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Labour deserves to lose for puerile by-election tactics

AS a political neutral I find it appalling that the Labour Party, in an attempt to hold onto Crewe and Nantwich in the forthcoming by-election, has resorted to lampooning the Tory candidate by walking around dressed as toffs ("More agony for Brown as poll disaster looms", May 19).

In the 21st century, this is not only risible but demeaning to a once-great Labour Party. The late Gwyneth Dunwoody must be writhing with anger in her grave.

There are several Labour activists who were brought up in privileged backgrounds – including deputy leader Harriet Harman and the Benns – so to mock those who can't help on which side of the fence they were born is hypocritical to say the least.

I hope the good people of Crewe and Nantwich show Labour what they think of such schoolboy antics by giving the nod to the Conservative candidate in this crucial by-election.

Colin Richey,
Tiverton, Devon

Sending sniper home from Iraq smacks of witch-hunt

USING a book as a practice target has caused an American sniper to be sent home from Iraq.

Whether the book was the Bible, the Koran, the collected works of Shakespeare or the Oxford Concise Dictionary, it was just a book. The soldier must have thought he was back in Salem during the witch-hunts.

Clearly the Americans are emulating the stupidity of the British Establishment, who are encouraging the 8th-century mind-set of radical Islam.

Get out of Iraq, let them listen to their power-hungry leaders and exercise their ignorant intolerance.

Dennis Jones,
Newbridge, Gwent

Criminals must earn right to be treated with respect

I FULLY support the comments made by Det Chief Supt Chris Gregg with regard to stopping human rights for criminals ("Stop 'human rights' for killers, says police chief", May 14).

Killers, rapists, murderers and anyone carrying a knife or firearm of any kind should not have any rights at all. They should be made to earn them back as part of their punishment.

When are we going to rid this country of these people if we do not make an example of them? Bring back the death penalty and give prisoners empty cells, not fully furnished ones.

I have always supported our police force as one of the best in the world, so untie their hands and let them do the job they were trained for before it's too late.

G Katte,
Leigh-on-Sea, Essex

Taxman should not claim a slice of reader's pension

I WAS puzzled by the e-mail from George Lane regarding the tax he pays on his pension (Letters, May 19).

The personal allowance for a

Letter of the day

No substitute for proper hygiene in our hospitals

IT is very gratifying to learn that scientists have produced a cream (weirdly named XF-73) that will apparently eradicate MRSA from our hospitals ("Wonder gel will cure MRSA", May 19).

However, this will not be available for at least three years. In the meantime, patients will presumably continue to die. Would it not have been quicker, easier and cheaper to bring in an effective cleaning programme to all NHS hospitals?

With cleanliness in mind, could I suggest that all doctors and nurses keep their uniforms at work, where they should change before and after each shift? They should not be allowed to wear their uniforms outside the hospital during the working day, and certainly not, as I saw outside the East Surrey Hospital last year, be allowed to sprawl out on grassy areas to have a smoke.

Geoff Manning,
Lower Kingswood, Surrey



CLEAN SWEEP: Patients are still at risk from MRSA

pensioner is now £9,030 so if all he has got is an occupational pension of £4,000 plus his state pension, he should not be paying any tax at all. I suggest he looks at his tax code as the Inland Revenue does not automatically process the increase in personal allowances despite the fact that it has all the information to hand.

The increased allowance comes into force the tax year in which you reach pension age.

Mrs P Whinnerah,
Stockport, Cheshire

Councils wrong to deny frail elderly hot, fresh meals

IT costs a pensioner on average £84 a month for community meals

(or meals on wheels) and they have to do this without any financial help from government or local councils.

When they have been deemed unable to cook for themselves, they have also been presented with a financial burden. What do they have to do without in order to afford these meals?

In some boroughs, the elderly are required to cook frozen, processed meals themselves, even though they have been deemed incapable of cooking.

The council is going for the cheap option but the cost is the same, plus the added cost of storing and cooking the meals.

The meals on wheels service provides hot, fresh meals, plus a daily visit from the driver. Under

the frozen option, it's just one visit every two weeks. This means a reduced service for the money under the frozen option.

The Government and councils should provide these people with fresh, hot meals free of charge to ensure that our elderly and frail people get a proper meal every day.

Alan Forrester,
By e-mail

Rotten memories of those old rustbucket Cortinas

ADAM Edwards has some rose-tinted views about the Ford Cortina ("Rusting, past-it? Maybe Labour but not our Ford Cortina", May 15).

The Cortina series was a load of rubbish that rusted before your very eyes.

I bought a four-year-old Mk3 and within a year I was spending a small fortune on new door sills and glass fibre repair kits to rebuild the rear floor pan and the rear end.

Unfortunately, I did not learn my lesson and went on to buy two Ford Scorpios which cost me an arm and a leg to run and repair.

I learned my lesson and have since bought Mercedes, which apart from petrol and tyres have cost me nothing.

Of course, car spares shops don't have many replacement body parts anymore. Due to the fact that modern cars don't rust away the way that Fords used to.

Rod Ackers
Portlade, E Sussex

WILL NEW ALCOHOL WARNING ADVERTS WORK?

Yes I WELCOME the Government's new campaign ("Up-market drinkers targeted", May 19).

Hopefully it will make us all think more about how much we are drinking.

Men should limit their intake to only two drinks a day and women just one.

There is convincing evidence that alcohol increases the risk of breast cancer, mouth cancer, throat cancer, bowel cancer and liver cancer.

Lucie Galice,
General manager,
World Cancer Research Fund

No MY heart sank when I read about yet more money being thrown away on an expensive advertising campaign warning us of the dangers of drinking. This will look good on Health Minister Dawn Primarolo's CV but will make no difference to Britain's binge-drinking culture.

For the past 40 years we have endured government warnings about having too much alcohol, and none of it has changed attitudes to drinking one jot.

People who drink too much know their 'limits' – they just ignore them.

Sandy Thompson,
Wakefield, W Yorks

Ten things you never knew about... flowers

WILLIAM HARTSTON

This year's Chelsea Flower Show is now in full swing, so here is some flowery information.

1. The top three flowers in Britain by sales value are roses, carnations and lilies.
2. About £80,000 was spent on flowers at Queen Victoria's funeral.
3. "If two people speak with one mind, their words will have the fragrance of the orchid" – Confucius.
4. During the tulip mania in the 17th century, £400 was once paid for a single bulb, or £4million in today's money.
5. The orchid gets its name from the shape of its bulbous roots – 'orchis' is the Greek for 'testicle'.

BEACHCOMBER



91 YEARS OLD AND STILL STINGING LIKE A BUTTERFLY...

FEELING a trifle guilty at not having dropped in for far too long to see my good friend Professor Norvus Breakdown, I made a bit of a detour the other day to visit him in his office at the University of North Brent (formerly the Outer North-West London Academy of Intermediate Macrame). Prof Breakdown, as you probably know, was elected some years ago to the Ikea Chair in Contemporary Lifestyle at the university and has been called upon to produce vital research over a wide variety of topics. Always ready for the unexpected when entering his sanctum, I was nonetheless surprised to be assailed by a horde of butterflies as I went in.

"Quick," shouted the professor urgently, rapidly trying to occupy a position between the butterflies and the door; "don't let them get out. And if any do escape, keep a note of whether they head left or right."

I tried to follow his instructions, shooing several butterflies back into the room, while keeping an eye on any that flew away. I spotted two landing on the drinks machine, just outside the professor's room on the left. "Two flew left, none right," I announced.

"Excellent!" said the professor. "Or possibly disastrous. Er, did you happen to notice whether they had blue spots on their foreheads, or were they orange?"

"Can't say I did," I apologised. "Perhaps you could fill me in on what you're doing with all these butterflies. Is it something to do with a chaos theory solution to the problems of global warming? I mean, if a single wingflap of a butterfly in Brazil can cause a tornado in Texas, as Edward Lorenz suggested in his seminal chaos theory lecture in 1972, then a whole roomful of butterflies could perhaps be trained to counteract the entire global warming now going on. That's a brilliant idea, professor. I congratulate you!"

"Hmm," hmed the prof, scribbling a rapid note to himself on a scrap of paper, "I hadn't thought of that. No, what I'm doing is a piece of research into the nature of knowledge itself."

"What, exactly, are these butterflies supposed to know?" I asked, surveying the apparently motiveless fluttering going on around us.

"That's what I'm trying to find out," the prof replied. "The basic question is: if you teach something to a caterpillar, will the butterfly it turns into remember it? If you'd come here a few weeks ago, you'd have found the room full of caterpillars. What I did was divide them into two groups and place each one at the foot of a T-shaped enclosure. By putting a leaf at one or other end of the upper cross-piece, I could train the caterpillars to turn either left or right when they had crawled to the junction of the T. I trained half of them to turn left and the other half to turn right.

Then, when they had metamorphosed into butterflies, I marked each one with a blue or orange blob indicating whether it had come from a leftward caterpillar or a rightward one. The final stage of the experiment will be to set the butterflies free and see which way they fly and whether this corresponds to the training received by their respective caterpillars."

"The two I saw escape through the door turned left and landed on the soft drinks machine," I said. "But it may have been the sugar in the drinks that attracted them."

The prof sighed. "Coca-Cola has a lot to answer for," he said. "Now what's this global warming problem you mentioned?"

yourhealth

OPENING my eyes I stared at the sea of faces in front of me. They all looked vaguely familiar but I couldn't place them.

A wave of fear swept over me. I looked round and realised I was in a hospital – but I had no idea why. A strange man held out his arms to me and said: "Emma, it's me. Dad."

The woman standing next to him gently took my hand and told me she was my mum. This was my family but I felt that I barely knew them. Mum explained I'd been watching a film with a friend when I started shaking uncontrollably. I fell into a coma in an ambulance on the way to hospital and had been unconscious for three weeks.

She had to tell me basic facts about my life: I had two sisters, Hannah, now 17, and Tamsin, now 26. We lived in north London and I was studying for A levels. Gradually, a few hazy memories of my family came back but everything else was like I was seeing it for the first time.

When the nurses brought me my lunch, my mum had to sit by my side and explain what every piece of food was – even a simple apple seemed strange. I was fascinated by the television – the fact it had moving pictures seemed amazing.

The doctors explained I had contracted viral encephalitis of the brain, which meant instead of a flu-like virus infecting my chest

'I want to make the most of my future'

it had gone to my brain, making it swell until I had a seizure and collapsed. At one point they thought I was going to die.

They reassured me that amnesia was a common side-effect of a massive brain trauma and my memory would come back gradually over the next few months. I'd managed to pull through, although they warned I'd never be the same again because the virus left me with severe epilepsy. At the time I wasn't worried about that – I was just wondering how I was ever going to get my memory back.

AFTER three weeks I went home. I'd hoped that being there would trigger some more memories but it made me feel even more like a stranger.

Later that week my childhood friends Katie and Emma came round and showed me photos of holidays we'd been on – but it was like staring at pictures of someone else. Because I'd lost a lot of weight since being in the coma I didn't recognise the curvy girl who always had a drink in her hand. Sometimes I pretended I did remember to make it easier for everyone – including myself.

But the girl who was always centre of attention had gone for good – in her place was a small, insecure person with no memory.

Determined to get my life back I took my A levels, relearning



Picture: LOTTIE DAVIES

INSIDE: Keep a check on your drinking ● Is Chinese medicine bad for us?

BRAIN TRAUMA: THE FACTS

● Viral encephalitis is inflammation of the brain tissue caused by a viral infection. In most cases a viral infection does not lead to encephalitis. It is extremely rare for a virus to directly attack the brain.

● Some people who have encephalitis are left with permanent brain damage. The type and degree of brain injury can vary.

● Encephalitis can hit anyone at any age but it is extremely rare, with approximately four people out of 100,000 affected in the UK each year.

● Some types of encephalitis can be mild and cause almost no symptoms other than feeling ill with a fever but other cases can be very serious and life threatening.

● For more information on epilepsy contact Epilepsy Action: www.epilepsy.org.uk/ 0800 800 5050

everything I'd known. Somehow it seemed easier to learn about politicians I'd never met than friends I'd known for years.

Six months passed and my memories were gradually returning but my epilepsy looked as though it was here to stay.

I wanted to make a new start and decided to go to university. Desperate to fit in, I ignored my health by studying and drinking too hard. After two and a half years I was having epileptic fits nearly every day and would often wake up bleeding in the shower where I'd had a fit and knocked myself out. I had no choice but to return home to my parents.

I LOST 18 YEARS OF MY LIFE

I STARTED a job as a volunteer at a charity which helps homeless children and I began dating a man called Joel, who accepted my condition. But my fits were becoming stronger and more frequent. If I caught the Tube to work I would have a huge fit and wake up on the floor, foaming at the mouth with people staring at me like I was a freak. I had fits in job interviews and once I even wet myself in front of Joel. It was so humiliating.

Five years after my illness, in February this year, I went to the National Hospital for Neurology and Neurosurgery so doctors could examine my brain and discover why I was having so many fits. They discovered a massive trauma and two weeks later I had an operation to remove seven parts of my brain.

As a result, I can't move a corner of my mouth and I have difficulty hearing, although that could soon improve. While my epilepsy is still there, it is much better. I have regular convulsions but they last only 15 seconds and I'm fully conscious during them.

I've come to terms with the fact that some of my past has been lost for ever and the confident girl I once was will never come back but I am determined to make the most of my future.

Interview by DEBBI MARCO