Israeli settlers and around 2,000 Israeli soldiers. Restrictions on movement, a policy of separation and discrimination by the Israeli Defence Force and settler violence has led to the destruction of the city's commercial centre. Hundreds of shops have closed and many hundreds of families have been forced to leave their homes.

Settlements, which are illegal under international law, remain at the core of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and a major barrier to a peace agreement and the existence of a viable future Palestinian state.

Sultana Begum

Hebron, West Bank

Sir: M A Baig complains that the western media is ignoring the Israeli reprisal in Gaza and over-reporting the slaughter in Jerusalem (Letters, 8 March).

It is important to remember that the Israeli army fought in Gaza against armed combatants. They were hiding among civilians. The Geneva Convention states: "The presence of a protected person may not be used to render certain points or areas immune from military operations." Which means that when the Hamas combatants fire their weapons and hide among civilians they are not immune from attack. And if civilians get hurt, the responsibility lies with those who hide among civilians and endanger their lives.

On the other hand, in Jerusalem, the heavily armed "militant" entered a high school library and started shooting, killing eight and wounding many others. It is unfortunate that Baig is unable or unwilling to see the difference.

Dr Jacob Amir

Jerusalem



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Where to draw the line on Europe

Sir: The obstacle in the way of a statement of the powers of the EU as clear as Simon Carr would like (10 March) lies not in Brussels but in the national capitals. The division of powers between the EU and the member states has to be agreed unanimously by all 27 of them, and clarity and simplicity will come only when each national government resists the temptation to insist on small changes that it thinks would be popular back home.

We are still waiting for that day. The Lisbon Treaty is undoubtedly an improvement on its predecessors. But there is still work to be done.

Richard Laming

Director, Federal Union, London SE1

Sir: The Lib Dems were quite right to call for a referendum on the EU. There are more than enough grounds. Both the Constitution and the Lisbon Treaty are a cop-out which besmirch the European project. Red lines are simply an excuse to opt out of things out of pure self-interest.

The Lib Dems put their pro-Europeanism on the line to give the electorate a voice. The other parties haven't the guts to put anything on the line.

Stephen Jackson

Bexhill on Sea, East Sussex

Sir: I was surprised to read Lembit Opik (My Week in Media, 10 March) admit that he voted with Nick Clegg "because he is an expert on Europe and I didn't want to read the 200 pages of the EU Treaty myself." It would be interesting to know how many MPs could be bothered to read the document before voting on it on our behalf.

Charles Hopkins

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Managing to save English heathland

Sir: Tim Williams mistakenly suggests that we are converting his local heathland into a bare wasteland (Letter: "Misguided attempts to manage nature", 7 March). In fact, this is an excellent example of how our agri-environment schemes are being used to transform a vulnerable habitat for the benefit of both people and wildlife. Many of England's lowland heaths are under severe pressure, including the heathlands of Dorset, which support rare species such as marsh gentian, sand lizards, smooth snake, Dartford warbler, wood lark and nightjar.

The positive management of degraded heathland can involve the loss of some areas of pine, birch and rhododendron thickets. However, this is a price worth paying for the enhancement of a globally rare and fragile habitat that provides valuable green space for local people and tourism appeal.

Sir Martin Doughty

Chair, Natural England, London SE1

Briefly...

Political debt

Sir: Now that New Labour has appointed a hedge fund manager as its new general secretary, can we expect its privatisation soon, or has that already happened? I also see that they owe millions of pounds to my bank, the Co-op bank. I am today writing to my bank suggesting we put them into administration and make them financially as well as politically bankrupt.

Hugh Kerr

Edinburgh

Addicts are equal

Sir: "Celebrity drug-takers need help, not jail," said the headline on Deborah Orr's column on 8 March. I yearned to add: "So do ordinary drug-takers." The unfairness of ordinary people who get caught up in addiction being regularly jailed, while no celebrity ever goes to prison, is another example of today's totally unjust society.

Diana Robinson

Leeds

War on plastic

Sir: I was impressed by the efforts of Catherine Eade ("Plastic? No thanks", 8 March) to reduce the plastic she buys. However, I'm not sure why she didn't mention buying milk from a milkman who delivers in reusable glass bottles. I also get my organic fruit and vegetables from the milkman in cardboard boxes. This service is underused and is great for reducing consumption of plastics. Long live the milk delivery service with its glass bottles.

Alexandra Murrell

London SE17

Road congestion

Sir: Ruth Kelly has stated that some motorways will be "broadened" by allowing motorists to use the hard shoulder. The effect of the broadening will be to make motorways more dangerous. Ambulances and police cars will not be able to reach the scene of an accident when the hard shoulders are blocked by halted vehicles.

George Huxley

Church Enstone, Oxfordshire

Welsh stars

Sir: How can Andy McSmith write a double-page spread on the sporting and cultural renaissance in Wales (11 March) and fail to mention Doctor Who? Not only is Doctor Who filmed and produced in Cardiff, it also owes its successful resurrection to writer and executive producer Russell T Davies, who happens to be, er, Welsh.

Martyn P Jackson

Cramlington, Northumberland ■

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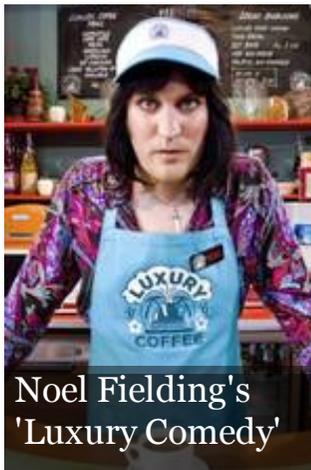
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