



War grave equality

Sir, Further to your report "Wartime shipwrecks are not what they seem" (Apr 4), the legal entity of "war grave" does not exist for those who died at sea. There has been widespread reporting of Royal Navy wrecks from the two world wars being looted both in the North Sea and in the Java Sea (from the Battle of the Java Sea in 1942), with accompanying gruesome images of human remains, removed by the perpetrators and buried ashore in shallow graves.

After the First World War the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) was established to bury bodies properly and record those killed whose bodies could not be found. By comparison with Flanders, naval burials seemed less immediate. For the bones of sailors torn from the hulks of warships by metal grabs there is nothing.

Naval remains will stay a very low priority unless the UK follows the example of many of its wartime Allies and treats its naval dead with the same reverence as all war dead.

The CWGC's avowed equality of treatment for all military personnel does not deliver tri-service equality. Just as UK law treats a ditched aircraft and its dead pilot differently from a sailor in a wrecked warship, so the CWGC treats a skull ploughed up in Flanders differently from a skull in a salvage grab in the Java Sea. JESSICA BERRY, CEO, Maritime Archaeology Sea Trust (Mast); VICE-ADMIRAL SIR ANTHONY DYMOCK, trustee, Mast; DAVE PARHAM, associate professor, Bournemouth University; MICHAEL WILLIAMS, visiting research fellow, Plymouth University, and Mast heritage director; ROBERT YORKE, chairman, Joint Nautical Archaeology Policy Committee

Search for a saviour to rescue the centre

Sir, I entirely agree with Rachel Sylvester ("There's a hole in the centre made for a saviour", Apr 3) about the desperate need for a new centre party, and that David Miliband would be an ideal person to lead it, but not only because of his positive qualities. Contrary to Ms Sylvester's hope that former leaders of all three parties might unite in supporting a new party, I think it is essential that they don't. All are liabilities with sections of the electorate.

The most prominent such figures are Tony Blair and Nick Clegg. However unfairly, the Iraq war makes Mr Blair a liability with nearly everyone on the left, as does Mr Clegg's flip-flopping on university fees with present and recent university students. They both must make themselves invisible if a new Macron-style party is to have any chance of success. And I think it would help if Sir John Major, Sir Vince Cable and Ed Miliband did the same. David Miliband, by contrast, has been out of UK politics for so long that he brings no unhelpful baggage with him. And, as Ms Sylvester makes clear, he has a great deal of highly relevant experience, plus undoubted charisma. DAVID TERRY
Droitwich, Worcs

Assisted dying and the sanctity of life

Sir, Having read Rabbi Jonathan Romain's Thunderer (Apr 4) readers might conclude that Jewish tradition looks upon assisted dying favourably. Nothing could be farther from the truth. He asks "in whose interest are we forcing people to live on against their will?" The believing Jew would retort sharply that by divine command no less, man is enjoined to carrying on living; not because there is anything sacred about suffering per se but because there is something sacred about living itself. Man does not have the freedom to bring upon himself his own death; such a decision lies within the confines of the

Sir, There's a hole called our antediluvian electoral system in Rachel Sylvester's suggestion that a charismatic centrist could sweep to power in Britain. Our first-past-the-post system has changed little since 1832. We still have equivalents of the pre-Great Reform Bill's rotten boroughs; nowadays they are called safe seats. About two thirds of British MPs are, in effect, selected solely by a handful of local party members. Even those of us who live in marginal seats must indulge in gesture politics or vote for the least-worse electable candidate if our favourite party stands no chance.

President Macron was voted into power in France via a proportional system. No such opportunity exists here; anyone hoping to "break the mould" of British politics will surely have the awful fate of those charismatic souls involved in the SDP-Liberal alliance high in their thoughts. Many things may have changed in 35 years but alas not our voting method. BRIAN HUGHES
Cheltenham

Sir, Rachel Sylvester may be right that there is a hole in the political centre but much of her article seems full of wishful thinking. For a start, none of

western generation — which ranks material and mental comfort and the rights of each individual as values of the highest order — as a cruel and unforgiving one. However, it enshrines the very act of living itself with a holiness and dignifies its adherents, who, strong-willed, refuse to allow their suffering to become the only determinant in assessing whether to continue inhabiting this Earth. GAVRIEL COHN
London NW4

Blocking takeovers

Sir, Robert Lea's intervention opens up the debate on corporate ownership ("Unions get wrong signals on GKN", Business, Apr 4). Clearly the government has a significant role to

the candidates she names, including David Miliband and Chuka Umunna, have the charisma to appeal to the wider electorate.

In any case, what is important right now is to prevent two impending catastrophes that need to be avoided at all costs: first, a bad Brexit without a trade deal, and second a Corbyn-led government that would dismantle our defences, cosy up to Russia and ruin our economy. If Theresa May can successfully manage Brexit there is a chance that her successor as leader of the Conservative Party will have the personality and policies to win the next election from the centre ground.

Given these imperatives, talk of political realignment is pie in the sky. MICHAEL PATTERSON
Swineshead, Lincs

Sir, Rachel Sylvester is to be applauded for her excellent commonsense idea of a middle-of-the-road party to take us out of the present political mess. David Miliband would be an excellent leader if he could be persuaded to return to the UK. I for one would have no doubt where to cast my centre-ground vote and there must be millions like me. PETER BRIESS
London NW3

But this matter extends beyond government. The national interest is intertwined with many other interests, including those of pensioners, consumers and employees. How can the clash between shareholders' expectations and pensions obligations be squared? This is only one of the questions with which a new forum must concern itself.

Ideas around the creation of share-bloc-owning foundations with the role of protecting those different interests, and the power to block takeovers, should therefore be looked at urgently. The work and pensions select committee will begin this exercise from the angle of pensioners. FRANK FIELD, MP
Chairman, House of Commons work and pensions select committee

'Mammoth' ivory

Sir, I was interested to read Michael Gove's article on the forthcoming restrictions on dealing in ivory ("We must end this shameful trade now", News, Apr 3). Visiting Hong Kong last week I saw many items for sale, clearly new, in a material closely resembling ivory. These items were labelled as having been made from "mammoth tusk" together with an explanation of how this material is being sourced from the frozen tundra. I do not know how many mammoths might be accessible for this purpose but would surmise very few, and not enough to meet what is clearly a significant demand. Shoppers should, I think, be on their guard.

PROFESSOR MICHAEL PROCTOR, FRS
King's College, Cambridge

Cost of poor health

Sir, Your correspondents (letters, Apr 4) note the health damage of smoking and drinking but also of outdoor pursuits. What they omit to mention is that smokers and drinkers pay huge amounts of additional taxes and also die younger, saving the state and private pension schemes large sums of money. Those rushing around outdoors do not. The biggest cost growth for health and care in the next 20 years is likely to come from the slowly declining fit, living in frailty, not the sudden deaths of those making poor consumption decisions. We should try to wean smokers and drinkers off their unhealthy consumption but this is unlikely to save the rest of us any money.

PETER WEST
Health economist, London SW20

Two coats good

Sir, Natalie Hammond's piece on the emerging trend of double-coating (Times2, Apr 4) is certainly timely given the recent Beast from the East. However, it has a precedent. In chapter one of *Mary Poppins*, Mr Banks looks out of the window and remarks: "Admiral's telescope says East Wind. I thought as much. There is frost in my bones. I shall wear two overcoats."