

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



Surrogacy ethics

Sir, Surrogacy, whether commercial or not-for-profit, is a hazardous undertaking for both the surrogate and commissioning couple, as Alice Thomson's sobering piece makes clear (Dec 14). The interests of the child should indeed be paramount but it can be difficult to determine, when things go wrong, who would best meet them. Not all surrogate mothers view the baby they have given birth to as "an object to be kept or given away". They may have bonded intensely with the baby and may be traumatised by the thought of handing her or him over to others.

It can be difficult to see who is less fit to be a loving parent: the surrogate who refuses to hand over a child she promised to have for another couple or a couple who reject a commissioned child because it is disabled. The child is after all no less genetically theirs. No surrogacy law can completely get around all the harmful permutations resulting from human selfishness. DR TREVOR STAMMERS Senior lecturer in bioethics, St Mary's University, Twickenham

Degree in policing

Sir, Further to your report "Police recruits must have degrees to tackle complex modern crimes" (Dec 15), a degree in common sense and the ability to communicate with all members of our diverse society are equally important qualifications for our future police officers. Although the possession of a degree offers many advantages, it does not automatically mean that the potential recruit will also be able to cope with the violent reality of frontline policing. Being qualified to face rioters, terrorists and violent members of the public still requires courage and a high level of personal resilience. KEVIN TRUST Walberton, W Sussex

Sir, I entered police training school exactly 50 years ago and was told that the 13-week course was equal to taking a degree course. Later, when supervising officers with degrees, I found that not all had common sense. JOHN CLARK Metropolitan police 1966-96, New Romney, Kent

Corrections and clarifications

● Our report, "Large waists put 92 per cent of women at risk" (News, Dec 9), was based on incorrect figures published by the Department of Health. The number of baby boomer men and women classified as overweight when waist circumference is considered should have been 75 per cent and 80 per cent, not 80 per cent and 92 per cent as the department's original figures said.

We are committed to abiding by the Independent Press Standards Organisation rules and regulations and the Editors' Code of Practice that IPSO enforces. Requests for corrections or clarifications should be sent by email to feedback@thetimes.co.uk or by post to Feedback, The Times, 1 London Bridge Street, London SE1 9GF

Freedom of the press and a state regulator

Sir, Further to David Aaronovitch's article ("A free press must not be bullied by the state", Dec 15), politicians claim freedom of expression as a "British value" — but British politicians have fashioned a system of arbitrary, unfair and unlawful press regulation. There is nothing like it in any modern democracy, and it has been condemned internationally.

In the wake of the Leveson report into media abuse, the powerful celebrity lobby Hacked Off persuaded parliament to amend two bills so as to coerce newspapers into joining a system of regulation by a government-approved regulator — currently, Impress.

Regrettably the press barons failed to replace their weak and ineffective Press Complaints Commission, but that has been done with the Independent Press Standards Organisation, chaired by the former senior judge Sir Alan Moses. He is robustly independent and has urged media proprietors to grant IPSO greater independence to prevent the industry marking its own exams.

IPSO is supported by most of the press and uses its formidable new powers effectively. When the public consultation ends next month, the culture secretary should not invoke section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act. If Hacked Off brings a legal challenge, I predict that the courts will rule that section 40 is arbitrary, unfair and incompatible with a free press.

LORD LESTER OF HERNE HILL, QC Blackstone Chambers, London EC4

Sir, Index on Censorship has published stories by censored writers for more than four decades. Now we ourselves face the prospect of censorship via legal action in the UK. As it stands, legislation on the statute means that we — as an independent publisher that declines to join the press regulator Impress — face the prospect of crippling legal costs, even if we won a case that had been brought against us. Our publication, to which last month the British Society of Magazine Editors gave an "editor of the year" award for its work, could be forced out of business. Any regulation that could potentially bankrupt the media and make investigative journalism too costly to publish should be fiercely resisted.

RACHAEL JOLLEY Editor, Index on Censorship magazine

Sir, As David Aaronovitch points out, the rich often force newspapers to suppress stories that should be published. A newspaper can be hundreds of thousands of pounds out of pocket even if it wins a major law suit. That is precisely the problem that Leveson has solved. When section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act comes into force, a newspaper can respond to threatened litigation by offering inexpensive arbitration. If this is refused, the court can order the aggressor to pay the costs of both sides. This new law strongly reinforces press freedom and should be commenced without delay.

MAX MOSLEY London SW3

Sir, The idea that a newspaper that has elected not to join the state-approved press regulator, and that is recognised before the courts as having been wrongly accused, can nevertheless be forced to bear potentially crippling legal costs (including those of the defeated plaintiff), has obvious implications regarding self-censorship and the sheer sustainability of freedom of speech. We strongly believe that such a rule would be in breach of Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights, and would constitute an attempt to control public debate. If passed in a country that is supposedly a bastion of free speech, it will set a dangerous precedent for media freedoms in other, less democratically established parts of the world.

ELENA PEROTTI World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers

Sir, In my break times as a public sector domestic cleaner on "jam" wages, I always enjoy reading David Aaronovitch's columns. His argument is well balanced. He accepts that parts of the press committed the crime of phone hacking but, like many others, feels that freedom of speech underpins all other freedoms.

Section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act 2013 is about controlling our press. The only time the government should act against the press is in the most extreme conditions of national interest, such as in wartime.

MICHAEL HOLDER Oxford

Aid and social care

Sir, Surely the solution to the urgent question raised in your leader "Reckoning Beckoning" (Dec 14) is simple. The absurd commitment to spend 0.7 per cent of GDP on overseas aid should be abandoned and the funds released spent on social care. This would give a breathing space for the whole NHS/social care system to be overhauled.

It is obscene that we are spending billions on overpaid consultants and dubious overseas projects while our own citizens receive inadequate or non-existent care in their later years. ARTHUR MATHISEN Alverstoke, Hants

Sir, Three cheers for Steve Webb (letter, Dec 15). His proposal for an insurance-based solution to the costs of social care for the elderly shows far more insight into the nature of the problem than the savings approach put forward by Jeremy Hunt.

Whatever the answer, part of the increasing cost will need to be met by the state, either through a state insurance scheme or out of general taxation. This burden should not be met by the working population alone.

Abolishing the triple lock on state pensions and using the savings to fund social care could be part of the way forward. This has the advantage that savings in pension costs should increase over time in a similar way to social care costs. Introducing national

insurance contributions at a modest rate for people over state pension age, effectively a state social care insurance levy, should also be considered.

MICHAEL GANNON Walton on the Hill, Surrey

Sir, As a 90-year-old I find it extraordinary that I should be made to pay more council tax to fund social care. This tax is unrelated to one's ability to pay. The time has come to place the funding of social care on the same footing as the NHS and pay for both entirely from central funds. ROGER MORGAN London W6

Letters to The Times must be exclusive

1914 THE FIRST WORLD WAR 1918

ON THIS DAY DECEMBER 16, 1916

THE PEACE FOR RUSSIA

The Duma has unanimously adopted a resolution urging a categorical refusal of the German proposal by the Allies. The resolution was moved after the delivery of a vigorous speech by the Minister for Foreign Affairs, who stated that he had the supreme authorization of the Tsar for the course he was taking in exposing the motives of the Central Powers. He concluded his speech with the

declaration that, in conjunction with the Allies, Russia would fight on to a victorious finish.

The resolution was worded as follows: The Duma having heard the statement of the Minister for Foreign Affairs is unanimously in favour of a categorical refusal by the Allied Governments to enter under present conditions into any peace negotiations whatever. It considers that the German proposals are nothing more than a fresh proof of the weakness of the enemy, and are a hypocritical act from which the enemy expects no real success, but by which he seeks to throw upon others the responsibility for the war. The Duma considers that a premature peace would not only be a brief period of calm, but would involve the danger of another bloody war and renewed deplorable sacrifices on the part of the people. It considers that a lasting peace will be possible only after a decisive victory over the military power of the enemy.

In his speech M Pokrovsky said: "In the course of the war Germany

has more than once mentioned peace. After each military success she put out feelers on one side and another and conducted an active propaganda in the neutral Press. All these efforts met with the calm and determined resistance of the Allied Powers. Now, seeing that she is powerless to make a breach in our unshakable alliance, she makes an official proposal to open peace negotiations. It contains no tangible indications regarding the nature of the peace which is desired. It repeats the antiquated legend that the war was forced upon the Central Powers; it speaks of the victorious Austro-German armies and the irresistibility of their defence. That is all it contains, except a threat to continue the war to a victorious end and, in the case of refusal, to throw the responsibility for the further spilling of blood on our Allies."

SIGN UP FOR A WEEKLY EMAIL WITH EXTRACTS FROM THE TIMES HISTORY OF THE WAR WWW.THETIMES.CO.UK

Retail park housing

Sir, What a refreshing idea of Clive Aslet's, to transform soulless retail parks into vibrant housing estates (Comment, Dec 15). Whenever I've visited one of our local retail parks, I've always been struck by how vast these ugly hangar-like outlets are, how few customers visit, particularly midweek, and how tedious work must consequently be for the sales staff.

As Mr Aslet suggests, these rust belts are a poor use of valuable land space. I pray that the government will see the sense in his innovative idea and includes it in its white paper on new homes next month.

MELANIE VITOW Frogmore Park, Hertford

Sir, May I commend to *Times* readers, and the government, the excellent article by Clive Aslet and the thoughtful letter from Sir Stuart Lipton (Dec 15). If combined, their proposals would seem to provide a blueprint for redevelopment that would go a long way to meeting our housing need.

CLAIRE WOODWARDS Littleborough, Lancs

Going the last mile

Sir, You omit one important fact in your article, "Just do it: race is on to break two-hour marathon" (Dec 14). The challenge would be far easier if 385 yards had not been added to the distance of the marathon for the London Olympics of 1908. Given that it was increased at the behest of the royal family (so it could start within sight of the nursery in Windsor Castle and finish in front of the royal box in White City), perhaps the Queen could use her royal prerogative to revoke it? MARK GIBSON Prestwick, Ayrshire

Men of mystery

Sir, Matthew Parris (Dec 14) compares morris dancing unfavourably with flamenco, yet the former is every bit as exotic as the flamenco and other passionate Spanish dances rooted in north African culture. Morris was originally "Moorish dancing", men dancing together, and was introduced to England by traders from the Levant, most likely Syria. It took English genius to add the hankies, bells and hats.

MICHAEL COLE Laxfield, Suffolk

Dodge the splodge

Sir, Jonathan Choat, on his travels around Europe (letter, Dec 14), may have missed the last episode of Sir David Attenborough's splendid BBC series *Planet Earth II*, which showed the damage done in December by the droppings of starlings in Rome.

The few hundred birds you picture circling Blackpool Tower ("Flying circus", Dec 14) may do little harm, but a million-strong murmuration is a different matter. JOHN BURSCOUGH Brigg, N Lincs

Queen of Hawaii

Sir, If Catherine the Great's rule of part of Alaska (letter, Dec 15) allows her to be adjudged an American head of state, then a stronger claimant to the title of America's last female head of state is Lili'uokalani, queen regnant of Hawaii between 1891 and 1893. CANON WILLIAM PRICE Wem, Shropshire