

The Daily Telegraph

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The sooner Brown goes to the country, the better

For the past six months, David Cameron has been calling for an early general election, a demand he repeated yesterday. Only a national vote, he argues, can validate Gordon Brown's unchallenged assumption of the Labour leadership and, from tomorrow, the office of prime minister. The Tory leader must be delighted, therefore, that the air at Westminster is heavy with election fever. Mr Brown's mischievous announcement in his leadership acceptance speech that he has appointed Douglas Alexander, the Transport Secretary, to the post of campaign co-ordinator has set the hare running. Despite a 66-seat parliamentary majority, Mr Brown would have little difficulty in justifying an early poll. Having achieved the highest office in the land without the tiresome chore of an election contest, he can legitimately claim that he requires a democratic mandate of his own. And on Sunday he outlined an ambitious legislative programme, including wide-ranging constitutional reform, that has never been put before the electorate. It should be.

Mr Brown may have been emboldened to lob this pebble into the pond by a weekend opinion poll showing Labour back in the lead for the first time in 18 months. The Labour leader is too canny a politician to be swayed by a single poll – given the scale of media coverage of Labour in recent weeks, such a “bounce” was no surprise. And it was only last month that in a real election – to English local councils – the Tories took 40 per cent of the votes to Labour's 27 per cent. Nevertheless, if the Brown premierships develops at the cracking pace he has set in the leadership non-contest, then Mr Cameron's Tories could find the polls slipping away from them. The other factor that may persuade Labour's new leader to go to the country sooner rather than later is his own bailiwick, the economy. As interest rates continue to rise, voters will be feeling less well off next year than they are this year – and by 2009 they could be in a very grumpy mood indeed.

Of course, for all Mr Brown's braggadocio, he knows that Labour is no more capable of fighting a snap election than the Tories, because both parties are strapped for cash. Indeed, one of the purposes of the whole early election tease is to get the donations rolling in – a task that will prove more difficult for Labour following the police investigation of the cash-for-honours affair. Nevertheless, there remains a powerful case for an early election on the simple grounds of democratic legitimacy. Mr Brown will never have the genuine authority of a prime minister until he has faced the voters. The sooner he does that, the better.

Lessons from the past

A report published this week on social mobility by the Sutton Trust presents a deeply shocking premise: the chances of a child from a poor background in Britain climbing the social and economic ladder has declined so dramatically over the past 30 years that Britain is now the least socially mobile advanced country for which figures are available. The report's conclusions are based primarily on access to higher education. They do not, therefore, necessarily take account of the more informal routes to self-advancement through entrepreneurial activity that have been made possible by the expansion and deregulation of the economy. But it remains true that the traditional avenue of good schooling followed by university has in effect been closed off to children from under-privileged homes.

There has certainly been a stark drop in the number of higher education entrants from working-class backgrounds since the 1960s, when Britain had a higher proportion of university students from working-class homes than any country in Europe.

As Sir Peter Lampl, chairman of the Sutton Trust, has pointed out, earlier generations of less affluent schoolchildren had the opportunity to benefit from the direct-grant/grammar school system that offered access to many of the finest independent schools in the country on the basis of merit rather than ability to pay. That system, and the similarly beneficent assisted-places scheme that followed it, were both dismantled on ideological grounds by politicians who professed to believe in “equal opportunity”.

The report offers some remedies for the dire state of educationally driven social mobility. It suggests that existing grammar schools should be opened up to children from less privileged homes, a situation that would arise naturally if more grammars were opened in poor areas. Then, independent schools should offer places to poor pupils on a needs-blind basis, with their fees being paid by the state: in other words, a return to the direct-grant or assisted-places system in everything but name.

The Harriet factor

It was quite wrong for anyone to laugh at John Prescott, the former Deputy Prime Minister, because of his class. There was nothing wrong with his class. He was risible for other reasons. Now that Harriet Harman is deputy leader of the Labour Party (but not Deputy Prime Minister), we should be honest in declaring why we find her so annoying.

It is not because she is a woman; she appears to annoy men and women in equal numbers. If she went to St Paul's Girls' School and sent her son to a selective school, well, perfectly agreeable socialists have done as much. If her only half-way proper job was as legal officer to the National Council for Civil Liberties, that is no more than many an MP can boast. No, an unknown factor is also at work here: the Harriet factor. From it, there is now no escape. We are just going to have to learn to live with it.

Letters to the Editor

If Ireland feels bound to hold an EU referendum, then Britain should

SIR – In Ireland, the minister for foreign affairs, Dermot Ahern, has said: “I think it is likely that a referendum will be held.”

If the substance of what was agreed for the European Constitution has not dramatically changed, it is simply ridiculous for the Labour Government in Britain to do a U-turn and not hold a referendum as promised.

Alex Orr
Edinburgh

SIR – By far the most dangerous part of the proposed new EU Constitution is the retention of the clause that gives the EU the permanent right to seize more powers without any future agreements.

It was in the last one; it is in this one. Only tyrants do that.

Law in the United Kingdom specifically forbids Parliament from binding its successors.

Like the last constitution, this version makes law, instead of creating a framework for law-making. It offers no

effective checks and balances to control future law-makers.

It turns the member states from theoretical masters of the house of Brussels into its servants.

The German Chancellor said the original version should change no more than its name. That is exactly what has happened.

Ashley Mote MEP (Independent)

Binsted, Hampshire

SIR – Last week, a YouGov poll revealed a startling 94 per cent of those questioned (excluding don't knows) wanted a referendum on the EU Constitution.

Even more surprising, perhaps, is that, among Labour voters, the figure was 90 per cent. There can surely be no issue in Britain revealing such a preponderance of one view over another.

For Gordon Brown to begin his term of office by snubbing such a huge proportion of the electorate would be very foolish, but it is his choice – and a great opportunity for David Cameron.

The gauntlet is down. Mr Cameron should pick it up as the champion of principled and reasoned Euro-reform and pledge us a referendum under him.

Frederick Forsyth

Hertford

SIR – One thing must be made clear: there is no repeal provision in this treaty.

The treaty brings a fundamental change as a result of the merger of the Treaty of Rome, which was about trade and political co-operation, and the Maastricht Treaty, which was about European government.

This new treaty provides that “the two treaties constitute the treaties on which the Union is founded, and that the Union replaces and succeeds the Community”. As I pointed out to the Foreign Secretary, in the House last week, this proposal in itself is the fundamental change that would require a referendum. She could not and did not answer my point.

Bill Cash MP (Con)
London SW1

Mobile turn-off

SIR – My solution to the question posed by Penelope Wade (Letters, June 25) is to carry a mobile telephone (as instructed by my wife), but never to turn the damn thing on, thus avoiding any social faux pas or conversational dilemma.

If I happen to be served by a shopkeeper who is on his mobile telephone, I make no effort to talk, pay, load or unload shopping until his conversation is finished and, instead, just stand there smiling serenely. This either unnerves the server or, eventually, the lengthening queue gets his attention.

One thing I have never understood is, given that all mobile telephones have a built-in amplifier, why people feel the need to shout: the noise making them shout is at their end, not the receiver's.

Paul Coddington
Isle of Sheppey, Kent

Flawed footprint

SIR – As a professional engineer, I checked my household carbon footprint using the Environment Secretary David Milliband's on line CO₂ calculator. It is flawed in the most elementary way.

It has three sections: home, appliance and travel. Home asks for details of gas and electricity bills, which have some correlation with the home consumption of fossil fuels and emission of greenhouse gases. The basic error is the appliance section, which asks for details of ovens, freezers, computers, etc. and gives a separate CO₂ footprint for them, which is added to home and travel to give a total household consumption.

The fossil fuel consumption of appliances, however, is also already included in the gas and electricity bills. Only the gas and electricity bills have any relevance to CO₂ emissions, but the calculator considers items twice. The travel section also has problems in that it inadequately addresses air miles.

John Allison
Maidenhead, Berkshire

Glastonbury damage

SIR – You mention (leading article, June 25) an organisation called the BBC attending the Glastonbury Festival. Is this the same BBC that produces programmes about wildlife such as *Springwatch* and *Countryside*?

If so, what is it doing at an event where 190,000 people swamp farmland at the height of the bird-breeding season and almost certainly break the Wildlife and Countryside Act.

It is in good company: Greenpeace banners proclaimed that body's “coolness”. The bodies of young birds in the nest with their parents frightened off by the crowds would have been even cooler. However, it is fascinating to know that Greenpeace is very concerned about whales, but is apparently not interested in willow warblers and barn owls.

Robin Page
Chairman,
Countryside Restoration Trust
Barton, Cambridgeshire



Bottled milk is delivered to residents in Elephant and Castle, south London, in 1949

The benefits of milk in bottles and pouches

SIR – Waitrose supermarkets will start selling milk in “specially designed pouches” (report, June 25), which are supposed to be less damaging to the environment than plastic bottles.

We get English farm-produced milk delivered in glass bottles, which are used over and over again. The supermarket milk could come from anywhere.

The same applies to water. Supermarkets sell it in plastic bottles that often travel thousands of miles. We stick to tap water; if you are fussy, buy a filter. Cheap and easy to install.

Edward Huxley
Thorpe, Surrey

SIR – Forty years ago, we were living in Zimbabwe, which at the time was suffering under sanctions imposed by the British government.

The local dairy started to supply milk in pint-sized pouches. These were bought a dozen or so at once and were easy to store in the fridge. The pouches were tough: we used them for rugby practice, as they were easily passed and could even be kicked into touch without damage.

Maybe the reintroduction of such containers would improve rugby skills, as well as containing milk.

Rev Donald Bird
Skipton, North Yorkshire

How to protect vegetable gardens from deer

SIR – Perhaps Julie Juniper, who asks for suggestions to keep deer out of her garden (Letters, June 23), should try a shotgun. Combined with the vegetables, a game stew could be enjoyed.

Andrew Holgate
Woodley, Cheshire

SIR – I suggest the countryman's remedy for almost everything: get a dog.

John Stephen
Bisley, Gloucestershire

SIR – According to the Marquess of Bath, I believe, lion dung.

Crispin Caldicott
Warkworth, New Zealand

SIR – I suggest Mrs Juniper goes to a hairdresser and asks for some cut tresses of hair and attaches them to her fence. Deer are deterred by the scent of humans.

Jane Broadbent
Clipsham, Rutland

SIR – A clue to the solution to Mrs Juniper's deer problem lies in her name. After all, juniper berries are regarded as the ideal flavouring for venison.

David Harvey
Bishop's Stortford, Hertfordshire

SIR – My garden was being destroyed by deer who are quite fussy eaters; for example, they prefer tulips to daffodils.

Since installing a floodlight that comes on when anything passes the beam, I have not seen any, which may only be a coincidence. However, the deer have been replaced by rabbits, which breed and destroy faster than deer.

Joan Gardiner
Hook, Hampshire

SIR – I put electrified pig wires around my vegetable garden. Though deer could clear the top wire, they never try, having “smelt” the electricity.

Harry Metcalfe
Romsey, Hampshire

SIR – The most effective method of keeping deer, hares and rabbits from destroying your garden is to water vulnerable plants with boiled chillies.

Phil Lever
Blandford, Dorset

YOUR VIEW
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Suppose – and you might not find this easy – that you were a committed Euro-federalist. Imagine that you wanted the EU to go the whole hog toward statehood. What would you have most wanted to get out of the Brussels summit?

In fact, much of your work would already have been done. The EU currently possesses many of the attributes and trappings of nationhood: a parliament, a supreme court, a passport, a currency, a national anthem, a flag, external borders. There are, though, four more pieces to slot into the jigsaw before the EU can call itself a sovereign polity.

First, a head of state. Second, a foreign policy, complete with a foreign minister, a diplomatic corps and accredited embassies. Third, a system of criminal justice, including a European public prosecutor and a police force. Fourth, the “legal personality” of an independent government, which confers treaty-making powers and the right to sit in international associations.

All these things are in the draft “Reform Treaty” – along with the Charter of Fundamental Rights,

the abolition of some 40 national vetoes, new powers for the European Parliament and a 30 per cent reduction in Britain's ability to block new initiatives.

Those who follow these matters will know this has been obvious to some for the past 18 months. It was obvious that the leaders of the EU planned to revive as much of the constitution as they could get away with. But they could hardly just turn up and sign: that would have given the game away. So, as had been forecast, they staged some faux fights, designed to simulate a re-negotiation.

I say this to make an important point about the EU, namely that *this is how it always behaves*. When people vote “No” to closer integration – as they usually do, given the chance – their opposition is seen as an obstacle to be overcome, not a reason to alter course.

The purpose of the Brussels summit was to allow the seven EU leaders who had promised a plebiscite to tiptoe away from their pledges. Ireland and Denmark are lucky enough to have rules that trigger a vote whenever any constitutional change is proposed.



Daniel Hannan

But the other leaders have joined hands and sworn a terrible oath: no referendums anywhere, in case the sight of one country voting should prompt demand in others.

I was wrong about one thing, though. I had assumed that, in order to sustain their line that the new text was different from the old, there would be some substantive changes. In fact, such alterations as there have been are decorative, not structural: emendations, not amendments.

This is admitted with startling frankness in the new draft, which emphasises the importance of

changing the terminology: “The term ‘Constitution’ will not be used, the ‘Union Minister for Foreign Affairs’ will be called ‘High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy.’”

Behind the new nomenclature, however, almost nothing has changed – as those EU leaders who don't have to back away from the promise of a referendum artlessly concede. “The fundamentals of the Constitution have been maintained,” says Angela Merkel. “The great part of the European Constitution is in the new treaty,” agrees José Luis Zapatero. “Thankfully, they haven't changed the substance; 90 per cent of it is still there,” echoes Bertie Ahern.

The main dissenting voice is, of course, Britain's. Our ministers insist that the new draft is milder, because Britain has opted out of elements of foreign affairs and criminal justice. But we went through this exhaustively after Maastricht: a treaty clause trumps a declaration. When asked, the European Court always upholds the legal requirements of a treaty, rather than the exemptions.

111 Buckingham Palace Road, London SW1W 0DT
Telephone: 020 7931 2000 Fax: 020 7931 2878
E-mail: dtletters@telegraph.co.uk We accept letters by post, fax and e-mail only. Please include name, address, work and home telephone numbers.

Brown's agenda

SIR – If Gordon Brown is to call an early general election, he will have to do this before the effects of his last Budget take effect in April 2008 (report, June 25).

Otherwise, millions of lower-paid workers and retired people with modest pensions will see the personal cost of his much vaunted reduction of 1p in the rate of income tax. This, of course, came together with the scrapping of the 10p tax rate band – an announcement made with far less noise and self-congratulatory smugness.

Roy Hughes
Bromsgrove, Worcestershire

SIR – A letter (June 25) refers, quite rightly, to the complexity of Mr Brown's tax system and other state benefits.

Would it be prudent of our new prime minister to adopt the policy put forward by William of Ockham, which states: “Entities should be not be multiplied unnecessarily.”

Tom Rhoden
Brooklands, Cheshire

SIR – Mr Brown has promised “unyielding support for the Armed Forces”. Brave words indeed from the comfort of Bridgewater Hall in Manchester.

He almost makes it sound as if our forces in Iraq and Afghanistan are on a mission independent of government.

It should always be remembered that they are there only as part of this Government's foreign policy, parts of which has been based on mis-truths.

I think that this fact is often forgotten by the people of this country. We should support the troops and save our criticism for this Government.

Philip McLaughlin
Ormskirk, Lancashire

Exam pressure

SIR – I read with interest the letter (June 23) where a mother described the plight of her son who had been doing exams for six weeks. What about students who have all their subjects timetable for the one day?

I am the examinations officer in a large secondary school. One of our lower-sixth students had all her AS subjects – Information and Computer Technology, Psychology, English Language and Film Studies – time-tabled for the same day. With permission from the examination boards, she was allowed to do two subjects one day and two the following day; she spent the night with her parents, who guaranteed that she would have no contact with students who had already done her papers.

By the time she started her fourth subject, she was extremely tired.

Has any research been carried out to examine the performance of students put under pressure such as this?

Jean Nile
Wirral, Merseyside

Signs of a postal strike

SIR – For people worried that we will not notice the one-day postal strike (Letters, June 22), it will, of course, be marked by fewer red elastic bands on the street.

Terence Rouse

Grimsby, Lincolnshire

Modern walkers

SIR – Ron Kirby (Letters, June 25) describes his hand signals. These are best used when approaching “Meanderthals”, that modern breed who, whether with phone clamped to their ear or not, seem unable to walk either in a straight line or at a pace that would be bettered by an ageing tortoise.

Giles Morgan
London SW16

Verbalising

SIR – There are many examples of nouns evolving into verbs (Letters, June 25) which have become accepted even to the most traditional of pedants.

I could think of some, but I have to do the Hoovering, then a bit of gardening.

Geoff Hall
Worcester Park, Surrey

Daniel Hannan is a Conservative MEP for south-east England