

Let people have right to die when they choose

Hats off to the Royal College of Physicians' (RCP) decision to go neutral on the issue of assisted dying (Report, 22 March). I have accompanied two very dear friends to the Dignitas clinic in Switzerland. They were both in the final stages of terminal illness, beyond the reach of palliative care, and were forced to go abroad like fugitives. Our society is exporting death and turning a political and ethical blind eye to it.

Assisted dying is supported by over 80% of people, and a change in the law is now on the agenda. However, the British Medical Association leadership opposes it, but refuses to survey its members. If the RCP can do it, why can't the BMA?

Michael Murray
Matlock, Derbyshire

● Bishop Harries (Letters, 25 March) is arguing by analogy, and the basis of this false analogy is his personal belief that some higher power "gave us life". The majority of citizens, who do not share this belief, must have the right to die at a time of

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their own choosing. It is ironic that the bishop sits in the House of Lords as a representative of an institution that places charity at the heart of its teachings. I write as an 88-year-old, quite incapacitated by serious illness and nearing the end of my life. What right has Bishop Harries to deny me a comfortable and dignified death in my own home? None! **Sue Atkins**
Lewes, East Sussex

● The right reverend Harries is taking a liberty by trying to distinguish between a right and a liberty. The two are so closely synonymous that such an attempt would lead you down semantic culs-de-sac and linguistic side alleys. His analogy with a gift is also problematical, as life is something that is inexorably thrust upon us, and much of a shock it is, at a least in its early stages. But with luck and care, we begin to enjoy the wonders of its vagaries on this small planet. My life might be a delight, but it is my own - and not a gift - and there is no one to return it to, should it become a burden. I would merely relinquish it. My liberty. My right!
Jerry Stuart
London

● I fear that Rt Rev Richard Harries's response to Simon Jenkins's article on assisted dying will cut no ice with the many who consider that life arises simply from a random collision of sperm and ovum, rather than being a "gift" from some notional higher power. A terminally

ill person has the right to wish to pre-empt a long-drawn-out and agonising death; there is no sense of "giving their life back" as one might return an unwanted Christmas gift, and any distinction between freedom and liberty is somewhat theoretical to say the least. His suggestion that they "don't like ... or grow tired of" their life is either uninformed or unkind.
Dr Brigit Purcell
Norwich

● Simon Jenkins's case for euthanasia (Being allowed to end one's life is the ultimate human right, 22 March) is as flawed as it is tired. Three examples will suffice. Conflating intentional killing with foreseen life-shortening, he opens with the absurd claim that the principal cause of death in Britain is "premeditated killing" by doctors.

He asserts that discussion of the issue "remains taboo" in parliament. But parliament has debated the issue repeatedly and exhaustively over the past 25 years.

He thinks the evidence from abroad shows that regulatory concerns can be answered. My recent book *Euthanasia, Ethics and Public Policy* shows that the evidence does nothing of the sort.
Professor John Keown
Kennedy Institute of Ethics,
Georgetown University, Washington DC

● So, desires not to be a burden or psychological distress are good reasons for ending life? At least the forthright Simon Jenkins can admit this is where he wants, or hopes, things may move. This understandable thinking will, I'm afraid, misguidedly put unnecessary strain on vulnerable people to do the "decent thing" and make an exit.
Dr GD Warnes
Morton, Lincolnshire

Dales of delight

'Looking across the limestone pavement from the top of Malham Cove in the Yorkshire Dales national park on a very mild February afternoon'

PETER WATSON/
GUARDIAN COMMUNITY

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Brexit can pave the way to a new politics

Gary Younge (A party not fit for power, and a system not fit for purpose, 29 March) is spot on in identifying the crisis in our constitution that Brexit has unfolded, but he prescribes the wrong medicine. The UK is in deep trouble. Europe is a symptom rather than the cause. Yes, the government is not fit to govern, but parliament is no longer fit for purpose. A superficial analysis would blame the first referendum for our current agonies. Why should a second binary referendum fair better?

The leave vote is often attributed to the places and communities neglected and left behind by the UK's economic success. Now we've all been left behind by a democracy trapped in the Westminster bubble. Government and parliament cannot do it on their own. In the short term, a general election is the only way out, and the traditional one too. The

Corrections and clarifications

● A picture of the author Ali Smith in last week's Review supplement omitted to include a credit for the photographer, Antonio Olmos (A new season, 23 March, page 6, Review).

● Today's Guide previews *Out of Blue*, but sets the film in Los Angeles, rather than its actual location of New Orleans (5 of the best, 30 March, page 19, the Guide).

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Now's the right time to signal distress

Anne Penketh, who writes movingly about her mother's mental deterioration and need for specialist care (Opinion, 28 March), should ask for an assessment for NHS Continuing Care immediately. Most people with severe Alzheimer's disease who are displaying aggressive behaviour will qualify to have all their care costs met, as their needs are health needs, not just social care. This does not deal with the emotional pain of watching a loved relative deteriorate, but it does deal with the issue of justice.
Hilary Caldicott
Freeland, Oxfordshire

● I see (Report, 28 March) that the French are upset by the suggestion they should limit wine consumption to two glasses a day. When I visited Paris in the early 1950s there were posters saying: "For your health's sake, do not drink more than a litre of wine a day." *Plus ça change plus c'est la même chose.*
Tony Meacock
Norwich, Norfolk

● Your picture (page 11, 29 March) of television crews outside parliament showed at least two union jacks attached upside down to their poles. I assume this was deliberate - to signal distress.
Michael Robinson
Berkhamsted, Hertfordshire

● Really? The only recipes in *Feast* (23 March) that relied solely on store-cupboard ingredients were those by Jack Monroe and Rachel Roddy. With no-deal Brexit over the horizon surely you can do better than this?
Fred Pickering
Chapel-en-le-Frith, Derbyshire

● Considering all that is going on in the news, I fear it will be difficult to pick out this year's April Fools' story.
Antony Jarrett
Hassocks, West Sussex

Established 1906

Country diary

Assynt, Sutherland

A clear stream runs through the small glen where I walk, singing a bright note on a chilly day. Afternoon sunshine has lured me out after a showery morning that dusted snow across nearby Conival and Ben More Assynt. Those mountains are a focal point for hillwalkers in this region, and few hikers venture over to the insignificant valley where I stroll. If they did, they might overlook the lumps swelling out of the earth next to the stream, just more bumps in a bumpy land. Yet, created by human hands thousands of years ago, these bronze age "burnt mounds" are more than just piles of dirt.

The mounds appear as pairs of crescent-shaped humps spaced a few feet apart, their earthy surface hiding a foundation of cracked stones. Millennia ago, people heated those rocks, tossed them in a stone-lined pit to warm the water it contained. The temperature change would have shattered the rocks, which were later thrown off to the edges, where they piled up in oblong heaps on either side of the trough. Burnt mounds are spread across Britain and Ireland, dating from 2500BC to 700BC. They're usually found next to a water source, and from where I stand I can see three pairs situated along this stream. These structures were once part of people's lives. A trough perhaps two metres wide full of heated water: why? A prehistoric sauna? Ceremonial cleansing? Cooking? For making beer, one theory goes. We can't know.

Low rays play across the valley, the burnt mounds dark against the golden-brown surrounds. That colour difference is not a matter of shadow and light, but rather the mounds' substrate shaping their overlying vegetation. Through the millennia, the rock piles acquired a coating of moss, stunted heather and spaced clumps of sedge and grass, contrasting with the grassier surrounds of less stony ground. At this time of year, their evergreen tint makes it easy to locate the mounds, but as spring progresses they will fade into the lushness of summer.

Daylight dims and so I leave the quiet of this hidden swale, imagining bronze-age people slipping into the warmth of their hot tubs as evening approached, escaping the growing nip in the air.
Robin Patten



Twitter: @gdncountryside
ILLUSTRATION: CLIFFORD HARPER

How the term 'cultural Marxism' has been co-opted by the alt-right

The Guardian should not refer to "the antisemitic term 'cultural Marxism'" as if that were a settled fact (Tory in antisemitism row, 27 March). Suella Braverman can explain for herself what she meant by it, but "cultural Marxism" was in common use in British and American humanities departments in the 1980s and 1990s as a term for a certain approach to what is still called "cultural studies".

Numerous examples of that usage can be found by searching the phrase on the academic database Jstor. For instance, Ioan Davies's history of "British cultural Marxism" in the spring 1991 issue of the *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*. The term also appears in this academic context in *The Cambridge Companion to Critical Theory*, published in 2004. If it has since been seized upon by the alt-right,

that is very unfortunate, and any antisemitic use or implication should be condemned. But it existed long before that as a term for an academic enterprise that was, if anything, often rather abstruse, even boring.

Jeff Smith
Brno, Czech Republic

● The Frankfurt School's Horkheimer and Adorno's seminal *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is as far from introducing a straw-man world of political correctness as one can imagine, Ms Braverman.

That book's central metaphor of western civilisation represented as a boat propelled by slaves with wax in their ears to shield them from the song that only their master, Odysseus, tied to the boat's mast, is allowed to hear is as relevant today, in a world of Twitter, dog-whistle politics, antisemitism and Islamophobia,

as ever. The book's critique, too, of the culture industry, ironically, has been unacknowledgedly appropriated by those who take advantage of our precious bourgeois freedoms to propagate ideologies and viewpoints that are, like antisemitism and Islamophobia in our political parties, abhorrent.

If one good thing comes out of that Bruges Group speech by Ms Braverman, I hope it is that it prompts more people to read the core texts of the Frankfurt School, written as they were in the shadow of totalitarianism.

Stephen Douglas
Oxford

● John Grace's incisive sketch is normally mandatory reading, but his description of the Eurosceptic Bruges Group as the "paramilitary wing of the Rotary Club" (27 March) made me hit the keyboard in protest. Perhaps John is unaware that Rotary Clubs have no political, religious or sectarian allegiance?

Shelagh Garvey
Didcot, Oxfordshire

parties then have the opportunity to reshape their manifestos in the light of the harrowing experiences of the past two years. In the longer term, we need a new democratic settlement between people and parliament; a written constitution that devolves power downwards to local communities; a bill of rights that includes social and economic rights - and policy and politicians that take account of the everyday economics of people's lives.

In this way Brexit could be the beginning of something new, exciting and unifying, and not the end of something terribly broken.

Dr Katharine Sutton
Aspire Community Works, London

● Excellent juxtaposition of two smiling men - Michael Gove and Ole Gunnar Solskjær - on both front and back pages (29 March). Is there any chance that the country can go with the Norwegian model of leadership and management? It works rather well in Manchester.
Angus MacIntosh
Burley in Wharfedale, West Yorkshire

Indian missile adds to space debris risks

On Wednesday the space Mission Shakti was carried out by India, in which it successfully targeted a low Earth orbit (LEO) satellite (Report, 28 March). Prime Minister Narendra Modi declared: "In the journey of every nation there are moments that bring pride and have a historic impact on generations to come. One such moment is today ... India has successfully tested the anti-satellite missile (Asat)."

He added that the target satellite was at an altitude of 300km, and that India had not breached any international laws or treaties.

It is a sad day when the intelligent leader of a civilised nation confuses shame for pride. Contrary to Mr Modi's belief that the act makes India an elite space superpower, it in fact places it firmly among those behaving irresponsibly in space. There are international efforts to regulate the incidental

creation of space debris and to promote responsible behaviour in space - removing spent satellites from orbit among them. This, however, does not mean that the placement of debris in Earth's orbit, let alone its intentional creation, is currently legal.

Under the Outer Space Treaty of 1967, to which India is party, any activity in space must avoid its harmful contamination, and be conducted with due regard to the corresponding interests of all other states. Considering that the International Space Station orbits at about 350km, and many Earth observation, climate, communication and other satellites operate in LEO, the debris created by this Asat can potentially have a devastating effect on the use of the orbits.

China's similar Asat test in January 2007 brought international condemnation. This act by India is no less to be condemned.
Professor Sa'id Mosteshar
Director, London Institute of Space Policy and Law

Hard for councils to enforce equal access

The appalling segregation of play facilities for families in different housing tenures has rightly been condemned (Developer bars poorer children from play area, 26 March).

Unfortunately, council powers to enforce equal access are limited, and new powers given to councils to do this by the mayor of London in 2016 cannot be enforced retrospectively.

We have lobbied the developers to do the decent thing and ensure equal access to shared facilities for all residents and we will keep doing so. This story is emblematic of the realities of the housing crisis under this Conservative government, with powers taken away from councils to hold developers to account. This means less affordable housing and fewer shared facilities, and is the opposite of the inclusive and mixed communities we want to encourage.
Clr Matthew Bennett
London Borough of Lambeth