

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



Alcohol duty plea

Sir, The government's decision to reverse the alcohol duty freeze will result in a double-digit tax increase that unnecessarily fuels inflation, leads to higher prices for consumers and to thousands of jobs being put at risk. The U-turn comes on the back of a turbulent time for bars and restaurants, which are struggling to manage ever-increasing costs, supply chain problems and a shrinking customer base as households feel the pinch of the cost of living crisis. People are already finding that their favourite drinks have become unaffordable.

It does not have to be this way. Over the past five years, during a stable period for alcohol duty, government income from taxing alcohol has increased by 18 per cent. Despite the challenges of Brexit, the pandemic and disruption to global supply chains, our sector has provided increased revenue to the Exchequer because of, not in spite of, duty freezes.

We urge the government to support the drinks industry and cancel the double-digit tax increases on spirits, wine, cider and beer.

Miles Beale, Wine and Spirit Trade Association; **Mark Kent**, Scotch Whisky Association; **Kate Nicholls**, UK Hospitality; **Lizzy Rudd**, Berry Bros. & Rudd; **Nuno Teles**, Diageo; **Simon Doyle**, Concha y Toro UK; **Mark Riley**, Edrington UK; **Alexei Rosin**, Moët Hennessy UK; **Tamara Roberts**, Ridgeview English Wine Estate; **Dan Szor**, Cotswold Distillery *Plus a further 106 signatories at thetimes.co.uk/letters*

Proust's insight

Sir, I can understand resistance to Proust as he has never been for everyone, especially in an age when the present moment and brevity of expression rule supreme — think social media, a torrent of photos, soundbites and the relentless stream of living in the "now" ("Deciphering Proust is a thing of the past in France", news, Nov 11; "Madeleine, Anyone", leading article, Nov 11; letter, Nov 12). But the genius of his introspection and revisiting of the past yield many subtle "Aha!" moments of recognition of the deeper self, through the extraordinary intimacy of his thought process and exploration of relationships and the passage of time. Plus, it has comic relief. I wrote my PhD on Proust years ago but *À la recherche du temps perdu* echoes on in my life and work. **Dr Carla Tammenoms Bakker** London SW3

Corrections and clarifications

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'Mary Celeste' hospitals and a seven-day NHS

Sir, Dr Andrew Stein is quoted as saying that on Friday afternoon hospitals look deserted and little or no routine work is done ("NHS must increase its weekend work to hit targets, says doctor", Nov 14). As a result there has been a predictable wave of criticism from the BMA and others. We should, though, be honest about this issue. In many large trusts non-emergency work (ie, planned lists, scans and clinics) indeed slows down as the weekend approaches, and weekends count as out-of-hours emergency work, both in the hospitals and in the external offices dedicated to social care for patients deemed fit for discharge. It is true that there is a staffing problem in some departments, and also true that the UK is short of doctors and that we are not training enough for our future needs, but it should nevertheless be acknowledged that in many trusts valuable physical resources such as operating theatres, clinics and scanners stand idle over the weekend while the rest of the economy continues to function.

If the NHS wants protected funding, an honest discussion about efficiency is essential.

Chris Wilson
Surgeon, Cardiff

Sir, There are sound arguments to be made for having the NHS available at weekends for routine as well as emergency care ("Unfinished Business", leading article, Nov 14). But even if we had enough staff it would be better to focus our resources (money, staff, estates and equipment) on reducing demand, not constantly responding to it. This week is the 70th anniversary of the foundation of the Royal College of General Practitioners. For seven decades GPs have led the world in providing safe, effective, affordable and accessible care. We are the "risk sink" of the NHS. Yet now, given the rise in complexity of patients' problems, we can barely cope with our workload and our patients are suffering. Redesigning the system by moving staff and resources out of hospital so as to work more closely with GPs and our teams is a far better way forward than stretching an existing workforce beyond its elastic limit.

Dame Clare Gerada
President, Royal College of GPs

Sir, Your leading article is wide of the mark in my opinion in portraying hospital consultants as part of the problem in the goal of providing

seven-day elective services. You suggest that tax incentives may help persuade consultants to do more weekend work, but my observation is that for consultant colleagues it is not all about money: we value and need "quality" time on days off just like everyone else. In my specialist field there are numerous offers from locum agencies to do lucrative elective work at weekends but most of my colleagues will ignore such offers, whether or not they have to worry about tax.

You acknowledge a staffing crisis; there is precious little point in asking staff to work weekends instead of weekdays if this would in turn leave weekday sessions vacant.

We simply do not appear to be training or retaining enough clinicians in the UK to meet the clinical need. Moreover, we should beware of recruiting ever more agency and locum staff to do additional work when the NHS already spends an eye-watering (and surely unsustainable) proportion of its budget on temporary staff.

Dr Neil Fisher, MD, FRCP
Consultant physician and gastroenterologist, Russells Hall Hospital, Dudley, West Midlands

Accountability of Christ Church

Sir, The response of Christ Church, Oxford, to severe criticism from the Charity Commission is not encouraging ("Oxford college guilty of misconduct", says charity watchdog", Nov 10; letter, Nov 14). Its defence is essentially: "We did what seemed right at the time, and the dean, Dr Martyn Percy, was very intransigent." That does not seem a very adequate response to being found guilty of mismanagement and/or misconduct in respect to lavishing £6.6 million in legal and PR fees on trying to oust Dr Percy — and then failing to report this expenditure properly in the public accounts.

The Charity Commission appears to place great reliance on the forthcoming report into the college's governance by Dominic Grieve KC. But the college has not, to my knowledge, agreed to implement Mr Grieve's recommendations and it is not clear that there is any other mechanism for holding to account any trustee responsible for the mismanagement or misconduct

of such a significant charity.

Alan Rusbridger
London NW5

Sir, The Charity Commission has now published its devastating judgment excoriating the misconduct of the Christ Church dons who wasted millions of pounds of the college's charitable funds on their pointless four-year civil war against the Dean without properly clearing it with the trustees. So which members of the college's governing body are going to resign? Which censors (who have been running the college) will accept, apologise and depart on account of their failings? Until these questions are answered there will not be, and should not be, peace at my once great former college.

The Rev Jonathan Aitken
London SW5

Posers in politics

Sir, Trevor Phillips refers to CP Snow's remark that, in his time, few in the political class knew the second law of thermodynamics ("It's time to kick the posers out of politics", Nov 14). This was noted by Flanders and Swann,

who accordingly, in 1964, published their song *First and Second Law of Thermodynamics*, which explained the second law as: "Heat won't pass from a cooler to a hotter/You can try it if you like but you far better notter."

In the same sketch they also exhorted the public to guard against "rude retorts" to scientists. This should be required listening for MPs. **Dr Julian Critchlow**
Ditcham, Hants

Growth industry

Sir, Your article regarding men getting their legs lengthened ("Growth industry as more men sign up to have their legs lengthened", Nov 14) reminded me of Harry Secombe, who maintained that he was taller sitting down than standing up. And indeed, when seen sitting down with others much taller than he was, this appeared to be so.

Charles Murray
High Harrington, Cumbria

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BROADCASTING OFFICIALLY BEGUN

FROM THE TIMES NOVEMBER 15, 1922

Broadcasting in this country officially began yesterday, when news bulletins and weather reports were sent out from the London and Manchester stations of the British Broadcasting Company. The erection of the station at the Witton Works of the General Electric Company, Birmingham, is being expedited, and it is hoped to have the station ready for use tonight in sending out the election results. Broadcasting will then take place from three stations, covering a large part of the country. Other stations are being completed as rapidly as possible. Sir William

Noble, chairman of the Broadcasting Company, outlined his plans to The Times. "At the beginning," he said, "broadcasting will be conducted purely from a social point of view. Twice nightly there will be a brief synopsis of the world's news, prepared by four Press agencies. The Meteorological Department of the Air Ministry is supplying us with two weather reports. The first of the two reports will be given directly the station opens, and the other between 9pm and 10pm. In addition there will be concerts, instrumental and vocal, and it may be that later we shall arrange for speeches written by popular people to be broadcast. For the broadcasting of the election results the Press agencies will give us an outline — so many Unionists, so many Lloyd George people, so many Liberals, and so on, together with particulars of Mr Bonar Law, Mr Asquith, and any of the leaders. I have told them that they must not

go beyond 1 o'clock in the morning, in order not to interfere with the newspapers. We want to work in such a way that broadcasting may be an incentive to the public to buy more newspapers. We hope that many people will take up broadcasting who otherwise might not take a great interest in the world's news, and that, by giving them a brief synopsis of events, we shall whet their appetite for news and thus induce them to buy more newspapers."

Asked whether, if broadcasting had started a fortnight ago, summaries of election speeches would have been issued, Sir William said: "No, that would have been usurping the legitimate functions of the Press. The matter has been thrashed out with the Press agencies, and we have been guided by them."

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Musical chairs

Sir, Huw van Steenis is right that ENO staff deserve better and that Arts Council England should reconsider forcing the company to move to Manchester ("ENO is a cultural beacon that must be protected", Thunderer, Nov 14).

There is good news, however: Ashford borough council and Kent county council have invited ENO to move its base to Ashford, which is only 35 minutes from London by high-speed train and within easy reach of the Continent. My company is building a live entertainment venue in Ashford that is scheduled to open next autumn: it could be the new home of the ENO, with its productions still playing at the Coliseum, with occasional visits to Manchester and elsewhere.

Arts Council England must surely understand that the West End and the Coliseum are slowly recovering from the pandemic and need regular funding, rather than being ordered to move north. Kent needs levelling up too, and moving ENO to Ashford would be a good start.

Paul Gregg
Managing director, Teampartner Three; former chairman, Apollo Leisure Group

Slip of the tongue

Sir, Further to your obituary of Sir David Butler (Nov 10), and a young producer, Tony Benn, asking him to avoid using too many Rs because of his lisp, as a former speech therapist may I correct this popular misconception? A lisp affects the letter S and is so named when the person pronounces an S as TH, with the tongue protruding between the teeth. A defective R, pronounced as a W, is termed a rhotacism. Both these speech defects are very common and often remain uncorrected, but a few sessions with a speech therapist can soon rectify the problem.

Diana Brocklehurst
Bournemouth

In fine voice

Sir, Libby Purves is to be applauded for her article "School should be something to sing about" (Nov 14). When the courageous Ukrainians returned to their city of Kherson, what did we see them all doing? Standing shoulder to shoulder, mobile phones in hands, singing their songs. **Judy Appleyard**
St Leonards-on-Sea, E Sussex

Roe your boat

Sir, How I sympathise with Mark Lane in Gloucestershire ("Where do roes go?", letter, Nov 14). I purchase mine at the marvellous wet fish counter of Waitrose in Clapham Junction. His recipe of "lightly fried in a dusting of seasoned flour" can be enhanced with a splash of Pernod at the end of cooking. The hint of Pernod lightly flavouring the buttered toast is truly delicious.

Gillian Royale
London SW11

British to the core

Sir, Further to Emma Duncan's piece "The British citizenship test takes the cake" (Notebook, Nov 14), the definitive test for awarding citizenship should surely be: "When did you last play Pooch sticks?"

John Pitts
Penarth, Vale of Glamorgan