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Saturday 13 October 2007

Letters: Free-range children

We must reclaim the world outside for free-range children

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Sir: Our children may not be as dependent on TV, computer games and mobiles as adults fear – as long as there is a more interesting alternative

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("The pain of a generation forced to grow up before their time", 12 October).

Last week I took 25 children aged nine to 11 from Wembley to Brent's Gordon Brown (no relation) Outdoor Education Centre in Hampshire. In a packed programme of environmental education, canoeing, trim trails, a low-rope course, paddling in fords, night-time torch games and plenty of opportunities to play independently in the centre's acres of woodland and meadows, not one child mentioned missing TV or other techno-entertainment.

Evaluating the programme around the campfire at the end of the week the children spoke about learning to try food they had not eaten before, facing their fears and being brave, becoming a stronger person, learning to be alone, taking responsibility for looking after themselves, discovering "you can meet nice people wherever you go", and that "nature is good and all around us". As a result of their studies the children all made specific pledges to reduce their individual carbon footprints – a small step but one that enables them to do something practical about the impact of global warming and overcome their feelings of helplessness.

The governing body of the children's school recognises the importance of such residential trips, academically and socially

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importance of such residential trips, academically and socially, and subsidises them. However children's "free range" activities should not be restricted to one residential trip during primary school. Instead we need to take a leaf from the 1970s Women's Movement and start a campaign to Reclaim the Streets – this time for our children.

Martin Francis

Wembley, Middlesex

Sir: The news that Britain's schoolchildren are stressed and unhappy isn't surprising. They can sit having their tea at six o'clock while filling their eyes and ears with graphic information about paedophiles, torturers, rapists and general carnage and brutality.

We all know that the world is a hard place, but children should be allowed to learn that in their own time and at their own pace. The media, especially television, has a lot to answer for.

Sheila Corbishley

Newcastle upon Tyne

Lessons of dirty hospital scandal

Sir: If 1,100 sick children had fallen prey to an infection that hastened 345 deaths among them, misplaced priorities wouldn't be the only source of criticism. Every person who witnessed and contributed to the neglect would have been held culpable, if only for a lack of basic humanity, hygiene and common sense.

This is what the Maidstone scandal is about. Let's stop pussyfooting around the ill-treatment of sick and vulnerable adults and face up to the fact that our society is unwilling to challenge and punish it as we do the neglect and abuse of children. Our humanity is the same from birth to death whatever our capacities. Old people are adults citizens whose



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death whatever our capacities. Old people are adults, citizens whose rights and dignity should never be compromised because of their age or infirmity.

For those of us who are "old" but in no way vulnerable it is time to look at what we each can do to challenge attitudes and practice.

Paula Jones

London SW20

Sir: Dominic Lawson does not mention two very important points in his article "Dirty hospitals and a crippled Royal Mail add up to a deep malaise in public services" (12 October).

It's very easy for independent treatment centres to have a low MRSA rate. They simply refuse to treat anyone who is MRSA-positive. This has happened to many of my patients and I believe it to be discrimination. What would happen if all hospitals had the same policy?

If the Kent and East Sussex had closed wards and cancelled operations in order to deal with the C. difficile outbreak would they have got any financial help from central government and any co-operation from the local population when people were told their operations would have to be cancelled?

Sooner or later you have to rob Peter to pay Paul and this is the debate the public should be having and the media should be facilitating.

Harriet Tullberg

General Practitioner, Bodmin, Cornwall

Sir: Jeremy Laurance's analysis of the difficulties in cleaning hospitals (12 October) ignores some crucial points. Cleaning is not a high-status occupation in this country. It requires little training and there is an assumption that anyone can do it. Moreover, the privatisation of cleaning services means that cleaners' first responsibility is to please their

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employers rather than ensure that they actually clean (as opposed to moving the dirt around).

During a visit to a hospital in Finland I remarked on the standard of cleanliness. I was informed that becoming a cleaner required a college education, at diploma level, and specialisation in fields such as public transport, hospitals and hotels.

One morning the cleaning staff invited me to breakfast in their "cleaners' cupboard", a large, spotless room in which all their equipment was cleaned daily after use and put away neatly. When I told them what a "cleaners' cupboard" normally amounted to in the UK they were disgusted, asking me whether anyone cared about the standards of their work or realised that what they did as cleaners was an important part of patient care. There was a real sense of pride in what they did that is noticeably lacking in the UK.

Doctors and nurses understand the need for hand-washing but the cleaning of wards, equipment, beds, mattresses and pillows is also essential.

Paula McGee

Professor of Nursing, Birmingham City University

Sir: We know what MPs are paid, what nurses are paid and what doctors are paid, but when it comes to Chief Executives at the Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells NHS trust, "financial arrangements are confidential" (report, 12 October).

Fabian Acker

London SE22

Sir: I am very glad to hear that "lessons have been learned" by the Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells NHS Trust after the recent scandal involving the large-scale infection and poor treatment of patients. After

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all, having existed for only a few hundred years, health care is obviously a new practice and there are bound to be teething problems.

Laurence Williams

THETFORD, Norfolk

Repression in Burma challenges Europe

Sir: As the brutal repression of the Burmese people continues ("Only now, the full horror of Burmese repression of monks emerges", October 11) the prospect of a strong and unequivocal European Union response appears to be tragically receding as member states prevaricate about the need to agree targeted economic sanctions.

When EU foreign ministers meet in Luxembourg next week, the European Union's subscription to human rights will be severely questioned if there isn't a clear signal that the recent events in Burma deserve a robust European response.

That means strengthened sanctions on individuals and on imports of commodities such as gems, timber and metals, and I know the United Kingdom Government is working tirelessly for a strong European position on this.

So too must there be the prospect of an investment ban if there is no progress on talks – without conditions imposed by the junta – with the opposition and ethnic nationalities.

All those who do business in Burma provide the lifeblood of that odious regime hunkered down in the jungle. Member states of the European Union must stand firm and keep their word. There is no justification for inaction now, of all times, as the brutality persists against those who joined the biggest popular uprising for two decades.

Europe must stand by those who demonstrated with such dignity and who dared to speak out in the face of threat of execution, arbitrary arrest

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Glenys Kinnock MEP

(Labour, Wales) Cardiff

Why US poor vote Republican

Sir: As an American of negligible income who votes Republican, I found Leonard Doyle's attempt to reduce this common phenomenon to the vile philosophy of Ayn Rand rather simplistic ("The guru of greed", 12 October).

As Arthur Brooks showed in Who Really Cares, American conservatives are far more generous than liberals in their personal lives. This is because the religiously committed give (on average) more than three times as much to charity than the uncommitted, and are more likely to be conservative. They also tend to volunteer far more, give blood more readily, and stop to help a stranger more quickly.

Why do many Americans vote conservative? Because we also have a fondness for freedom. The state can, no doubt, do some good, but Mr Doyle should talk to disgruntled American parents, tax payers and home owners and ask if they see any cost to the all-encompassing compassion of the Nanny State.

David Marshall

Oxford

Amis's musings on Islam and violence

Sir: Martin Amis only digs himself deeper ("Amis launches scathing response to accusations of Islamophobia", 12 October).

Had he mused, in a 2006 interview, about the "definite urge – don't you have it? – to say, 'The Jewish community will have to suffer until it gets its house in order.' . . . Curtailing of freedoms. Strip-searching people

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who look like they're Jewish. Discriminatory stuff, until it hurts the whole community . . ." he would never have been invited to take up his current post at the University of Manchester.

His books would no doubt have been pulled from the shelves of all major bookstores, and excuses that he'd been upset at the time by the latest Israeli killing-spree in Lebanon would – quite rightly – have been rejected out of hand. However, in today's climate it seems you can make pretty much whatever statement you like about Muslims and not expect to be challenged by non-Muslims.

Gabriel Carlyle

London N6

Sir: I'm sure he wasn't being ironic, so did Martin Amis pause just momentarily before writing to Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, "The [Muslim] extremists, for now, have the monopoly of violence, intimidation, and self-righteousness."

Did he give a passing thought to the perhaps one million Iraqis who have died and the four million displaced by the violence and intimidation initiated by the self-righteous George Bush and his government?

It's Amis's selectivity when discussing the victims of violence which opens the door to Terry Eagleton's argument that his comments are essentially racist.

Robin Beste

London N10

Modern physics agrees with Genesis

Sir: Although I quite agree with the sentiment of the Rev John Williams' letter (11 October), that the Genesis creation myth is the product of a primitive pre-scientific civilisation, his initial argument about light and the sun and moon is incorrect.

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He states, perfectly logically, that there is a discrepancy between God creating light on the first day, but sun and moon on the fourth. Yet in the current cosmological model something similar did happen: for a billion years the universe was lit in the afterglow of the Big Bang, and it was several hundred million years before the first stars formed (and about 8 billion years before our sun and moon began to coalesce).

So, the light without stars mentioned in scripture is possible and did exist. But unless the ancient Israelites had access to a radio telescope and/or particle accelerator I imagine we can chalk this up to coincidence.

Alex Johnson

Coventry

Artistic indigestion

Sir: Isn't it time that Tracey Emin slowed down and rejoined the real world? All those navel-gazing exhibitions she has attended recently (My Life in a Column, 12 October) can only breed ever more artless work to clutter up the increasing number of commercial spaces taken up by those who try to second guess the investment potential of celebrity kitsch.

Tony Hill

Seaton, Devon

Green terror

Sir: I know that we are encouraged to believe that there are terrorists lurking everywhere, but is Peter Thomas de Cruz (letter, 9 October) really justified in fearing "the wrath of eco-terrorists" if he doesn't use fluorescent lighting in the homes he designs? Or was his use of the term simply a crude slur on those who argue perfectly peacefully that we should be reducing our carbon footprints wherever we can?

Jonathan Wallace

Newcastle upon Tyne

Legacy of divorce

Sir: Dr Meads' claim that offspring of divorced couples are discriminated against under the IHT reforms (letter, 11 October) holds no water. If a couple divorce with, say, a £600,000 joint estate and split it 50:50 they will have £300,000 each, covered by their individual inheritance tax nil rate band, and enough between them to grant their children a tax-free inheritance of £600,000. Whether or not the divorcees choose to pass their estate to the children of the previous relationship is a matter for them, not the tax man.

Lawrence East

London SE10

Climate insurance

Sir: The insurance companies have just threatened to refuse cover for many properties unless the Government unbalances its budget to pay for more sea defences. The insurance industry is the first branch of big business to take climate change seriously because of the threat to their profits. Mr Darling should offer the industry a bargain: he will find more money for flood defences if it will put financial pressure on its customers to reduce pollution and excess energy use.

Jenny Tillyard

SEAFORD, east Sussex

Spaghetti heresy

Sir: I feel I must warn your readers that Tony Pattison (letter, 12 October) is a false prophet, and beg them to shun his words. There is only one true name for His Noodliness, and that is Flying Spaghetti Monster, not the profane "Giant Spaghetti Monster" (I can barely bring

myself to type such blasphemy). The Esoteric Order of the Giant Spaghetti Monster are nothing more than heretics. May you be blessed by the touch of his noodly appendage.

Steven Richmond

Harpenden, Hertfordshire ■

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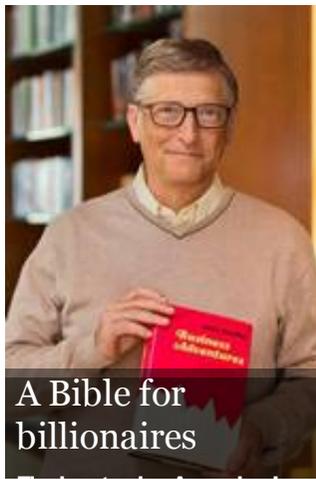




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