

Letters to the Editor



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Lifting restrictions

Sir, Your leading article "Testing Questions" (Feb 22) rightly highlights that the government's plans fall short in not providing free testing for the over-50s and the clinically vulnerable. However, the plans also fail to recognise, and make provisions for, the unequal impact that the pandemic has had across society so far, and the unequal risks from "living with Covid". Expecting people to take personal responsibility to reduce the spread of Covid overlooks the insufficient provision of sick pay, which means that many of those who are infected will be tempted to continue working rather than take time off. The removal of statutory sick pay from day one of isolating further increases this risk.

Further, limits to free testing could lead to infection rates increasing more rapidly in more deprived areas of the country, where the impact of infection may be more severe given the lower uptake of vaccination.

David Finch
The Health Foundation

Sir, I tested positive at 8am on Sunday morning, an hour before I was due to participate in a church service of 50 people. The idea that I could have continued to meet and minister to such a group of people with such knowledge, without any restriction, defies belief. At best, privacy. At worst,

Time for the West to stand up to Putin

Sir, William Hague suggests that the "Ukraine crisis is a wake-up call for the West" (Feb 22). I would suggest that just as President Putin states that his decision on Ukraine was "long overdue", the West's prevarication on Russia is even more overdue. For too long the British government has taken a soft line with Russia. The Salisbury novichok incident was a state-sponsored terrorist attack on UK soil, and as such an act of war. The resulting expulsion of Russian diplomats was ineffectual, as were travel and visa restrictions on Russians close to Putin after the annexation of Crimea. Meanwhile Britain has failed to close the back door, allowing vast sums of money to flow into the UK through offshore tax havens from Russian oligarchs close to Putin. Now is the time to correct such mistakes and for Britain to stand up to Putin and his corrupt regime. We need action, not words.

Stephen J Allen
Portola Valley, California

Sir, William Hague is right that Putin's Russia poses a new challenge. Since Cardinal Wolsey in the 1520s, British foreign policy has had the balance of interstate power as a

guiding principle. It is striking how many major wars have been caused by rulers with unlimited power, from Louis XIV to Hitler. With the decline of democracy around the world and the rise of autocracy, it may be that we and our allies should pay more attention to an imbalance of governmental power, seeking to dethrone or diminish dictators before they do what seems to come naturally to them as warmongers.

Philip Allott
Professor emeritus of international public law, Cambridge University

Sir, The truly chilling aspect of President Putin's decision to recognise the "independence" of rebel statelets on the territory of Ukraine is not just the violation of the most basic principles of international law but what this tells us about him. Putin was often portrayed as just a good gambler. Yet the past few days have revealed him as an obsessed leader who genuinely believes in his pseudo-historic theories denying the existence of a Ukrainian nation: he seems utterly convinced of his own mission to restore Russia's glories and avenge his country's supposed slights.

Thus, even if Putin's latest land grab in Ukraine is his last and he is deterred from launching a further military invasion, containing a Putin-led Russia is now our certain burden for many years to come.

The post-Cold War period started with lofty speeches from dissidents and intellectuals and boundless optimism. It is now ending with a rant from an individual no longer amenable to reasoning.

Dr Jonathan Eyal
Associate director, Royal United Services Institute

Sir, Our government has fallen straight into President Putin's trap by reserving severe sanctions for if and when Russia invades the whole of Ukraine. Putin will now happily absorb the eastern provinces of Ukraine at minor cost in terms of banking rather than trade sanctions, as happened after the annexation of Crimea. He will have noted with relish how Germany has suspended rather than cancelled the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline. Ukraine has been invaded and we should apply full and total trade sanctions right now.

Bradley Lightbody
Batley, W Yorks

Post Office scandal

Sir, Melanie Phillips is absolutely right about the public indifference shown over the appalling treatment by the Post Office of more than 700 innocent sub-postmasters over 14 years ("Where's the outcry over Post Office scandal?" comment, Feb 22)

have seen with many recent scandals, including HBOS, Carillon, PPE contracts and Barclays, to name but a few, where systemic wrongdoing has been alleged but the management that has overseen these matters has been able to move on with little or no penalty, sometimes taking bonuses and high salaries with them.

This case is far worse and can be

a free press in exposing two egregious miscarriages of justice, the Birmingham Six debacle and the Post Office sub-postmaster scandal. In both cases it was investigative journalists who exposed the malign mindset in official circles that led to innocent people being incarcerated, and victims being misled as to the justice they had received. To constrict

Skeleton cuts no ice

Sir, Owen Slot ("Time to end expensive fixation with skeleton", sport, Feb 21) is right: Britain must be more realistic about which sports are likely to result in medals at a Winter Olympics and put resources into those. The obvious model to emulate is the Netherlands, which has even fewer mountains and less snow than Britain but won 17 medals in Beijing, eight of which were gold. All these medals, except one bronze, came from speed skating, a sport in which they have built upon tradition with great facilities and excellent coaching. The success we have achieved at Summer Olympics in cycling and rowing gives us clear, repeatable models to find world-beating speed on the ice rink.

Alan Hearne
Woodstock, Oxon

Unwitting divorce

Sir, It has always been relatively easy to obtain a divorce fraudulently ("Woman unaware of divorce for 12 years after signature forged", Feb 21). The applicant for divorce has to give the address of their spouse/civil partner on the application but no check is made as to whether the postal address is actually that of the respondent or on the identity of the respondent or authenticity of the signature of acknowledgment that is returned to the court. Anyone worried about their marital status should carry out a search of the central register of decrees absolute.

Peter Devlin
District judge, Oxford Combined Court

Unsung royal son