

The
Audacity
of
Hype

Bewilderment, Sleaze and Other Tales of the 21st Century

**Armando
IANNUCCI**

Armando Iannucci is one of Britain's most celebrated comedy writers and directors. He is a creator of *The Day Today*, *Alan Partridge*, *The Saturday Night Armistice* and *The Thick of It*. He has produced many TV and radio programmes, including *On the Hour* and *The Mary Whitehouse Experience*, and co-wrote and directed the film *In the Loop*.

Also by Armando Iannucci

Facts and Fancies

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For Emilio, Marcello and Carmella.
A small exchange for all the smiles.

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The Cultural Omniverse: Books, Film, Art, TV, People, Receipts

And the award for the best award goes to . . .

The slow movement of the first violin concerto by Max Bruch has just been voted the most popular piece of popular classical music from the romantic period popularised by Nigel Kennedy of all time. The poll was conducted among readers of *Popular Music Popularised by Kennedy Music Magazine* and was published in this month's edition. The full results were: 1st, Bruch, Violin Concerto, Slow Movement; 2nd, Adagio (Slow Movement) from Concerto for Violin and Orchestra by Max Bruch; 3rd, *Kennedy's Classics* CD, track three (the slow movement of Bruch's Violin Concerto).

Furore as 'golfing' voted most popular sport ending in '-ing' of all time

In a shock poll upset published this week, the sport of 'golfing' was voted the most popular '-ing' sport of all time, above the favourite, 'fishing'. The poll, conducted by readers of *Sporting Reading Magazine*, a periodical devoted to '-ing'-ending sports, has provoked a furious outcry

from sports enthusiasts, who claim that golfing is not a true '-ing'-ending sport.

'The vote was fair,' said editor, Coling Robertsing. 'I know this year we've relaxed the rules slightly, but they're still a true reflection of our readers' interests.'

The final results were: 1st, golfing; 2nd, fishing; 3rd, hurling; 4th, curling; 5th, footballing; 6th, snorkelling; 7th, snookering; 8th, kissing; 9th, kicking; 10th, dining.

Dam in *Dambusters* voted greatest film wall of all time
Readers of *Utter Cinema Magazine* have voted for the top hundred walls in cinema history. Surprisingly, the wall in the Pink Floyd-inspired film *The Wall* did not make it on to the list.

Prince Philip voted world's least eligible bachelor, by readers of *Tatler* magazine

He narrowly beat last year's winner, Madonna.

Historians declare 'and' most important syllable of twentieth century

A panel of three historians has announced that, from an eligible 545 syllables, 'and' is the one that has done most by far to shape the course of the twentieth century. The three historians, who comprise the readership of *Historical Prospects in Perspective* magazine, voted overwhelmingly for 'and' in this month's issue, saying that its occurrence in such crucial words as 'Flanders', 'Bertrand Russell', 'Commandant' and twice in 'Normandy Landings' already put it streets above other syllables by the end of the Second World War, but its role in shaping later

twentieth-century history was confirmed with the release of Nelson Mandela. It has also featured in many familiar icons of twentieth-century cultural life, such as *Grandstand* and *The Manchurian Candidate*. Runners-up were 'ol' and 'sud'.

David Dimbleby voted strongest anchorman in Europe

In this month's *Men's Total Fitness Magazine*, a panel of thirty flab experts assessed the fat-to-body-weight ratio of a hundred political presenters across Europe, looked at muscle definition, age and imagined strength, and concluded that, if cornered and angry, David Dimbleby could probably knock his nearest rival, Andrew Marr, into kingdom come.

Wicker voted thing people feel nothing towards, one way or another

Readers of the *Sunday People* were asked to vote for one thing out of everything there is. All the votes were then totalled, and everything put in order. The five things that were in the exact middle were then declared the top five things that people feel nothing towards, one way or another. The full results were: 1st, wicker; 2nd, barometers; 3rd, Phillip Schofield; 4th, lime; 5th, the *Sunday People*.

Golfing voted best thing ever by readers of *Woman's Own*

There was upset this week when the results of a *Woman's Own* readers' survey showed that golfing was the best thing ever, defeating the two clear favourites, cherries and northern Italy. 'There's no evidence our poll has been

sabotaged by outside golfing groups,' said editor Kathy Faldo, 'so we just have to accept most women like golfing over everything else there is in life of all time.'

Fight for your rights, you thick, fat, sad, golfing men

I want to start a sex war. Yes, another one. I think it is time all men took to the streets with horns and whistles, scaled some hallowed public monument, such as the Albert Memorial or Esther Rantzen, and unfurled a large banner saying, 'No to the consistent portrayal in greetings cards of men as fat, balding, beer-swiggling idiots who spend all their time thinking about football and eighteen-year-old girls, don't do any housework and can't express themselves emotionally other than by means of childish and disruptive roof-top demonstrations.' I have just about had it with the way men are portrayed in greetings cards. My wife tells me that it is nearly impossible to organise a 'spontaneous' Father's Day card from my children because all the cards on sale contain messages along the lines of:

Dad, as you sit and read your paper
Beside your breakfast spoon and cup and saucer,
Today remember how we think of you
As a lecherous, fat, boozy old dosser.

And that's one of the least poisonous ones. Birthday cards are even more consistent in their portrayal of us all as thick, fat idiots. Try getting a card for a man over thirty-five, and I defy you to find anything different from

Have a great day, you birthday boy,
And drink as much beer as you can.
What else can you do at your age,
When your life's gone down the pan?
You thick, fat idiot.

Subtlety is not the outstanding feature of these cards, which are the essence of contempt for the male being. Their very look and feel shout loathing, even though that loathing has probably been manufactured by men in the greetings-card industry who think there is a huge market in articulating utter disdain for half the population. Maybe that explains why when you go into a card shop now, alongside the signs labelling standard categories such as Mother's Birthday, Sister's Wedding, or Family Funeral, more than half the shop is taken up with a large sign for 'Thick, Fat, Sad, Golfing, Impotent, Slobby Men'. One is free to pick any card at random from this section; it will contain roughly the same stark message, such as:

Happy Birthday, golf-git

Or

Ooops. Now you're forty, you're a sad sack of dust

Or

All the best, now your genitals don't work

So consistent are card messages in portraying all men as barely functioning degenerates, that I wonder if the

greetings industry is not missing a trick here. Surely they can come up with more specific variations on the theme of male inadequacy? What about:

Happy Birthday to a wonderful dad
Obsessed with cars and electrical wiring;
Too engrossed in engine oil to notice
The divorce lawyer Mum is hiring?

Or

Drunk, insensitive, narrow-minded and boorish
Are adjectives some others would mention,
But the one quality that sums you up as a partner
Is your unwavering anal retention.

And why stop there? Why not produce a range of greetings cards for men that claims to express masculine emotions clearly and succinctly? For example:

This Valentine's Day, my darling girlfriend,
My love burns with a flame that dances and
flickers,
My heart beats in unending rhythm with your soul,
'Cos I'll do what it takes to get into your knickers.

Or

To my darling wife, now our child is born,
You've made me proud and excited and happy.
So here's to a new stage in our life together,
One in which I'll go nowhere near a nappy.

Or

With deep sympathy, my friend,
At this time of your painful loss.
Words can't express my sorrow
So let's go bet on a horse.

This last example raises an even more worrying possibility:

This is it.
There's nothing more to be said,
Other than congratulations
Now your male partner's dead.

Man has decided to stay in and wait for the broccoli

Up in space is a trillion-dollar superstructure built by five continents, the main purpose of which is to allow man to make valuable observations on what it's like having nothing to do.

The International Space Station is probably history's most ambitious construction project since the Pyramids, and, like the Pyramids, no one really knows what it's there for. Nasa is mostly stumped trying to come up with a daily schedule of scientific experiments to divert the vehicle's astronauts from thoughts of spectacular suicide.

A team of a hundred scientists somewhere in Houston devises experiments such as Measuring the Effect of Weightlessness on Mariah Carey, Seeing if the Time Taken to Read *A Suitable Boy* by Vikram Seth Is Reduced if You

Travel at Close to the Speed of Light, and When You Repeatedly Focus and Refocus a Telescope In and Out, Can You Make it Look Like the Universe is on *Top of the Pops*?

The Space Station's main purpose is to look at the Earth, though if we'd sent up a gibbon with a camera in a hot-air balloon and spent the rest of the money on irrigation projects throughout the third world, the Earth might now look radically different and the gibbon would bring back more interesting pictures. In the end, though, the Space Station may serve one final useful purpose: to function as a perpetual reminder that humanity's intelligence is not limitless.

The fact that we feel the need to build it, but have run out of ideas for its everyday use, signifies a terrible full stop in the history of human enlightenment. We have reached the end of what we want to know. While the Hubble telescope brings back snapshots from deep in space and back in time, we are stumped if we know how we can further improve the here and now.

A circuit in our brain appears to have been triggered over the past ten years or so that causes us to apply miraculous technology to the pursuit of the mundane. The communications revolution hasn't made us get from A to B any faster: it's simply meant that our trains are now full of people reading their phones.

The bulk of the trillion pulses of information shuttling through our atmosphere do not contain knowledge of medical advances or economic breakthrough, but are instead prized data on how to update your phone's ring-tone to the theme to Channel 5 News.

We were told we could have all knowledge and information at our fingertips, and now we're saying we don't want it. All we need in life is some free games, porn and music, and the ability to have broccoli delivered to our door in a van. The lure of the interactive has been spurned. We don't want to look at our screens and see all our choices and make our decisions at the push of a red, yellow, green or blue button. We'd rather they were made for us.

The invention of scores of new ways of voting in state elections, by post, by email, text message, pigeon or car-horn, has resulted merely in the miserable decline in the number of votes cast. Man, who spent millennia venturing forth into the unknown, charting dangerous waters and conquering towering peaks, is now deciding to stay in.

It may be that this capping of enlightenment is a good thing, perhaps the last throw of the evolutionary dice in our favour. When we do acquire fresh knowledge, we usually put it to bad use, mostly in the form of weaponry that will kill us all. We would breed animals that detonate if we could.

Is it, then, that Mother Nature has contrived for our brains to stop growing, so that we'll survive that little bit longer, even if it means simply to spend more time performing pointless experiments on squirrels in space?

Don't miss these TV treats

In case you haven't yet seen them, here's the full programme listings for FourFuss, the new digital channel from Channel 4 that consists entirely of programmes commissioned just to cause a fuss. Highlights include:

Celebrity Circumcision Live From Gordon Ramsay's kitchen. Contains strobe effects.

Where Are Diana's Knicker Elastics? What became of them, who's got them and why are they hiding them?

Racist Bingo, presented by Jon Snow and Dr David Starkey.

Puppetry of the Foetus Dr Gunther von Hagens uses latest scientific mini-stick techniques to poke fetuses inside the womb into performing children's tales with a bloody twist.

Balls of Testicles More comic capers from the bollock-naked team, who use their testicles to fool members of the public into thinking they're bags of money.

Gerald Kaufman Says, 'Fuck Golf!' The popular but morose MP explains why he's suddenly gone off the popular but pointless game. Contains swearing.

Coptic Collisions Atheist scientist Richard Dawkins proves that religion is nonsense by firing two representatives of the Eastern Christian Coptic Church at each other at high speeds to see if, at the point of impact, they forgive each other for their deaths. The programme is followed by a dramatisation of the subsequent court case.

What If Tessa Jowell Were A Lesbian? Dramadoc penned by Alistair Beaton imagining what it would have been like if

Tessa Jowell had been a lady-feeler for the last ten years. Starring Catherine Tate.

Carpet Bombing Never Happened With Julie Burchill.

Was Goebbels Nice? Yes, He Was Controversial documentary claiming that Hitler's henchman was actually lovely.

Someone's Eaten My Cannibal! New reality show in which two teams of celebrities go into the jungle and learn how to eat each other.

Fisting from Newmarket Account of life in a small town in Suffolk.

Radioactive Roustabout Entertainment show highlighting controversial new evidence that radioactivity is harmless by featuring a celebrity game of Laser Quest from inside one of Sellafield's cooling towers.

I Love Having My Tits Sliced Off With John McCririck and Vanessa Feltz. Contains astonishing nudity.

House of Tiny Terrorists Small children are raised from birth to blow up densely populated urban areas, but are then reported to the police and arrested.

Ugly Botty People with misshapen backsides talk about what it's like growing up with them. And then show them. (Also available in high definition.)

You won't catch me on I'm a Celebrity . . . But, there again . . .

There comes a tipping point in everyone's life when they have to give up their dreams of ever again achieving a flatter stomach. The dam has burst, the levee has been breached, the poundage will tumble on, never to be removed in your lifetime. There comes a time in every person's days when he must realise university students really do look thirteen and that the reason they do is because he is now forty-three. The runway to death is being taxed and the engines are revving.

There comes a moment, such a painful pinprick of a moment, when you find yourself actually raising one eyebrow in interest at the sight of the word 'lavender' on a jar of lavender honey. You've gone bourgeois, and no set of barricades and handbooks on squatting will reconstitute your now defunct revolutionary mindset.

What I'm saying is, there comes a point in life when you have to accept you're no longer the person you like to think you are. Where the thing you might have liked about yourself no longer holds, and you have to admit it openly or live the rest of your life hunkered down in a lie. Even though I've been writing for newspapers for more than ten years, and occasionally turn up on telly or the radio, I've been telling myself I'm not a celebrity. Celebrities are dirty, stupid things. Their brains are in their wardrobes and their souls are parked outside the gates of hell.

They shag, divorce, get arrested, shag on telly, dry out and have weird shapes tattooed on their shoulders. How

can I be a celebrity? I'm normal. I do normal things like fill up the dog-bowl and look forward to buying strong cheese on Saturday.

Then I got an email asking if I'd be interested in being in the new series of *I'm a Celebrity . . . Get Me Out of Here!*. Suddenly, a series of simultaneous but radically different existential crises ran through my head. Does this mean I'm a celebrity? I thought. But also: Which kind of a celebrity am I? A C-list one, whose time has come? Or a Z-list one who's in desperate need of a comeback?

And what does it say about how others perceive me? Does the world see me as someone so dead in the heart I'd be happy to wash my pants in an infected river and stick my arse in a bath of dung beetles so Ant and Dec can laugh at me crying? Do people who shape fashion and bleat on about cultural trends actually see me as someone perfectly relaxed about being filmed in the company of a retarded version of Cilla Black and the violinist from the Cranberries? For two weeks away from my wife and kids? And all my friends? And then return to them afterwards, when they've watched me do these things? And think I'd be perfectly happy and not broken inside like a vase under a rhino?

On the other hand, I thought, it might be quite a laugh. I was asked to come and meet the producers for a 'no-obligation' meeting. What ought I to do to these crack-minded people? I asked a friend for advice and he suggested I either turn up and, for a laugh, pretend to think I'm being offered the hosting job, or go along to the meeting, ask pertinent questions and then, once they've booked

me, say, 'One thing. There won't be any Jews, will there?' My friend works in comedy, but that's normal, isn't it?

Reality suckers

When I was asked to go on *I'm a Celebrity . . . Get Me Out of Here!*, I wrote a newspaper column about it, which I thought made it pretty clear why I was saying 'no'. (It was because I think reality shows are stinking, manipulative psycho-sewers populated by emotional dwarfs and made by scum-smearred zombies with the brain power of a blood orange and the imagination of a bin.)

So it came as a complete surprise when, the following week, I got an email from another reality show saying they'd read what I had to say about reality shows, could see that I had something to say about reality shows and wondered if I wanted to go on a reality-show-based show to say it. Basically, I was invited on to *Big Brother's Little Brother*.

What I don't understand is, where in all this bile I threw at reality shows did the writer of that request find any redeeming phrase that would make him or her think, You never know, he might say yes? Anyone with an IQ above that of a spatchcock can surely see I don't want to have anything to do with reality shows. But no. On they come, again and again, like the Japanese at Okinawa. I hate their shows. I hate the space they take up in my brain. I hate the images of men with stupid hats piggyback-riding naked women round an inflatable settee that spatter the newsagent's counter each morning.

And I resent the notion that I could give these shows

the oxygen of publicity when so much more could be achieved chucking them the anthrax of publicity instead.

James Bond's receipts

- Small Moroccan marketplace destroyed. Thirteen chipped jugs and smashed shelving unit. Fifteen geese escaped from wicker basket: £350
- £433,000 gambled in South African casino to lure blackjack enthusiast into giving me secret code to rocket-launcher: £433,000, plus £23 entry fee
- Funeral arrangements for thirty-three men: £23,000
- Counselling services for ninety-two children, and widows of thirty-three men: £2600
- Memorial service for man eaten by shark: £3000
- Aids test: £100
- Speeding ticket, Lisbon: £40
- Destruction of Lisbon: £3 billion
- Use of thirteen snowploughs to tidy up ski slope, Lausanne, after chase: £56,043

- Cost of lifting snowplough from bottom of seabed (see my PA for explanation: it's quite complicated): £23,000
 - Cost of removing a further three snowploughs from the Moon: £4 billion
 - Small operation on groin: £450 (covered by private health insurance)
 - Damage to jumbo-jet window: £23
 - Loss of jumbo jet: £49 million (may be able to include window-damage cost in this)
 - I left three grappling hooks on the side of a building somewhere in New Delhi: £45 each. Can't remember where because it was dark
 - Loss of night-sight goggles: £670
 - Repair to buckled Corby trouser press after being used to fry arm of hotel-room intruder: £34
 - Replacement of small glass tumbler used to house toothbrush and razor in hotel bathroom; accidentally dropped as I fumbled in the night to switch light on only to find the bulb was broken and had blown a fuse: £3.50. (I have subsequently taken this up with the hotel manager and he's likely to waive the charge.)
-

Orwell's Newspeak is reborn: the new language of relentless optimism

Someone on the telly once uttered a certain phrase and, in its utterance, signalled the end of proper communication as Western civilisation has known it for the past 2500 years. The phrase was 'greenfield opportunity'. The man who said it probably didn't realise he was initiating a radical paradigm shift but, then, why should he? He was just a spokesman for Capita, the company that runs London's congestion-charge operation. There he was on the local news, explaining away the teething troubles that his company had experienced in trying to collect penalty payments from motorists. Why, he was asked, had there been some almighty cock-ups? Why were thousands of motorists getting off scot-free while innocent drivers were receiving demands for hundreds of pounds? He said it was because the congestion charge was in its infancy. Nobody had ever done something like this before. It was 'a greenfield opportunity'. That was the end of the interview.

When he said 'greenfield opportunity', the newsreader didn't bat an eyelid. A graphic failed to pop up on screen saying, 'Huh?' The reporter didn't spray water from his mouth. The spokesman had turned potential defeat into a moment of rejoicing. We now live in a society that lets someone get away with the phrase 'greenfield opportunity' without being punched. And, therefore, we are becoming a people every bit as weak and as imaginatively constipated as the citizens of Airstrip One in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

Orwell depicted a world constrained by Newspeak, a verbally clumsy and deliberately limited language whose very inadequacy stamped out the expression of inappropriate social and political thoughts. 'Greenfield opportunity' and other phrases like it ('blue-skies thinking', 'beacons of excellence', 'refreshing the brand', 'placing innovation at the forefront of our strategy', 'the challenge of change') may not be as explicitly connected to an arid ideology as Newspeak, but the attempt of these phrases to impose a fiction upon thought, to manufacture a world view from which it's increasingly difficult to diverge, is just as deliberate. Language experts write articles about how texting is a new form of English that will eventually kill the current one.

But while we've all been staring at our phones, we've lost sight of the real threat to proper communication: the frightening and unchallenged conquest of our language by this new dictionary of upbeat, light-headed, fresh-faced optimism. Orwell's spokespeople had a dry, non-decorative vocabulary; the greenfield opportunists speak a language of metaphor and vivid imagery that may seem more appealing but is just as dogmatic in its rejection of any word or concept that implies criticism or opposition. It's a relentlessly, almost religiously, optimistic harangue. Someone like the Capita spokesman uses 'greenfield opportunity' as comfortably as an evangelist would preach to us about water and 'the light of life'. 'Yes,' the spokesman is saying to us, 'when we at Capita took this job on, we hadn't a clue how it was going to work. But don't you see how dull and mindless it would be to admit ignorance? Life is full of challenges; the

unknown must be seized with relish. The cock-ups and glitches signal the dangers that we brave fellows have taken upon ourselves.

'But utter not defeatist talk of failure and heartache. Look to the eastern horizon, where the green uplands of an eventually smooth-running penal-collection system lie in wait for only those of us brave and noble enough to continue the journey to its end. Come, come with us; be on our side; see the bustling, but carefully regulated, drive-through Utopia beckoning. Journey alongside us with a shining heart, for before us lies a greenfield opportunity.'

The problem with the utopic language of these enraptured automata is that it's almost impossible to translate into anything meaningful. You either have to accept word-for-word the kind of vision it's selling, or remain one of the unelect, cast into the darkness. A couple of years ago I attended a television arts 'brainstorming' session, where one of the organisers got up at the beginning and said, 'Above all, what today's about is having fun. If you're not prepared to have fun, then get out now.' Out appears to be the only place to go if you're not one of these individuals with a head full of manufactured optimism about the absolute correctness of what you're doing. The language is carefully shepherded to exclude the possibility of complaint or criticism; the agenda never allows for an alternative viewpoint. Halfway through the brainstorm, disappointed and more or less struck dumb, I did get out and went home; it was the only meaningfully articulate thing I could do. I left because I felt as bewildered and slightly scared as a non-believer in a room full

of evangelists: they may shriek about Heaven and Hell and redemption and faith, but if you share none of their beliefs, you will not understand fully the concepts they're hollering at you. The door will remain shut. Similarly, unless you buy into the new language of improvement, continued success and the enhancement of all things, you will be unable to communicate.

That's why it's possible now for a government to launch a Big Conversation and for you to feel that a dialogue isn't taking place; there can't be dialogue unless you both speak the same language. But to speak the language of the Big Conversation, you have to empty your head of its baggage of negativity; you have to leave behind all notions of doubt, difficulty, suspicion, blame and failure.

The language of 'greenfield opportunities' is not to be confused with the complex management-speak that broke out in the early 1990s. Redefining, say, a sacking as an 'employment-opportunity launchpad' was an easily spotted and parodied attack on communal verbiage that may have infected the workplace but never really spread further. Greenfield-speak, however, is proving more virulent. It may have originated as the language of corporate puffery, but it has infected the mainstream ('mainstream' is itself a common greenfield word). It comes into the home with any mention of 'classic' lifestyle choices or journeys to 'a better you'. Your children pick it up if they have to pass a sign at their school gate announcing that they're going through a 'gateway of excellence for the lifeblood of the community'. The leaflets listing the swim-times at my local pool urge everyone to 'activate your lifestyle' with 'full-on family fun'. Buses are 'taking me to the heart of' my neigh-

bourhood, trains are 'clasping the future towards me', and traffic wardens are 'bettering the streets for a smoother nation'. Burglars are presumably 'working at night for a leaner Britain', while prison warders on suicide watch are undoubtedly 'at the vanguard of health choices'.

My fear is that we're soon going to split into two separate communities: the Greenfielders and the rest of us. The Greenfielders will talk to each other, in an increasingly hysterical manner, about 'furtherance and futurity' and the 'enhancement of bigness in the fuel of endeavour', neither knowing what these phrases mean nor troubling to find out. The rest of us will be cast to the sidelines; we won't be promoted, we won't partake of the 'unfurlment of opportunities' because we won't understand what they are. I go to the Capita website, and I'm told they're 'at the forefront of the evolution of business-process outsourcing in the UK, focused on service transformation through innovation'. I'll never be able to enjoy their services, because I still don't know what they do. Soon, Greenfield-speak will split off from everyday English and evolve its own grammar and lexicon. 'Forefront' will become a verb, 'enhance' a noun, and between them, they'll give birth to a hundred new ways to express the wide-eyed deadness that lurks behind the forehead of the man who perkily speaks to us of 'greenfield opportunities'.

TV in a hearse – that's choice for you

These are exciting and challenging times for the television industry. I know, because I've just been to a TV conference that said it.

'Challenge' is one of those words executives like to say at conferences. It makes them sound like they're at the forefront of something. Words such as 'modernisation', 'development technology' and 'the future' are bandied about at any professional gathering, even if it's one attended by just milkmen. The word that bugs me most at the moment is 'choice'. Businesses and governments now say 'choice' as readily as a two-year-old says 'poo'. Somehow our movers and shakers have got it into their heads that our lives are enriched by having available a vaster spread of options, but there are certain times when the last thing you need is a choice. When you're ill, for example.

You want to go straight to hospital, without having to decide which one. Yet our administrators think it's nice we can now choose the hospital we go to. It's a false choice. If there are two hospitals nearby, a good one and a terrible one, there's nothing to be gained from offering sick people the option of going to the terrible one. Better to knock it down or improve it. People who choose to go to the terrible one need their heads examining, although not at the hospital they've just chosen.

The TV conference debated new technology. Everyone's rushing to make programmes available to items of equipment other than televisions. It's all a bit complicated, but here's a summary of what you can expect in the next few years:

1. BSkyB announced technology that will allow people to access twenty-four-hour television on their mobiles. Reeling from this, the BBC

announced plans to allow asthmatics to download *Rolf on Art* directly on to their Ventolin inhalers. A BBC spokesperson said, 'For far too long asthmatics have been penalised by not being able to watch quality television during an attack.'

2. BSkyB hit back with the launch of Para-vision, a new TV service aimed at road-crash victims waiting for ambulances to arrive. New technology means it's possible to bring the crash victims a diet of up-to-the-minute celebrity gossip and business news, plus, of course, the latest road-traffic information. This is all at the touch of an interactive button, which, because it clashes with the blood, won't be red.
3. Channel 4 announced its digital expansion with the launch of a new channel aimed exclusively at dogs. The new channel, called 4Legs, is to broadcast twenty-four hours of high-pitched sounds to dogs across the country, transmitting topical whistles and discussion shows about the under-sides of cars.
4. Finally, everyone got together and announced the launch of a new network of channels for a long-neglected consumer group: recently bereaved people on their way to funerals. According to a spokesperson, Hearse-A-Tainment will 'provide memorable celebrity gossip beamed to hearses and funeral corteges all across the country, as

well as, of course, all important traffic information'. The broadcasters say they based their content on surveys of what people want to watch in a hearse, as opposed to who people would most like to see in a hearse, which was Robert Kilroy-Silk.

Russell Brand died that Jimmy Carr's python might live

***The Funny Day After Tomorrow* – scenario for a Britcom disaster movie**

A plot I've been working on since I was inspired by watching the British Comedy Awards: three hundred comedians and their agents are in London Weekend studios. Unbeknown to them, al-Qaeda are, meanwhile, detonating a series of co-ordinated dirty bombs across Britain, releasing both radioactivity and a killer virus into the atmosphere. The entire population of Great Britain and Northern Ireland is wiped out in seconds. Those inside London Weekend's studios are the only people left alive in the country.

In front of a hushed audience, a distraught Harry Hill rushes on stage and breaks news of the disaster outside, while also picking up an award for best entertainment performance. After a hurried consultation with ITV's management, it's agreed an Emergency Survival Committee will be set up during the next commercial break.

Back after the interval, Jonathan Ross is appointed Interim President of the British Population, with emer-

gency powers to declare martial law and shoot anyone who breaks a newly imposed night-time curfew. Stephen Merchant is put in charge of the armed forces because he's the tallest. All the army are dead, but there's still some navy out at sea. Merchant orders them on permanent standby and receives details of three possible al-Qaeda training sites in northern Sudan. He sends three Trident submarines to the Horn of Africa and gives them four hours to prepare a missile strike. Leigh Francis, a.k.a. Bo' Selecta, makes a joke about the Merchant Navy.

Meantime, for the comedians and their agents trapped inside the studios, thoughts now must turn to survival. With all food outside possibly radioactive for months, they must feed off whatever's on set. There's nothing. An Emergency Food Committee is set up. Normally, there's a celebrity chef up for an award but not this year: it's been a bad year for celebrity-chef-led entertainment strands.

So, a three-man committee is appointed, consisting of three award winners, Ant and Dec and Catherine Tate. Unfortunately, Catherine couldn't be there that night to receive her award, so she's presumed dead. The committee meets and announces the immediate decision to kill and eat foreign guests.

Ant approaches Oliver Stone from behind, while Dec distracts him by saying, 'Vietnam was funny.' Stone is quickly felled with an award to the head, groaning miserably. His raw carcass provides much-needed meat for the desperate survivors, winners first. Madonna takes longer to kill and there's very little on the bone.

Suddenly Jimmy Carr remembers there's a large python backstage, brought on the show earlier as a bit of

fun. However, after protests from Russell Brand, the poor creature is spared and released back into the wild. Brand is killed instead, but nobody eats him.

Meanwhile, a breakaway group of survivors, led by me, Alistair McGowan and Robert Webb from *That Mitchell and Webb Look*, tunnels through to a second chamber, where sets are being built for a poorly thought-through game show.

McGowan, Webb and I use a large prop spider with the numbers one to eight on the ends of its legs and a photo of Al Murray on its back to climb up and remove an air-conditioning ventilation grille. I fall off, but McGowan and Webb manage to reach down and pull the spider prop up on to the outside roof of the building. Their plan is to use it as a makeshift satellite dish to transmit a distress signal overseas, although neither of them knows how.

Back in the main comedy-awards studio, a search party is now organised by Derren Brown to find the breakaway group. Time is running out. Rations are running low and it's now really not funny. But then the building is stormed by Americans in radiation suits and the comedians are bundled into a van and taken off for decontamination and safety, winners first. McGowan and Webb managed to send a signal after all.

As the last few laughter-givers leave the tragic arena, a US marine announces the sad news that McGowan and Webb are both dead from radiation poisoning. They gave their lives so that we might laugh. Posthumously, they are both given awards, then their bodies are burnt by Jack Dee.

Cultural marvels that have left London speechless

It has been my privilege over the past few months to witness a terrific number of cultural marvels in London, all manifestations of individual towering genius. I thought I'd describe some of them now so that people would know what they're missing.

Mnemorabilia (Rickets Theatre, London)

A fantastic theatrical event by internationally renowned performance bunch Theatre du Maurier, in which the universal topic of time, memory, space, rotation, annotation, Anna Karenina, chaos, shoes, chamber music, Serbian pottery, fax technology, armour, kissing, sponges and gasping is distilled into a hilarious half-hour within a three-hour drama about a man who is in love with his buttocks.

Theatre du Maurier is a collective formed in 1995, in which 'a democracy of thought and improvisatory rehearsals within the community of performers comes together in a centralised homage to the unique and throttling genius of its main writer-director-designer-performer-accountant Simeon Majesty'.

In the play *Mnemorabilia* ('though to call it a "play",' says Majesty, in the programme note, 'is to risk ridicule for utilising the predictable and outmoded terminology of the theatrical thicket'), Majesty himself plays the three lead roles: (a) a man in love with his buttocks, (b) a woman in love with only one of his buttocks, and (c) the other buttock.

The fifteen other members of the cast carry props on and off stage for three hours, though, as Majesty explains: 'This being a collective piece, we are all paid an equal share of the profits, though, as writer-director-designer-performer-accountant, I am entitled to at least eleven shares.'

International critics have heaped praise on *Mnemorable*, especially on the emotionally charged ending, in which the woman cuts off one of her own buttocks as a protest at someone in the audience coughing.

***Footballers' Wives.* An opera by Nathaniel Mop (Royal Opera House, Covent Garden)**

This was that rare beast, a modern opera playing to packed houses, with tickets sold out long before it was commissioned. 'We all remember the television series *Footballers' Wives*,' says conductor Sir Steven Tosca, 'but no one could have believed that the extraordinary task of transferring it intact to the opera house could have been achieved so magnificently. This is entirely due to the unique and translucent genius of Nathaniel Mop.'

The opera, though costing £318 a ticket, is, like a football match, only ninety minutes long, with a fifteen-minute interval. Even so, it's in twenty-two acts, each act portraying the lives and loves of a footballer's wife, with the whole opera taking us through all the wives of the players in a game between Southampton and Newcastle.

The only set design is a large Jacuzzi big enough to take a chorus of two hundred, though in the performance I saw the chorus were protesting against staff cuts

by refusing to remove their shower caps. The stage design also utilises video screens, some of which play the original television programme to which the singers then mime. Season tickets are now on sale, priced £298,404.

***Gervais!* An exhibition of works of art inspired by Ricky Gervais (Royal Academy of Arts, Piccadilly)**

An amazing treasure trove of visual splendour seen for the first time in this country, *Gervais!* places the monumental genius of Ricky Gervais at the very centre of our civilisation. The visitor is greeted by a forty-foot model of Gervais, reconstructed from fragments of photographs of paintings of him that are now in the National Portrait Gallery. The penultimate room shows us how scientists imagine what the tomb of Gervais would look like if his sudden death were to shatter the nation. The final room is a chapel in which we can pray that that may never happen.

Stephen Poliakoff's *The Lost Prince* Themepark

A magnificent temple to the crowning genius of Stephen Poliakoff, *The Lost Prince* Themepark is a replica of Buckingham Palace, situated next to Buckingham Palace. Be sure to visit the animatronic Queen Mary and the Cave of Juddering Johnny.

Herd of wasps chase nuns covered with jam – a date for the diary

Here's a look at some of the cultural highlights of the forthcoming season.

21–28 July: the Coventry Large Actor Festival

Another season of theatre for those with sight problems. Popular productions are put on with casts made up entirely of very large actors. There's also a late-night comedy tent with giants doing stand-up. This year's scheduled performance of *The Big Friendly Giant* has been cancelled; it fell over in rehearsals.

23 July: Ladies' Crab Day at Newmarket

A popular day in the racing calendar; all ladies are permitted to bring crabs into the steward's enclosure.

4–10 August, Dublin: the Festival of the Dropping of the Bull on the Drunk Man on a Stag Weekend

Every day a live bull is dropped from a twin-engine Cessna on to a group of about three thousand drunk Englishmen over for stag weekends. Traditionally, the Englishmen dare each other to stand closer and closer to the point directly under the plane. It is also traditional for at least three drunk Englishmen to be flattened to death.

4–19 August: the Bedford Chamber Music Festival

This renowned festival has a new music director this year, Paddy Frimetrace. Each year the festival schedules chamber music around a particular theme, and this year Frimetrace has chosen the theme of Cinnamon. So far, no music has been found that's related to this theme and therefore details of events are unclear at time of going to press.

12–16 August, Belfast: the Running of the Orangemen

Each year at this time, five Orangemen are let loose down

a fiercely Catholic street while tourists and locals dare each other to get in their way. Traditionally, at least one drunk tourist is gored to death.

13 August: Official Start of Geordie Shooting Season

Opening of the season whereby Geordies can be legally shot. This year, there's a £2000 prize for the first person to bag Jimmy Nail. Next year's season is in doubt because of recent human-rights legislation.

22–24 August: the 18 Bradley Gardens, Hemel Hempstead Rock Festival

Once again Mrs Betty Donaldson plays host in her two-up, two-down terrace house to the likes of Radiohead, the Dandy Warhols and Jane's Addiction and up to fifteen thousand rock fans. Vacancies.

29 August: Uphelvetica

Traditional Orkney night festival in which all social workers' records and details of child and elderly care homes are burnt before an official inquiry can requisition them. Family tickets.

1–19 September: the hang-gliding opera season at Buckfast Manor

Sir Peter Hontray, the owner of Buckfast Manor, fulfils a lifelong dream to hold an opera festival on hang-gliders flying over his sumptuous gardens and valleys. This season, twenty-three international singers have agreed to perform their roles while hang-gliding around a pair of airships containing a chorus and an orchestra. There will also be banners across the sky for the hard of hearing.

3 September: Leeds Castle Drunk Stag Weekend

A weekend in which tourists risk life and limb being chased over the grounds by a stampede of drunk stags.

12 September: the Wendover Pollen Chase

More than fourteen thousand drunk stag weekenders with hay fever run across an open field chased by rampaging pollen. Bring a tissue.

16 September: the Sourbury Wasp Chase

The Gloucestershire village of Sourbury once again enacts an ancient festival based on events during Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries. A herd of wasps chases a local nun covered with jam. Plenty of parking, picnic areas.

17 September: the International Dolphin of the Year Awards

Held every year at the Milton Keynes Bowl, these awards are in their fourth year now and are fast becoming the principal forum for the recognition of excellence within the dolphin kingdom. Among this year's awards are those for Best Dolphin in a Sea, Most Promising Set of Dolphin Clicks and Grins, and Best New Dolphin in an Enclosed Space. The awards, as ever, are hosted by Fiona Bruce and Gene Hackman.

That's enough entertainment, thanks

A couple of years ago, in a scientific paper posted on an obscure website, Stephen Hawking publicly abandoned

his famous quest to arrive at an Ultimate Unified Theory of Everything. I've an admission of defeat of my own to report: I am publicly confessing that I've never seen – and probably will never see – an episode of *The Sopranos* in my lifetime (1963–?). Of the two pronouncements, I think the second offers more helpful pointers as to how mankind might develop as a species. So, leaving quantum physics to one side for a moment, let me explain how admitting I'll never see *The Sopranos* signals a fundamental advance in the search for human happiness. *The Sopranos* has been described by some as the finest television series ever made but, for various reasons, I never quite got round to watching it. I confessed my predicament to a friend, who introduced me to the DVD revolution: the entire first series of *The Sopranos* in one boxed set. It lay on my shelf for ages, unviewed.

Eventually I decided to hand it back. It has been strangely liberating. The earth has not stopped turning, nor have the central foundations of my sanity crumbled. Instead I feel rather wholesome and expansive, like someone just back from a weekend in Dorset. There's now one less thing I have to do in my life, and the lifting of the weight has brought a rush of tremendous relief. And confidence. I now want to shout out loud all the other things I've never seen and now know I needn't see without any adverse effect on my overall happiness. I've never seen a single episode of *ER*, *Sex and the City*, *Only Fools and Horses*, *Emmerdale* or *Dalziel and Pascoe*. There! That doesn't make me sick or deranged, does it? I now realise the sooner we set limits to the amount of stuff we're prepared to be entertained by, the happier we will all be. I've suddenly sensed

how much pressure we are under to view and hear everything. The constant thrum from the arts pages and review sections of the weekend papers, the non-stop shrill from monthly magazines and cultural round-ups on television and radio insist that we simply have to see that film and order those CDs and set the video for the next nineteen episodes of this unmissable drama. And yet, as those unread supplements pile up, as the SkyPlus clogs to bursting with recordings of as-yet-unwatched episodes of *The Nazis: A Warning From History* and *Spaced*, what we are left with is an ever-expanding sense of failure to catch up with all the sensory experiences that have been made available to us. Like the theoretical physicist, with his quest to arrive at a fundamental equation that would work out the state of the universe and everything in it, we, too, entertain aspirations of completeness.

We all still believe that some day we will have seen and heard everything, that though we may have fallen behind, we'll eventually become synchronised with our cultural output. It's a sort of entertainment Nirvana we hope to enter; how many times have we considered taking a day off just to watch our backlog of recorded programmes? Our efforts to develop technology all push this belief to the forefront. The iPod means we can carry a lifetime of musical tastes in something the size of a cigarette packet. Sky Plus and TiVo tell us we need never forget to record anything ever again. The BBC's online Digital Player makes missed radio programmes from the past seven days suddenly unmissable. And the torrent of extras that comes with most DVDs means that not only can we probably find any obscure arthouse movie we

missed first time round but that we can, if we want, watch all the scenes cut from the original edit while listening to the director explain why he decided to cut them. Today, we cannot, literally, miss a thing. However, handing back *The Sopranos* made me realise how much better it would be if we did. As grown-ups, we have to let the dream die. Our completist paradise is not going to happen. The technological explosion of choice has only alerted me to those areas where I now know I'm going to choose not to go. I'm never going to explore the music of Donizetti, or the albums of Manfred Mann; I will not now travel across Peru; I will go to the grave never having come to terms with jazz or Will Self or snowboarding or A. S. Byatt; I have decided I'm never going to waste precious hours watching *Eyes Wide Shut*. And I'm never going to read *The Spoils of Poynton* by Henry James (in fact, I'm rapidly concluding I'll never get round to reading anything by Henry James). Stephen Hawking abandoned his search for the Ultimate Unified Theory of Everything after applying pre-existing and proved mathematical theories to demonstrate that our understanding of the observable universe can never be complete.

But his conclusion would have been as valid if he had given up his quest because he simply couldn't be bothered. The arbitrary act of choosing a limit beyond which you're simply not prepared to go, of expecting slightly less and settling for what you've got, makes just as much sense as any theory. Imagine if all the cultural outpourings that currently bombard our senses were replaced by entertainments that all appealed just to our sense of smell.

The same number of artefacts as before, but all of them now smells. You can imagine what an unbearable stink even the greatest of our artists would be contributing to. And yet it's a similar sort of sensory mush that we now try to live with every day. We have reached sensual overload.

To introduce another theorist to the argument, it's what the psychologist Barry Schwartz calls 'choice fatigue', namely, the brain beginning to seize up under the number of options laid before it. Schwartz cites the example of shoppers who are ten times more likely to buy jam when there are only six choices of item on display as when there are twenty-four. The conclusion is inescapable: less choice makes us perform better and, consequently, feel happier. The cultural equivalent is, for example, the strange feeling of depression that is said to overcome users of an iPod. Having all music in their pocket, they find it more difficult to be entirely satisfied with the track they've chosen to listen to. The urge to flick is greater across multi-channel TV, not necessarily because the programmes are bad but because logic dictates there has to be something even better somewhere else. Yet, faced with an infinity of choice, I've discovered there is still hope. It boils down to simple mathematics. Anything we watch or read or listen to can't possibly make the slightest dent in our backlog, since our backlog is infinite. Far from causing despair, this knowledge should liberate us to abandon the quest and revel even longer in what we have immediately to hand.

To put it another way, whether you choose to re-read *Great Expectations* or read for the first time the latest

A. S. Byatt makes not the slightest bit of difference. You'll be no nearer completion, so you might as well settle for whichever you really prefer. You can, if you wish, take all your unread books and unwatched videos and throw them out. Or you can choose not to buy anything new and stay in and arbitrarily select from what you have. If you start listening to a CD and, by track four, find it's clearly doing nothing for you, you're at liberty to throw it away. If you are put off reading *Don Quixote* because you think you simply don't have the time, think again: the dozen paperbacks or videos you would consume over the same period will bring you no nearer to total cultural fulfilment. If you go to see a film and really like it, the following week you can go back and see it again. It's really up to you. I've postulated quite a radical quantum leap in how we choose to be entertained, but I've no time to soak up the glory. I've got *Mad Men* to watch. I'm told it's unmissable.

Note: Since writing this, I have watched series 1 and 2 of *The Sopranos*. It's really rather good, but the force of my general argument remains if you consider my view to be utterly insignificant when measured against the sum total of all things.

Nostradamus told us all about the giant space mouse

Sunday. I wake up to hear that a four-mile-wide mouse is hurtling through space and is due to hit Earth on 14 March 2011. Astronomers say they're pretty sure it's a

mouse and not a rat, but that it's definitely four miles wide and about twelve miles long, travelling at a speed of more than 2500 miles per second. And it's coming our way.

Monday. They're saying on the radio that a rodent that big and that fast could devastate an entire continent and plunge Britain into permafrost. This could, however, be conjecture. There have been no known observable impacts from giant space mice in the past, so we're entering new territory here. The best thing to do at the moment is to watch the mouse as it hurtles towards us and see if that helps.

Needless to say, though, panic has spread across the globe. There's also a self-satisfied look on the faces of those who, for years, have been pointing us to Nostradamus's prediction that 'towards the mid-morn of the new millennium, shall the bountiful pearl of earth be shattered by a massive space mouse'. For centuries, analysts thought this last phrase was a colourful metaphor for something else, such as smog or flooding, but now it appears Nostradamus was being much more accurate than we thought.

Tuesday. A major international conference has been called to help formulate a response to the unique biological threat hurtling towards mankind. The Worldwide Congress on the Avoidance of Mammalian Impact is going to meet on Ascension Island, deemed to be the middle of the world. It will open once an international airport has been built there.

Wednesday. There's an outcry in Britain over the government's decision to cut costs on its delegation to the conference by not sending the Minister for Total Responsibility for Shielding the Country against Large Interstellar Mice. The official explanation is that 'the potential threat posed by the space mouse does not necessarily come under the minister's brief'. They're sending a minister from the Home Office instead, who has given her assurance that, if the giant mouse crashes into Britain, Customs officials have authorisation to send it back immediately.

Meanwhile, wrangling continues on what the emergency conference should talk about. An alliance of third-world countries has proposed that discussion of the impending impact of the hurtling rodent should be linked to an agreement on sustained investment by the first world in the infrastructure of developing nations. A small group of second-world countries has proposed a compromise in which all talk of mice is excluded, in favour of non-stop free trade talks.

Everyone agrees to postpone the conference until 13 March 2011, a day before impact, when we'll have a better idea of what we're dealing with. In future, the conference will be referred to as the Worldwide Congregation on the Development of Sustainable Economic Growth and Hampering of Undue Rodents.

Thursday. Ascension Island has pulled out of the conference, but still wants to host it.

Animal-rights activists are now pressing for an international effort to see if the giant mouse is OK.

Astronomers think it may have been dead for forty million years and will therefore smell terrible, but others argue that, until we're sure about this, we have to operate on the assumption it may be alive and in need of water.

Nasa agrees to spend \$40 million on launching an exploratory probe to impact on the side of the mouse in 2010 and to come back with some of its stools.

Friday. The emergency conference has been cancelled because all the powers think that building an airport on Ascension Island might look extravagant. However, an interim treaty signed on the Seychelles has agreed that, though no efforts will be made to stop the mouse hitting the planet, all signatory nations now promise to think about how devastating the consequences might be.

Unlikely as it sounds, I've met an estate agent to pity

In the process of moving house recently, I encountered the most traumatised estate agent I've ever come across. As he showed me around a walk-in utility room that you had to go up a ladder in the second bedroom to get to, he suddenly broke down and started weeping. 'Is everything all right?' I asked, hoping he would say, 'Yes.' But instead, he looked up and in his eyes burnt the deep glow of Hell.

'No, no,' he said. 'I'm suffering like no man is suffering. You could never imagine the torment chewing my spirit right now, O client.'

At this, the broken humanoid slumped and collapsed

on to a nasty rug with a coffee stain the shape of Africa. Realising it was already beyond redemption, I thought nothing of trying to revive the pathetic salesman by throwing my own cup of cold coffee over his tear-basted face. He looked up at me and howled dejectedly. But to see before me the sight I'd so longed to witness – the sight of an estate agent on his knees, crying for mercy and salvation – gave me no joy that day.

I sat him down on someone else's cork-coloured sofa and asked him to tell me what gnawed him. The following is his pitiful tale.

The ballad of the Peter Donaldson Associates estate agent

'I want to tell you about that maisonette across the road. Last month I sold it. Only – and I don't know why I did this – I took my eye off the ball, I suppose. The thing is I sold it twice in the same day. To two different families! One came in the morning and said they liked it, and an elderly couple came in the afternoon and said they'd fallen in love with it too. Maybe I felt so happy for all of them that I couldn't bring myself to let anyone down. So I said yes to both sets of clients.

'Obviously, when I got back to the office, I thought, This is stupid, I've got to tell the elderly couple the house has gone. But I couldn't. She looked so sweet, staring at the breakfast bar. She obviously had great plans for it. I melted into inaction. I just told the vendors I'd managed to sell the house for much, much more than the original asking price. And then followed many sleepless nights fretting over what was to become of me.

'Soon the day came when both families were due to move in. And still I stayed silent. The first family, who had two children, moved in in the morning. The older couple turned up in the afternoon. I stood across the road and watched them move their stuff in. Then I ran.

'That night, I got back to the office, expecting to hear a stream of abusive and filthy phone messages in my voice-mail. But nothing. The next day, nothing too. Or the next. And the next and the next. It was unbearable, I tell you. I wanted to know what happened when they all discovered they were sharing a house with each other. But there was just silence.

'Two weeks ago, I could stand it no longer, and I went back to see what was going on. This house came on the market, so I installed myself in the bedroom upstairs, not the one with the walk-in laddered utility unit but the one across the landing with the surprising amount of wardrobe space. I spent the day looking across the road into the double-booked house. And what I discovered, I can't begin to comprehend. The fact is, neither family knew there was another one living there. As they went in and out of their rooms, they all kept just missing each other. As one father left through the front door, another entered round the back. As someone left one room, another two from the different family would come round the corridor and go in. One of them's got a dog, and it just happens to wander in and out of rooms when the other family isn't looking.

'It's been going on for three weeks now and I don't know what to do. They just keep missing each other. The

odds are extraordinary. What shall I do? Please tell me! What?'

I looked down into the broken estate agent's eyes and said the only thing I could think of under the circumstances. 'This house is a bit too far away from the shops for me,' I said, and left him crying into his pile of wet details.

The final frontier. Well, sort of

Britain wants to send people into space. I'm a big fan of space, so much so that before I got married the only pre-nuptial agreement I had to make with my wife-to-be was that I would never ever take a rocket up into it. She was worried I was so keen about space travel that I might actually do it and end up crashing back to Earth in a molten sprinkle of speeding limbs. I was happy to make the promise, given that I'm a terrible traveller, get car sick on or near merry-go-rounds and would never willingly undertake a mission that carries a high likelihood of my wearing a helmet full of stomach chunder.

So, I'm safe, but I like to take life-lessons from space, the most recent one being that we know nothing about anything and that whatever you hear anyone saying is probably bull's bollocks. I say this because the world's most knowledgeable scientists have been concluding for the past few years that they really don't know what the universe consists of.

Most of what we see through our telescopes makes up only about four per cent of space, leaving an astonishing 96 per cent left that weighs something, and has energy, but which can't be seen or felt. Scientists have resorted to

calling all this a combination of Dark Matter and Dark Energy, as if somehow giving a name to a complicated mess of uncertainty sorts it all out (the same principle applies to the War on Terror).

These scientists are all worried crapless that they look like idiots for not knowing what 96 per cent of everything is, but I take great heart from this. It encourages me to react to everything with immense doubt. And to react to doubt with immense confidence.

No one really knows anything; about global warming, about electoral support for any of the parties, about where Osama bin Laden really is, about whether Chris Moyles is a good thing or a bad thing, about whether all television is a deceitful sewer of trickery and hospital-and-bodily-dysfunction-obsessed falsehood, about whether all analysis and comment and discussion and debate and Polly Toynbee and Richard Littlejohn is a pack of doubt-infested, out-of-arse-talking wibble-wobble.

In fact, in the grand sum of all things, either 96 per cent of us haven't a clue what we're doing all the time or all of us are talking nonsense 96 per cent of the time. Whatever, it means that anything an expert tells you, even this that I'm telling you now, is probably mental tat. So ignore me now; go on.

Welcome to the brave new world of Murdoch

In the annals of business acumen, no single act of commercial chutzpah can surpass the company manoeuvres carried out by Rupert Murdoch over the period 2010 to 2014.

To assess just how revolutionary, how completely beyond the reach of what any human individual had yet achieved in more than thirty millenniums of civilisation his actions were, it is useful to note that prior to the year 2010 the figure of Rupert Murdoch was one respected but never adored by people of influence who considered themselves his peers. True, he was the world's most successful and influential publisher.

Now in his late seventies, he showed no sign of loosening the reins of power he held so firmly in his two gnarled hands. But there was talk. What would happen when his mental powers started to fade? Why had he not planned any orderly succession, whether to someone in his family or to a trusted colleague?

And how sure was his touch, now that the print media as well as film and television were fast looking obsolete against the rise of the digital citizenship? In short, was he beginning to think he was both infallible and immortal?

And so, when Rupert Murdoch called a meeting of his entire executive committee on 12 January 2014, many were expecting something momentous. At the very least, the demand forming among the mass of executives and expensively shirted dogsbodies shortly before the great man entered the room was that, unless he laid before them a very clear pattern of succession, they would resign *en masse* and thus, surely, cause a collapse in his parent company. In one way, at least, he met their demands.

The man, the figure, the legend, entered the room and asked for the lights to be dimmed. He began his PowerPoint presentation, flashing a quick succession of

slides and charts before this, his most important viewing audience. Corporate declarations tumbled out of him. 'I have purchased a fifty-nine per cent stake in Sun Microsystems'; 'News Corp has consolidated its share position on the boards of fourteen South Asian cellphone networks'; 'I have merged Transmutual Holdings with our southern American division to form a new parent group for all terrestrial entertainment networks.'

On and on they spurted. '... taking all the European subsidiary companies and merging them with a new North African web presence ...' No one knew where this was heading, but neither had anyone seen Murdoch so energised since his last marriage. '... promoting the chairman of Digital Investment to the new post of vice-president Corporate Sustenance ...'

And the phrases became stranger, introducing concepts and references that few in the room had heard before. '... executive director of the Mother Board ...'; '... a billion-dollar investment in skin and infrastructure ...'; '... company cells multiply exponentially ...'

And in the end it came: the announcement that would transform the world.

'And so, ladies and gentlemen, I have thrown into action a complicated sequence of company mergers and buy-outs, and a logarithmically positioned series of investments, that now mean all my main subsidiary companies form a unique pattern across the globe. It's a pattern so complex that no other sequence of values comes close to it, save the integers of DNA.

'And that is no accident. For I have arranged my companies in the one precise global sequence that will set the

conditions right for the birth of life itself. My company is now so complex, so intelligent, so diverse and yet so intricately controlled that it has acquired all the first properties of a living organism. My company has become a life-form!

'Primitive at first, it will need nurturing by a top team of hand-picked executives, but within a year it will think for itself, feed itself, learn, defend and, if necessary, attack. Behold, I have created a living company. I have created Child International!'

At this, the magnificent man raised his left arm and the curtains behind him parted. On a large screen dominating the chamber could be seen a complex web of numbers, flickering and scrolling across the plasma. As the audience stared up at them, the pattern of digits seemed to alter slightly, as if winking back.

'That,' said Murdoch, 'is Child International recognising your presence and, within the space of a microsecond, calculating the amount of shares it needs to buy and sell on Nasdaq in order to make it look as if it's blinking.'

The men and women in the room gasped in surprise and a little fear. 'What were the consequences of that action?' asked one middle-aged executive, known for his good personnel skills.

'Our share value went down by 0.04 per cent and we had to lay off fifteen hundred workers in China.' The people groaned. Immediately the screen flickered and the numbers on it formed the shape of a smile. A package arrived at the door to the room and, when it was opened, a small cube leapt out making the noise 'Only joking!'

'You needn't worry,' said Murdoch. 'Child International was able, in a nano-instant, to pour just the right amount of financial investment into technological development that it was able, within twelve seconds of its last action, to launch on to the market a new electronic one-inch cube that can make more than thirteen thousand entertaining remarks. The Chirpy-Blok has already made us four billion dollars.'

There was silence. The numbers on the screen stared accusingly at the people round the table, who each knew in their hearts what had to be done. One by one, the executives tendered their resignation, knowing that Murdoch had indeed appointed his successor and it wasn't going to be human.

So the living company, Child International, carried on trading successfully on its own for the next twenty-four years until, in 2038, it was bought by the Chinese and, two days later, committed suicide.

Last week's TV scandals in full

Sunday

BBC forced to admit that Eamonn Holmes isn't real

The TV world was rocked by an admission from the BBC last week that, as many people suspected, no normal human being could ever look like Eamonn Holmes. The presenter's size and shape have been ballooning and then deflating on an almost monthly basis, which was explained by today's revelation that he's entirely artificial.

'We thought his appealing voice would see us past ini-

tial viewer scepticism,' said a rather frazzled BBC spokesperson, 'but now we've just got to tell the truth. For the past fifteen years, what we've been claiming was Eamonn Holmes was actually a flesh-coat of pigskin hooked up to a set of hydraulic winches operated by teams of specially trained children, most of them sons and daughters of BBC employees. We're really sorry. It all started as a joke one day, but sort of got out of hand.'

In a fresh twist to the television crisis, fourteen other TV presenters have been withdrawn for tests to see if they, too, are false. The Metropolitan Police have said they're particularly interested in newsreader Matthew Amroliwala.

Monday

ITV admits it is deliberately causing celebrities to have horrendous accidents in Dancing on Ice

An ITV spokesperson confessed that the company has been deliberately tampering with skates to cause maximum shin and ankle injuries to top celebs so it can make money from members of the public phoning up to ask if they're all right. 'We've made more than two million pounds from Andi Peters's shattered fibula,' said a now-sacked ITV spokesperson.

Tuesday

All the food on Ready, Steady, Cook tastes of ammonia

The BBC was left reeling yesterday after contestants complained that all the food on the popular cookery show, though it may look good, is actually camphor blocks

painted with food colouring. 'We're still made to eat it at the end,' said one contestant, who asked to remain anonymous, 'and if we look like we're not enjoying it, the floor manager quietly threatens us by holding up a picture of our children next to a mincer. It's harrowing.'

Wednesday

BBC under pressure to prove that Dale Winton is real

As the scandal over false TV presenters grows, the BBC came under pressure today from television watchdogs to prove that the russet TV presenter Dale Winton is actually real. There was suspicion that the unappetising campster may be false when it suddenly dawned on everyone that no one can remember a single thing that Dale Winton has said or done that is in any way original or memorable.

'No,' said one member of the public, when a gun was put to his head. 'Even if you were to put a gun to my head, I'm not sure I can come up with anything Dale Winton's said that made me laugh or even think for a bit. It's just a great big desolate nothing. The sound of a bleak, empty wind would have more substance. It's depressing really. Go ahead. Shoot me.'

When asked to comment on the issue, Mr Winton said nothing memorable.

Friday

'EastEnders is all made up,' admits BBC

'Of course it's sodding made up,' said a furious BBC spokesperson. 'It's a completely fictional storyline using

actors, you numbtits. We've never said it was real. This notion that it's somehow real is perpetrated by thick, feckless members of the public who want to know what time the funeral service is for characters we kill off. You're all idiots. Now cock off.'

The row comes just days after a throng of photographers camped outside J. K. Rowling's house demanding to know if the magic in the Harry Potter books is actually faked. The press only left her alone when she shouted from her window that if they didn't go away, she would write an eighth book in which she kills Ron.

Saturday

Carphone Warehouse pulls sponsorship deal with Big Brother

A spokesperson for the company said, 'The racism in the programme was bad enough, but in the end, what made us pull out was the realisation that *Big Brother* is just a fetid morass of unpleasantly noisy hominids spewing bile all over each other for the entertainment of millions of gullible zomboids.'

We're much too smart to look clever: the rise of extreme populism

A while ago, I found myself at the epicentre of a small cultural storm. Alan Partridge, a comedy character with whom I've been associated as a writer and producer for most of my professional life, was somebody's specialist subject on *Mastermind*. Not long after the broadcast, articles started appearing in serious newspapers about

the dumbing down of Magnus Magnusson's legacy. A quite senior government minister also wellied in with an unhelpful comment.

I suppose I should have gone public with a riposte, arguing that popular culture is as valid a topic of study as, say, the works of Titian or the history and development of the sash-window. I could have argued that knowing the order in which Henry VIII married and disposed of his wives is as every bit a collection of trivial, listed facts as knowing the names of all the players who kicked short-corners in the past five football World Cup finals. I could have pointed out that Ancient Greek civilisation gave us not only algebra but naked mud wrestling and erotic pots, or that the American physicist Richard Feynman not only won a Nobel Prize but was a particularly good bongo player.

I could have said all this, but didn't. That was because, while being mightily chuffed that something I'd done was a subject on Britain's brainiest quiz show, there was a part of me that also thought, *My God, Mastermind's* really gone downhill!

It's the same conflict of emotions that must plague teachers every time A-level and GCSE results come out: a combination of being relieved to get the pass rate up, and worried that so many success stories devalue the exam process. Opportunist politicians, abetted by the media, hail the rising pass rate as a scandal. This may be because in the vacuum of opposition or in the side-show of comment, one can get away with not having to propose an alternative.

I'm prepared to wager a thousand pounds you won't

get David Cameron going into the next election campaigning under the slogan, 'Under The Tories, More Pupils Will Fail Their A Levels'.

The fact is that I got in a quandary over *Mastermind* for the very same reason the media is collectively twisting its gusset over exam results, which is that today it's a lot more difficult to know what knowledge is for. For example, I was always told that we study Latin because it exercises the brain by teaching one how to analyse and clarify, to source obscure information and present fact in a coherent, skilfully developed argument. Which all sounds good, were it not that we can acquire the same skills studying the first comic-book editions of *Spider-Man*. What got lost somewhere along the way was the argument that sometimes it's just good to study something for the sake of it, because the knowledge acquired may be of no practical use, but somehow, in some indefinable way, is worth knowing. (And I concede that there are many people who would argue this still applies to the early comic-book editions of *Spider-Man*.) Today the argument that knowledge is there simply for knowledge's sake has become obscured by the nervous rush to provide practical justifications for our curriculum, that what's being studied will lead to better jobs, better managers and doctors, more enlightened bakers, more technically adept steelworkers, more confident-sounding teachers. Yet our persistent cries that the country is dumbing itself down reflect a fear that something is getting lost, some indefinable body of thoughts and feelings – let's call it the Intellectual Life – that for some reason seems important, even if we can't understand or master it ourselves.

But hang on. Don't we also share a mild suspicion of higher thought and intellectualism? The fact that we portray classical actors as luvvies, that we can consider people to be too clever for their own good, that at school we tease and bully the swot, and in adulthood malign the geek and the egg-head, suggest that we're uncomfortable with the notion of using all of our brain power all of the time.

Saying something's a bit clever is today seen as a criticism, an accusation on a par with saying you don't like something because it's a bit twee, or too loud, or a little racist. It's the subtly underlying concern of any broadcaster, publisher or promoter, under pressure to dilute the intellectual content of their work for fear of presenting something too 'heavy' and therefore off-putting to the public.

It's the steadily forming concern I have now that the last few paragraphs contain no jokes and that I might be beginning to come over as unnecessarily serious.

In an ideal world, we'd let these contrasting pulls towards and away from the intellectual life form an untroubled and merry tension in our heads. So, for example, we'd happily endorse the view that there should be more cultural and arts programmes on prime-time telly, while (if you are like me) not really seeing much point in dance, finding most films ever so slightly disappointing, and viewing much theatre as a bit poncy. Like perfect morality, our cultural impulse should be mostly to recognise that there's a high ideal worth striving for while knowing we could never attain it ourselves because we're either too lazy or prefer watching 24.

Recently, however, this decent compromise has been beleaguered by what I can only describe as the onset of Extreme Populism. The Extreme Populist takes the view that not only is it perfectly legitimate to rejoice in popular culture as well as in more refined cerebral or 'high' art, but that we should prefer the former at the expense of the latter.

The Extreme Populist takes pleasure in showing himself to apply all his brain power to stuff that doesn't really require too many brains. He pooh-poohs academics and fusty traditionalists as relics of an unevolved state of humanity, and instead proclaims that, for example, all socio and psychological progress is to be gleaned exclusively from watching *Big Brother*. The Extreme Populist will rebel against his or her education, and instead sit in the offices of successful independent television production companies declaring that the best art is of the moment, belongs to everyday public taste, and is to be found mostly in property shows. He tells us that the best drama is the mundane drama of non-celebrities being filmed washing dishes, or minor celebrities being sworn at by Gordon Ramsay.

The Extreme Populist sits in his government or council office with a pocket calculator in one hand demanding to know why opera costs so much, then quietly drives home listening to classical music in his car. The Extreme Populist, blessed with a fine and coursing business brain, gets some kind of psycho-sexual thrill telling everyone in press interviews that he never ever reads books. Because he prefers reading people.

The rule of Extreme Populism is momentary. I know

this, because I'm happy to read books and to study history. And the one thing my studies of history have taught me, and the one thing the Extreme Populists don't know, is that everything, absolutely everything, dies not long after it triumphs.

And now, back to the studio

Fifteen years on from the first transmission of *The Day Today* (an event that went unmarked in our house because my wife was in the process of giving birth to our first child, but whose date I can always remember with pinpoint accuracy for the very same reason) and the question that keeps coming up is: are you depressed that the programme has made no difference to how television news is presented?

The true answer is, I don't know, and I'm not sure news presentation is the right thing to get worked up about today. Yes, I do remember in 2003 watching Bill Neely, the ITN reporter, storm Saddam's palace in Basra while wearing combat uniform and handing over to the main presenter standing next to him in a suit and, yes, I did think, But that's like the bit where Doon Mackichan's dressed in combat uniform and storms through a bombed-out house and hands over to Chris Morris in a suit. But moments of soberly performed absurdity like this rarely happen on the news, these days.

We made *The Day Today*, and its radio hen *On the Hour*, when newspeople stomped around BBC canteens giving it the big 'I am'. News devoured licence-payers' resources, then emitted the reconstituted mess from its own funda-

ment in the form of very loud banging theme tunes and supercharged graphics. One of my favourite Items-That-Never-Made-It-To-the-Production-Stage was our reporter Valerie Sinatra flying round the country reporting on road conditions from *The Day Today* News Harrier.

So it seemed the right thing to do to make *On the Hour* feel like a news programme, because news seemed the most obvious vehicle for saying deeply stupid things in a deeply serious voice. We weren't a pre-existing troupe of performers with our own freshly written comedy manifesto still wet on the table, and neither did we know what sort of 'voice' we would come up with. All we knew was that it would be good to do something that didn't sound like a sketch show, and in which the programme's style and form were as big a joke as the content.

When we went on to make *The Day Today*, we were still naïve. Not only were we making this particular television show but we were learning about television for the first time. Chris Morris and I went on a television-news training course to find out what goes through a journalist's mind as he or she puts together a report. The shocking realisation that dawned on us both (though it sounds so obvious now) was that the medium was utterly picture-led. We were given raw footage from the Bosnian conflict, told five facts, and asked to compile a report within two hours.

As the clock ticked on, those facts that had no pictures to go with them were quietly dropped.

For the first time, I appreciated how much the process by which the medium of television works does your editorialising for you. In making *The Day Today*, because we

were forced to look at the visual grammar of the medium in a way that seemed less up-front when we made *On the Hour*, we became more conscious of wanting to point out the editing and graphic tricks by which 'factual' television so often deludes the viewer into thinking they are getting unmediated truth. But, fundamentally, we still wanted to make a funny show.

Today, if anything, it's news's lack of importance that worries me. Even though the world is in a bigger state of flux and mishap since the height of the Cold War, sadly we no longer seem to take the news seriously enough. News is entertainment. Where once it was politicians who were the target of impressionists, it's now Huw Edwards and Andrew Marr. News is done in pastel colours, and weekend editions have a few jokes. Nightly news has been pushed later to make way for drama and comedy and reality shows (ironically, since news is the biggest reality show of the lot). We take the news less seriously because we take politics less seriously. And we take politics less seriously because politicians take the news less seriously, going on GMTV to 'speak to the nation' rather than on *Newsnight* or *Dimbleby*.

Jack Bauer's back and he's lost in space

It's time to take a look at some of the hot new shows already big in the States that will be dominating Britain's TV screens later in the year.

36. New, even longer series of 24. Jack Bauer chases drug traffickers back and forth across the International Date

Line, so he ends up with thirty-six hours in his day. The series has been so successful in America that the next one, *365*, is already in the planning stage. This involves Jack Bauer foiling a drug-trafficking plot by being shot into space at near the speed of light so that time slows down and he has longer to think about how he'll catch them.

Malcolm Has a Middle. New sitcom about obese American children. Episode one takes place on the tenth anniversary of the last day Malcolm saw his genitals.

Low Carbon Emission Robocop. The cyborg crime-fighter franchise is resuscitated for a new series with a more environmentally friendly message. Set in the near future, when America has to wean itself off oil dependency, Robocop fights crime in a Detroit City where all the free-ways are covered entirely with speed-bumps. Each episode ends with a high-speed, low-speed, high-speed, low-speed car chase.

Hill. After British comedian Hugh Laurie's success in *House* comes a series about fast-living maverick James Hill. By day, he's a foul-mouthed forensic scientist, by night a successful basketball-playing drug addict and professional hit-man. Starring Harry Hill.

Melissa Etheridge's Matterhorn Makeover. New extreme makeover show in which singer Melissa Etheridge takes six disadvantaged children from the Bronx up the Matterhorn and asks if they'll clean it up. A ratings failure, the season was cancelled a third of the way through its

run. All six children were abandoned by Etheridge and left to make their own way down the mountain with emergency supplies.

CSI: Vermont. Crime-investigation spin-off funded by the Vermont Tourist Board. There is no crime in Vermont, so in each episode, the state's CSI unit examines a different kind of maple leaf and works out which tree it might have fallen from.

Bust Off. Tough cop show featuring Anglo-American actor Ricky Gervais. Gervais plays an undercover cop-comedian who infiltrates a Mexican-run comedy club in order to bust wide open a money-laundering racket. To prevent his cover being blown, Gervais has to deliver a series of comic monologues each night to the audience of trigger-happy regulars, who will shoot if he's less than brilliant.

Ground Down. The surprise hit of the season. Six Bronx children abandoned by Melissa Etheridge's TV production company halfway up the Matterhorn try to get down while filming everything on their mobiles and selling the footage to Simon Cowell's production company. Some manage to sell drugs made from snow.

The Passion in the City. Spin-off series from the highly popular feel-good movie, *The Passion of the Christ*. Christ is now working in New York as a high-flyer in a law firm run by goofy attorney Kim Cattrall. While Christ's boss has the hots for him, he's more interested in uncovering

evidence that will prove he should never have been crucified. Guest appearance from Joan Collins as his mother.

Creepy Court Dudes. Melissa Etheridge sues Simon Cowell for rights to the footage of the Bronx children abandoned on the Matterhorn and left to make their own way down. The resulting court case is televised and put on DVD, with profits split between them. More than thirty-six million viewers tuned into the final episode in the States, in which the court ordered both Cowell and Etheridge to be executed by lethal injection.

Is fine art just fine?

The government announces it's going to make sure every child gets at least five hours of 'high-quality' cultural activities a week and naturally everyone agrees this is a good thing. But what will the teachers and educationalists do when children's cultural sensitivities start to grow as a result and they're soon able to express their first opinions on whether the culture they're getting is in fact any good?

What happens on the day that a teacher takes her class down to the library and a previously disruptive pupil picks up the latest offering from a bestselling children's author and says, 'Frankly, this is overrated. The characterisation is, at best, skimpy, and though there's vividness to the narrative flow of the action sequences, these moments are few and far between. Instead, the author presents the reader with nothing more than a poor succession of mildly plotted but woefully overwritten passages of explicatory dialogue. This book is more jejune

than joyous and, frankly, I'd rather be whacked on the arse with it for insolence than actually have to read anything by this writer again'?

In short, what happens once a child learns what every adult knows: that culture is not all it's cracked up to be, some 'celebrated' novels can actually be tedious, an opera can be boring, a 'stunning' film overhyped, a 'searing' actor pretentious, a popular TV show dull, a columnist un insightful?

One of the worst nights I ever had (and that includes once nearly drowning) was being stuck in the audience at a terrible experimental drama called *Hamletmachine*. It was on in a reputable fringe theatre in London and I went almost forcefully propelled by the magnificent reviews. The event in the end was ninety minutes of unutterable brain-wax. Scenes from *Hamlet* were boiled down and contemporised, then played very slowly. After the longest fifteen minutes in Christendom, the same events were then turned ninety degrees on the stage and played again. And so on. And so on. And so on.

My mind started to wander. I began to ask big questions of the arts. For example, 'Haven't they been doing experimental theatre for about a hundred years? If so, when are they going to publish the results of their experiments?'

Whatever it is, these results ought to be pretty bloody impressive. A cure for some disease, for example. Or a suitable alternative to fossil fuels. If one day we can power motor vehicles with, say, experimental dance, then all the suffering a lot of us have been through will have been worth it.

I got home after *Hamletmachine* and, having slept and nightmared on the evening's performance, woke up feeling a bit more positive. It's easy to start criticising as pretentious any bit of the arts that seems unnecessarily obscure. A thirty-minute dance piece about the value of lettuce. A song-cycle in Braille. The National Museum of Paprika.

But, actually, I think there's a lot to be said for the obscure and the difficult. Any cultural activity that seems like hard work or that requires the application of the brain is probably a useful reminder that experiencing art isn't as easy as experiencing entertainment; unfortunately, we're so scared that anyone will be put off culture if it seems like a bother that we now tend to conflate the two.

So, Shakespeare's words are thrown out and his stories turned into cartoon strips, or Beethoven's music is heard only as a background score to the dramatisation of his life.

This means that as well as warning kids they may not like what they're about to experience, we should also warn them they may have to put in hard work before they can even get to the privilege of deciding that what they're watching or reading is rubbish.

No one will tell them this. There's a great conspiracy about high culture. We hear a lot about our philistinism towards the arts, how we regard them as elitist and expensive, but there's also a silent pressure group quietly clobbering us with the viewpoint that all art is fantastic and that somehow even the lowliest, scummiest, bingiest, drugged-up, fifteen-year-old granny-stabber will become a better person if he's just given the chance to sample some arts.

This ignores the possibility that the arts can be quite variable. I like chicken, but I don't like cabbage, which is why I don't go around saying I'm a big fan of food. Some butchers end up selling poisoned meat, which is why we don't dish out funding willy-nilly to the butchers.

But have a real go at anything that calls itself part of the arts and you're barracked like you've just razed a village. The upside of all the rubbish is that there are great things that stand out and that become not only memorable nights in the theatre or unforgettable films or gripping literature but actually, in an indefinable way, are experiences that make sudden sense of life. They don't make you better as a person, they don't rid you of your grumpiness, claustrophobia, fear of change, inability to commit, tendency to throw furniture around or any of the things that make us totally idiotic beings on a daily basis, but everyone knows that, for example, when you come across a piece of music that knocks you dead, it's completely transformative. And that makes the search worthwhile.

This can't be taught, because no one can agree on where those magical moments are. I'm sure, though, that if we relieved children of the pressure to feel that every piece of culture they were being subjected to was both 'fun' and the best thing they were ever likely to experience in their miserable lives, then the chances are that one or two more of them may accidentally stumble upon a magic moment.

The hysterical new century

What adjective will historians come to use about this period in time? The 1920s were 'roaring' while the 1950s

were 'austere'. What, then, of the 2000s? I predict 'hysterical'. That's hysterical as in 'frenzied and panic-stricken' and not as in 'unbelievably hilarious'.

Setting to one side the obvious presence of the War on Terror and suggested threats from global warming, asteroid attacks, coughing chickens, kids with knives, banks run by bastards and hospital wards covered with axle grease, there seems to be a general air of frenetic uncontrollability at the moment and it's really making me nervous.

Politically, one week we all think Gordon Brown's the best thing since diamonds, yet the following, he's regarded as lowlier than a slug. One week, David Cameron is a fat-eyed windy twit with no real conviction and the next he's a towering political presence rivalling Charlemagne.

One week, we can see past spin and presentation to gauge the real soul beneath the skin and the next we're discarding pensioner politicians like worn-out tyres and desperately choosing anyone to lead a major political party who comes closest to looking like a boy.

I've become seriously worried by the decline in the quality of things we're getting collectively hysterical about. Decades ago, it was nuclear war and the complete collapse of society. Now it's salt levels in food. Yet the mass hollering is getting louder. Emotional outpourings are going off the Richter scale. A man only has to come off his motorbike at five m.p.h. for him to wake up lying in the street surrounded by floral tributes in the shape of his face tied to the nearest lamppost.

I have two theories as to why this is happening. One is

that, although we spend all our time alone in our rooms networking with 'friends', we have so few collective shared experiences that anything that happens in the real world, even if it's as banal as someone in *Big Brother* spotting a lemon, will have all of us collectively yap on about it simply because it's something we know others will have seen. We like it not because it was someone spotting a lemon, but because she's spotting a lemon in front of millions.

My other theory is that it could just be mass hysteria linked to high salt content in fish oils.

Logs From the Political Jungle

Who are you calling names, you balloon-faced blubber-stick?

Who the hell does David Cameron think he is? Answer: a bum-faced southern ponce with a tiny washer for a mouth. Excuse the *ad hominem* and regionalist diatribe, but I'm only operating in the spirit in which Cameron himself conducts debate. I'd actually wanted to reserve judgement on him for a wee while, but then I came across something the smarm-podule said in an interview in *The Times* that made me instantly want to jump off the fence and take a very heavy steam hammer to his back teeth.

Talking about Gordon Brown's first few days in office, Cameron said, 'He is always producing initiatives, quite gimmicky initiatives that die before they get anywhere. I think people are quite sick of this kind of McPolitics.' McPolitics? Since when has it become a funny Scottish trait – among being careful with money, having your gums fall out because you eat too many deep-fried Walnut Whips, knifing people's faces and chucking cabers around like they're lolly-sticks – that we produce quite gimmicky initiatives that die before they get anywhere?

Such behaviour is not McPolitics, it's just politics. Yes, I know, Cameron will probably argue he was drawing a comparison with McDonald's rather than Brown's McScottishness, but (a) I'm enjoying making insulting personal remarks about the balloon-faced bastard too much to want to stop now, (b) Cameron has been waging a sly campaign against Brown's Scottishness because he knows it goes down well with the troops, and (c) I can't help it, I really do like having a go at the toffee-nosed blubber-stick.

More to the point, Cameron started off as Conservative leader saying he wanted to put an end to the Punch-and-Judy politics of name-calling, only for him and his cronies to spend most of their time slagging Brown off as 'old' and, at one point, 'autistic'. In months to come we'll no doubt get references to Brown's 'Alzheimeric misunderstanding of local government', 'a lack of toughness on British-based terror groups that makes him about as useless as an arseless rent-boy' and to 'Brown's complete mishandling of the flooding situation, the utter spastic'. At the very least, it makes it now perfectly valid to make personal attacks on this big-faced twelve-year-old boy with a thirties haircut and two scatter-cushion cheeks that demand unstoppable slapping, the tall, pussy-voiced twerp.

Stop up your ears

I once went to the Conservative Party conference. I'm not a party member, you understand. I was asked along by the Electoral Commission to take part in a fringe discussion on how we can reconnect people with politics.

I said one way was for politicians not to bang on about 'listening' all the time. Political parties, especially after they've been defeated a lot, usually spend several years conducting a listening exercise with the electorate to hear what they really have to say. Usually it's 'We didn't like you', but these exercises are often conducted on the assumption that the electorate is going to come up with a coherent set of economic policies as well as a vibrant political credo. It doesn't. It just keeps saying, 'We don't like you.'

At the meeting, I suggested it's a bit like going into a baker's shop and saying, 'I'd like a cake, please,' only to hear the baker reply, 'Well, we're not going to rush into cakes at the moment until we get a better idea of the sort of cakes you like and, moreover, the proportion of butter to sugar to egg you think is the right mix of ingredients for a cake that's more relevant to you.' At this, your natural reaction would be to throw a tray of shortbread in his face and run out of the shop.

However, a Tory next to me said, 'That's all very well, but there's no point putting cakes in the window three years before they're going to be eaten and, moreover, what's wrong with having a good, long, hard think about how you're going to make the cake in the first place. Otherwise it might come out half baked.' I thought she had a point but, on the other hand, we were now spending a lot of energy talking about cakes. We got applause, but I had a sneaking suspicion we weren't connecting with people.

After the session, I was nabbed by BBC2's *The Daily Politics* for an interview. Live on air, I realised I hadn't explained why I was actually at the conference and went

through a momentary dark afternoon of the soul. My God, I thought, what if everyone thinks I'm a Tory? I spent most of the rest of the interview explaining I wasn't.

Afterwards, I puzzled over which was worse: people thinking I'd always been a Tory or people thinking I'd recently decided to become a Tory because of David Cameron. Surely, I persuaded myself, there can't be anything more heinous than being so fickle and fey that nice young David has persuaded you to give being right-wing a go?

A Cameron convert is the political equivalent of someone who's just got into jazz or decided that short-sleeved shirts look fine on him or who's started asking, 'Have you got any green tea?' at the end of meals in restaurants. Converting to Cameron is a lifestyle choice, like moving to the catchment area of a Church of England school or using a breadmaker or only just starting to watch *CSI* or buying monthly membership of LA Fitness. Cameron is the new patio of politics.

I thought the conference centre in Bournemouth would be full of old Tories. The mad badger-heads are usually caught sleeping by mischievous camera operators bored out of their skulls filming a councillor from Derby talking about nuclear defence. But I was surprised by how few old people there were, until one delegate confided, 'They're all locked up in a holding bay in a hotel further up the coast.' Surprised the conference was ending on Wednesday, as opposed to the more traditional Friday, I asked why, and another delegate answered, 'To be honest, Wednesday is about as far as we can stretch this thing out.'

MPs should vote by downing a row of tequila slammers

Political apathy is now virulent in this country. Surveys show that an amazing 94 per cent of people under thirty-six have never heard of politics. Of the remaining six per cent, an astonishing 98 per cent have heard of politics, but have no opinions about it one way or the other. Of the remaining two per cent, 100 per cent hate it.

Further surveys have revealed that 32 per cent of MPs cannot name the prime minister, that an astounding 69 per cent of the cabinet didn't bother voting in the last election because they thought Labour would get in anyway, and that 44 per cent of Tory MPs joined the Conservative Party primarily as a 'sexual lifestyle choice'.

With this level of ignorance now fast becoming the norm, people whose job it is to report on politics are now doing their best to encourage fresh interest in the subject from those younger than themselves (i.e., the 18-53 age group).

For example, politicians are thinking of dropping the word 'politics' from their speeches, in favour of the more user-friendly expression 'UK-Now's Reality Tent'. It is also thought that the main parties have agreed to limit the total number of politicians in the country to forty-five.

A parliamentary sub-committee (now called a DemocraPopper) has been set up to reform Commons procedure to make it more appealing to today's youth. It has recommended that legislation be written in less off-puttingly formal language and instead contain an awful lot of swearing.

Moves are now under way to fast-track the Sodding House of Lords Reform Bill, to put the F****ng Waterways Act in the next Queen's Speech, and to announce the date of the next F****ng-Ar**-F elch***- Shi***** Budget. Gilbert and George have been hired to help with the drafting of some legislation and to design the covers.

Also, to appeal to first-time voters, most Bills introduced for the next parliamentary session will be about boyfriends. Already, all the main parties are committed to filling their next manifestos with advice on what to do if your boyf is caught snogging your best friend, but still says you're the gurl he really loves. The Tory manifesto will also contain a calorie chart as part of its 'Hundred Hot Tips on Looking Good'.

However, most experts contend that a fundamental change has to take place in political life if a wider audience wants to share and enjoy the benefits of a fully active democracy. Politics has to be simpler, a set of easy-to-grasp rules, with clearer labelling. The government has to bring in Bills marked 'Good' or 'Bad' legislation, so that people can more readily form an opinion about them. People should be able to use the Internet to vote on which pieces of legislation should apply to them.

Items voted 'Dull Laws' should be ignored. Old fogeys like Andrew Neil should be taken off Radio Five Live. Younger fogeys like Kirsty Wark should be taken off *Newsnight* and replaced with sexy people like Andrew Neil in a brightly coloured tie.

MPs should vote not by going through a lobby but by downing a row of tequila slammers lined up around the serjeant-at-arms, the length of each row established in

direct correlation with the budgetary impact of any proposed amendment to the particular item of legislation. MPs should also literally bang their heads together.

And the time taken to enact legislation should be speeded up. People find concepts such as three years or even two months boring, since it's so far in the future. The future should now be defined as no more than a week, while 90 per cent of legislation should be about what's happening this evening.

Finally, one area cited as the biggest voter turn-off is the 'yah-boo' nature of debate in the Commons. However, frustratingly, 78 per cent of young people in surveys have said they would be more inclined to watch parliamentary debates if party leaders did actually use the phrase 'yah-boo' in their speeches. This anomaly is best explained by the fact that up to 95 per cent of people are uninterested in the statistics in surveys.

Things for government ministers to say when they've been caught lying to a Parliamentary Select Committee

1. It is true that what I said was untrue. However, what is not true is that it sounded untrue when I said it.
2. I now realise that what I said at the time was untrue, but I don't yet know what the reason I will formulate to explain this anomaly might be. And that's true. And more recent. So, therefore, better.

3. I agree that the statement I made was not accurate, but at the time my mouth was going through personal problems.
 4. Look. Over there. A hat!
 5. The divergence between the truth and the inaccuracy I uttered is smaller than the distance between Glasgow and Berlin. And yet you can fly between those two cities for thirty-four pounds. Don't you think, therefore, you're making a huge fuss over nothing? Or, if not nothing, then something that's worth less than thirty-four pounds.
-

Oh, Dave, it's the way you tell 'em

Some people have argued that comedians have no place on the likes of *Question Time*. Sometimes, I can understand why a viewer would be more interested in hearing Margaret Beckett's views on Darfur than, say, Peter Kay's. (If it's of any interest, Peter favours a concerted five-point UN action plan granting autonomous status to rebel-controlled areas but only after a verifiable ceasefire is in place along disputed border regions.)

Maybe we comics are asked on to the likes of *Question Time* to provide unpredictable, non-partisan opinion, in contrast to the politicians all toeing their agreed party lines. Although when I appeared on *Question Time*, my views were texted to me from a centrally controlled national comedy headquarters run by Jo Brand.

However, I think comedians can only be removed from

political shows when politicians stop trying to do stand-up comedy. More and more of them are employing joke-writers to pepper up their speeches. Hence David Cameron's bizarre effort in a recent debate on the Queen's Speech, when he tried to compare the government to a court case involving the organist playing on Procul Harum's classic hit, 'A Whiter Shade of Pale'. I can't remember what point Cameron was trying to make, but it climaxed in the extraordinary joke that the government was not so much a whiter shade of pale than a whiter shade of fail.

With this in mind, I've decided to write a whole stand-up routine for David Cameron for his next intervention in a Queen's Speech debate.

'Thank you very much.

'The prime minister says the chancellor has a clunking fist, but I think he'll be knocked over in any fight because, though he looks like a heavyweight, he's actually as easy to knock over as a snowman. He's not so much "A Whiter Shade of Pale" as "A Fighter Made of Hail". I thank you.

Now here's a thing. Have you ever noticed how Peter Gabriel's album *Passion*, featuring music from the film *The Last Temptation of Christ*, contains the track "It Is Accomplished"? The only thing the prime minister has accomplished with this, his last Queen's Speech, is a climate of fear and complaints about the decline of public services. It's not so much "Bread and Wine" (another track off the Gabriel album) as "Dread and Whine".

'I thank you. Ladies and gentlemen, I'm here all week.

'You know, I chose Radiohead's "Fake Plastic Trees" to be one of my desert island discs. The trouble with the

prime minister is he's so fake that if he was a woodpecker, he'd only be a plastic one pecking at fake plastic trees. He'd have not so much a radiohead as a Formica head and his bones would be plastic, too. "Bones" is also the title of another Radiohead track of their album *The Bends*. Thank you very much, you're too kind.

Moving on now. The chancellor claims the economy is heading back into the black, but he's no Frank Black, the singer whose album *Teenager of the Year* featured the track "Ole Mulholland", but with Holland's economy growing faster than the UK's, I wonder if the chancellor has ever listened to the Fun Lovin' Criminals track "Korean Bodega" and asked the foreign secretary if our diplomatic negotiation with North Korea over their nuclear ambitions has met with any progress or is it, like the economy, a bit of a dog's dinner at the moment, Koreans being partial to having dog as dinner and Oasis having a track called "Digsy's Dinner" on their album *Definitely Maybe*? Settle down, now. There's more, there's more.

'The prime minister claims to be pushing through legislation on improving climate change and the environment, but rather than employing these half-hearted measures, wouldn't it be better to divert investment into funding home-grown farms for the production of organic seaweed, so that it's not so much "A Whiter Shade of Pale" as "A Brighter Glade of Crail"?'

Step right up to Politicsville, USA

Someone once described Washington as 'Hollywood for Ugly People' and there is a sense as you stroll around the

city that this is a one-industry town, filled with gawky individuals hell-bent on writing policy papers and amending anything that moves. Streets are laid out in a grid system, with numbers and single capital letters for names; it's the only place where people's addresses sound like chess moves. ('I'll meet you at the corner of H and Twenty-second.' 'OK, then I'll see you tonight at Tetrahedron Five on the corner of Z and Pi.' 'We're having a party five inches from Nine, which means I can take your bishop.')

The government buildings are impressive from the outside, but inside little is spent on ornamentation. Long, wide white corridors, intermittently dotted with American flags, lead off into the distance. This is a city designed for meetings. It's a low, purposeful place. And its purpose is politics. Everywhere you go there are politicians, aides to politicians, monuments to politicians, and hotels putting up politicians and their hookers. It's like a constant festival of politics. It's Glastonbury in suits. At night, all the young staffers and policy wonks get blitzed at bars filled with journalists and bloggers and gossip about whose politics didn't work that day.

Meanwhile, the gift shops sell novelty trinkets about politics. I brought back an Obamarama car air-freshener and a set of Hillary Clinton nutcrackers (you put a walnut between her legs and squeeze).

And everywhere there are statues of politicians. The Lincoln Memorial gazes from one end of the Mall to the Washington Monument at the other. On either side are monuments to Jefferson and F. D. Roosevelt. As I contemplated the marvellous serendipity of American history, that it could produce just enough great presidents to map

out a perfect square, it struck me that what distinguishes the UK from the US is how little we mythologise the political process. In America, if you are a president or a mayor, you're likely to have an airport named after you at some point or a fountain constructed in your memory. In the UK, you get a peerage, which is a sort of living reward, but not much more impressive than being handed a cuckoo clock and useless when you're dead.

I can't imagine we would ever spend money on huge, immovable edifices to significant political figures. I can't see us, fifty years from now, queuing up to get into the Ian Paisley Rotunda or taking off from Jack Straw Airport.

I predict an Apocacataslump

Global warming, world conflict, religious earthquakes and financial collapse are all coming to a head simultaneously, creating the perfect conditions for what world experts are calling 'a potential Apocacataslump'. Plus, an asteroid is due to hit Wall Street in 2013.

So, how can we tell whether the present, utterly miserable state of affairs is just a blip or the worst time for every species since records began? Ringing round a few friends who know people who are experts, I've compiled a quick guide to recognising whether we are truly in the Worst of Times. Put a tick against any of the symptoms you feel are actually happening and tot up your score at the end. That way, you'll know whether or not you're doomed to die depressed, poor, miserable and quite soon, while also having a useful bank-holiday quiz to try on the kids.

Financial ruin

1. When you go into a bank, instead of saying, 'Cashier number two, please', does the Tannoy voice above the counter say, 'Ten pence for a cup of coffee?'
2. If you happen to have been in a bank during an armed raid, underneath their face-stockings did the robbers look curiously like people you know who work in other banks?
3. Do you know of a local branch of your bank that has seriously talked to you about its plans to marry Paul McCartney?
4. When you walk through the financial district of your nearest city, do people come up to you and say, 'I was once a golden dragon, mighty and strong, hungry and keen, whose purposeful beating wings could fly me to a thousand sunny tomorrows. Now I'm like a turd in a farm,' then ask you for ten pence for a cup of coffee?
5. When you pass a travel agent's, is the travel agent standing in the window posing in a pair of trunks next to a sign, saying, 'Like what you see? There's more of this in Morocco'?
6. Have you discovered that your favourite magazines have gone out of business or else merged with other magazines to produce editions with

names such as *New Statesman and Country Life*, *Exchange and Economist*, *The Radio the Times* and *FourFourSpectator*?

Social behaviour

1. Do the kids near you spend all day filming each other laughing at video footage other kids have Bluetoothed to their mobiles?
2. Is that footage clips of a kid hitting an old man over the head with a concrete bollard while the old man's wife laughs as she films it on her mobile?
3. Do you switch on the television to find that the old man's wife has now been given her own chat show?
4. When you switch to another channel and watch a documentary about how gazelles, ground squirrels, voles and prairie dogs sometimes eat their young, do they still come across better than some of your neighbours?
5. If it takes a twenty-two-year-old six years to have four children from three different men, how long does it take a twenty-four-year-old to have three children from five men?
6. Do you realise that this is one of the questions in the new schools maths syllabus?

Environment

1. Do you think there are slightly fewer swallows than this time last year?
2. Are you aware that swallows have been seen migrating to another planet?
3. Are you also aware that, to do so, they have, over the past three million years, evolved a brain that is brilliant at aeronautical engineering and that it's taken them all this time to devise and build tiny thermonuclear booster rockets attached to their anklets?
4. Were you also aware that Michael Jackson was seen flying with them in an escape pod tethered to their legs?
5. Are you also aware that, though they are leaving Earth because of the impending climatic catastrophe, their booster rockets have caused more carbon emissions than a hundred thousand jet fighters crashing into fifty volcanoes?
6. Are you prepared to tell people that the glaciers are melting because they've been used as launching pads for penguin rockets?
7. Are you aware there's a space station manned entirely by spiders hurtling at 300,000 m.p.h. away from Earth? To relieve the tedium of a long

space flight, they're conducting experiments to see how easily humans can spin webs in zero gravity. Those who can't are chucked out via the airlock.

At last – a real use for Heathrow

Following the collapse of the airline industry, it's about time someone came up with a handy guide to what to do with all the empty airports that are going to start cluttering up the world's outskirts. I've asked a few experts to come up with 101 solutions and here is a selection of their best suggestions.

- Just as farmers who faced economic collapse were told to diversify into other crafts and services, opening up dairy shops or bed-and-breakfasts, so too should airport authorities be encouraged to find alternative, more creative, uses of their land. Such as farming. Airports are mostly grass, suitable for sheep or wheat, while runways are a useful place to park tractors. The planes would make excellent stables. Some airlines such as easyJet already do this and larger operations such as British Airways could downsize effectively by operating each aircraft as a half-plane, half-cowshed service.
- Venue for hen nights. Why go for a stretch-limo cruise through Leeds on a Saturday night when

you and your girlfriends could club together to pay for a stretch-Boeing 747 to taxi up and down the M62 to and from Leeds-Bradford airport for a couple of hours?

- Use the revolving satellite dish at the top of the air-traffic control tower as a tether for a giant game of swingball.
- Use airports as venues for murder-mystery weekends. Ten thousand of you and your friends gather on a Friday night and a senior airport official is murdered. You have forty-eight hours to solve the mystery. Clues are hidden in bags of luggage, which are then scattered randomly across ten other airports.
- Have airport announcers set up a new enquiry service like Ask Jeeves, in which they answer any query you like. They give the answer over the airport Tannoy system, which means you have to turn up at the airport to hear it. It is recommended you turn up at least two hours before your answer is due.
- Tall World. New adventure theme park for short people. They walk along the roads near airports that have specially shortened street lighting because of incoming planes and this way experience what the world would be like if they were a bit taller.

- Retrain air-traffic controllers to issue instructions to bees looking for pollen.
 - All the above ideas are rendered pointless by an economist who discovers that the prohibitive cost of airline fuel is more than outweighed by the sackfuls of money airports make from the vast quantities of magazines, sweets, books and camera batteries we feel the need to buy thirty minutes before our flight. He concludes that if all airports simply replace their planes and runways with more book, magazine, sweet and photo shops, they'll stay in business for the next thirteen decades.
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Richard Branson's complaints corner

Hi there.

I'm Richard Branson, and every week in this spot I'm going to complain about something that stops Virgin being as successful as I'd like it to be. Virgin is really a public company, in that members of the public use it. All profits eventually come to me but, as you know, I'm really holding them in safe-keeping for you. Now I've made that clear, you can see why it's important that Virgin makes as much money as possible because, in the end, you benefit, if only metaphorically.

Only the other day, I went to my bank to get out some gold ingots to take to my house in the Bahamas. As you know, I look after the ingots there in safe-keeping for you.

However, the bank manager said, 'Sorry, you can't come in. It's actually eight o'clock on Saturday evening and the bank is shut at that time.'

Once again, the forces of protected interests were conspiring to thwart you, the public. I decided then and there to set up my own bank called Virgin Bank, which will be open twenty-four hours a day and will allow you to deposit any amount of my new currency, which I'm launching, called Virgin Coins. I know some shops have been insisting this money is not legal tender, which just goes to show you what I'm up against.

That's why I've decided to construct a thirty-foot banner saying, 'I'm Richard Branson. Could Everyone Stop Harassing Me. I Deserve to Succeed,' and put it up in the middle of Piccadilly Circus. However, the Metropolitan Police refused to give me permission to close central London down. This again shows just how unfair these vested interests are. They conspire against the little guy (although my company isn't technically little: it's actually quite successful, on your behalf).

That's why I've built a Virgin Piccadilly in my back garden (which is huge). It's the exact same size as the real Piccadilly Circus, but entirely mine, which means I can do with it whatever I like. Sometimes I deliberately smash shop windows just to see what that feels like. It feels good. I also rob a bank that's an exact replica of the one that refused to open up for me. The man from Virgin Psychiatrists says I'm all right and he should know because I pay him.

Poke, prod, press or push . . . it's your choice

I know this doesn't make total theological sense, but last Easter I had an epiphany. Not a spiritual revelation, more a political *eureka*, a sudden understanding of what it is that's starting to go terribly wrong in the nation's public head.

It happened while I was on a family visit to the Natural History Museum in London. There, in one condensed moment, I saw why it is that we find politics a repulsive turn-off. Not just politics, but also newspapers, television, the arts, anything, in fact, that purports to engage us in a conversation about public life.

Polls suggest that more than half of us might not bother to vote in the next general election. As for local and European elections, we may get down to single figures (I'm not sure whether that's percentages or actual people).

Meanwhile, in the Natural History Museum, I had my revelatory moment. I, my wife and children were suddenly struck dumb by the futility of it all. Not the stuffed giraffes and elephants, which were terrific and, as far as we were concerned, suffered an extremely informative death. No, it was the relentless, raucous, lapel-grabbing interactivity of much of the newer displays that was so off-putting. You couldn't walk a centimetre without a bright neon sign urging you to push a button to see how many farmers Mount Etna fried in a year. Turn a corner, and a yellow motorised bumblebee the size of a fit gundog flapped down on metal chains and insisted that you find out how much honey was produced in Guatemala by shouting, 'Buzz,' up its fundament.

The sum result was a quiet disappointment on the faces of the children doing all the pushing and popping. The thwarting display cases invited participation in a process, only to lead you to the conclusion that the process was not worth pursuing. A large talking ant-hill urged you to spit on a glowing red saucepan to find out whether ants masticate grass. That's exciting. So you spat on the saucepan, and a small sign lit up, flashing, 'Yes. They do.' That's dull.

The moment of revelation, my state-of-the-nation epiphany, came when we entered the section devoted to freaks of nature. Sounds good, doesn't it? There in front of me were four extremely large representations of destructive forces, including earth and fire. Water was illustrated by a trickling stream down a concrete slab, with a sign saying 'Water'. Alongside it, a large square column had its top foot-high section slowly topple over forward and backward on hinges. Attached to its side was a sign with the word 'Gravity'.

There I stood, wondering what was the hourly fee of the exhibitions consultancy that recommended the museum illustrate the magnificent, mysterious force of gravity by a square block of column slowly yawning on its hinges. How much time had gone into the construction, how much space on this our all too precious Earth had been taken up, stolen, by this exhibit? I was lost in irate reverie, a confused man standing in front of a snapping pillar. Around me, children ran everywhere in interactive frustration, mindlessly pulling at any protuberance in the demented hope it would do something, pressing walls, punching fire extinguishers, jumping up

and down on cracks in the floor. Meanwhile, flip, went the pillar, backwards. 'Gravity'. Flip again, forwards. 'Gravity'. Flip back again.

'Gravity. Do you see?' Suddenly everything became clear.

Interactivity is a superficial sham leading only to hunger and emptiness. It deludes us into thinking we're taking part; we're 'having a say'. By pushing a button, we're made to feel more involved, but that button is never really going to launch a missile or appoint a judge. It's extremely benign. At best, it supplies information; at worst, it condemns some Z-rate celebrity to spending another night in the jungle with Ant and Dec.

And yet the world is conspiring to make our whole life completely interactive.

Despite widespread political apathy, we're told that voting in elections will be made easier by the introduction of online ballots, or that we can vote in supermarkets or by some other eye-catching method, like being able to nail our preferred candidate to a cross. Process is replacing content, and the more exciting and sensory the process, the more we'll be deluded into thinking the non-existent content has been shaped by us.

Interactivity implies participation. The pseudo-dogma behind it is that the powers that be are 'giving the public what they want'. In television it's bolstered by urgent appeals to press the red button if we want to vote on the colour of Jon Snow's tie. 'Giving the public what they want' is the limp excuse of a TV executive asked to defend a thirteen-part documentary series about celebrity thigh tattoos. 'Putting the public in charge' of schools and

hospitals is the get-out clause for politicians who know there's not enough money to sort everything, but who want to make damn sure they don't get the blame when it all goes belly-up.

And 'I'm only giving the public what it wants' is the retreaded apology of the newspaper editor who prints stories leading to celebrity hell and occasional tragedy.

But who says the public know what they want anyway? Hitler and Mussolini won popular votes, and in this country the public very nearly voted *The Vicar of Dibley* the best sitcom of all time. We need a mediator. We all know we're greedy, unimaginative fools, but we should mistrust anyone who tries to ingratiate themselves with us by saying it's not really his or her job to challenge us.

There's a difference between mindlessly consuming what's in front of you because that's what you really want, and because that's all you think there is. I think beef's great, but I'm glad the high streets aren't filled with endless Angus Steak Houses. There's an additional, perhaps subconscious, satisfaction to be gained from knowing there are other things on offer, even if you choose not to take them.

The essence of the rest of the selection rubs off on you anyway.

At the museum, disappointed, the children ran gleefully around the stuffed animals section and gawped at the sheer immensity of a big blue whale. Now, there was substance, the real thing, a mammal deciding to show you how big it is by just being there. It was pretty successfully doing its job of being a blue whale, in much

the same way that political and media animals could do theirs by just being themselves.

Meet the man who won rave reviews for the Old Bailey

Tom Stafford, newly appointed director-general of the Old Bailey, greets me over a plate of black olive tapenade in the smoke-filled bar of Sinatra's, a new, expensively constructed London hotel, built to look like the inside of Frank Sinatra. 'I always come here at lunchtime,' he says. 'The tonsils are fabulous. Made of graphite. The Old Bailey's just a hundred yards away; we've done a deal to get the juries on any of our long-running trials put up here at a very good rate.' Pleased with himself, he orders crab and wine from a Sammy Davis Junior lookalike.

Since his arrival at the Old Bailey, Tom Stafford has transformed its fortunes. Trials have become faster and more efficient. Press coverage is on the increase. Summings-up have been capped. More people are being found guilty.

Many had greeted Stafford's appointment sniffily. After all, he was only forty-one and had no working knowledge of the law or public administration. What he did have, though, was one of the most exciting business CVs this side of the Atlantic. It's thought the Home Office was won over by the impressive way he raised the public profile of Q8 garages. It must be hoping he does the same for Britain's biggest law court.

I want to completely redynamise the way law works in that building. This is the twenty-first century yet most of us are still locked in a very eighteenth-century way of

having a judiciary. People nowadays won't buy the standard trial-jury-verdict thing. They want something less structurally overloaded. An average jury member – I'm talking about a kid of twenty-eight or twenty-nine – is never going to put up with excessive legalese or be expected to adjudicate over something technical like computer fraud. Sure, those crimes ought to be looked at, but I think it's right to put cases like that on overnight.'

Stafford raised several bewigged eyebrows when he proposed night-time trials for less interesting felonies, leaving the day free for mostly murder.

But his tactics have borne results. Attendance at the Old Bailey is now up to 92 per cent during the day. The night trials are still conducted in front of a jury, but only if all twelve jury members are interested. Otherwise, the judge takes the case to a small booth, where he adjudicates on his own.

'You know, I really don't expect as much fuss next month when we put sex crimes on every Friday. If it works, we'll put them in Court Number One permanently. God knows, they can easily find enough people out there doing them.'

He points up to the hotel ceiling, an impressively carved reconstruction of Sinatra's cranium, decorated with a pastel frieze depicting scenes of the singer's divorce from Ava Gardner. 'This place knows exactly what it's doing. So why can't the British legal system? What gives judges the right to lay down the law?' Here he smashes a large hole through the top of his brûlée. 'The more people get interested in the kind of trials we do here, the more they'll learn about the law. I really think the best

law degree to be had is from just sitting through a rape case for a week. So we're launching a new degree course offering people the chance to do just that.'

With that he gets up and walks towards Sinatra's lips, but then pauses and turns. 'Believe me. I really do support the judiciary. For example, the Home Office wants to lock up potential psychopaths before they commit a crime. Now, actually, I happen to think these people are entitled to a proper trial first. So I'm doing a deal to get all the cases put on at the Old Bailey. I want it to be the best place for people to be tried for crimes they might commit.'

I pay the bill as I watch Tom Stafford, roaring success, step out into the day, leaving one of Frank Sinatra's teeth swinging shut behind him.

The Best News Money Can Buy

I'm splitting the next section into two, one half for the rich and the other for the poor. I hope you enjoy this more targeted look at the world, bringing you all the latest comment, views and gossip from your own socio-economic income bracket.

News for the rich

(If you are poor, please skip, and go to your section below.)

Hedge Fund Quarterly to give away free Barbra Streisand concerts

The financial magazine *Hedge Fund Quarterly* announced that every copy of its next edition will have attached

to it a life-size Barbra Streisand stadium concert, totally free.

It's thought *HFQ* is the first magazine ever to have large stadiums stapled to the front cover. 'We've had to build a new printing press fifteen times bigger than Wembley,' said *HFQ* editor, Steve Bosh, 'which is obviously expensive, but since each copy of the magazine costs twelve million pounds anyway, we can afford it.'

Unveiling today of new Thames footbridge for the rich

The new Rémy Martin Bridge, which costs £14.25 to walk across, connects St Paul's Cathedral with the new St Paul's Cathedral optimum observation area directly opposite which, for £17.80, gives Londoners a chance to look directly at St Paul's Cathedral.

Great alternative to plastic tower covers

Fed up with plastic tower covers? Why not try hemp fabric covers instead? More and more people are dissatisfied with the crinkled, scratched appearance of plastic when they're looking for something to keep their thirty-storey company offices and penthouse apartments dry in the rain. That's why more people are calling on Skylark Natural Tower Covers of Dorset.

The company, only in business for two years, has already sold a hundred tower covers to the City of London made from natural hemp fibres, which 'cloak up to forty storeys in natural goodness and give off the sweet smell of hemp'.

At the slightest hint of rain, the tower covers (£12,000) are dropped over your building by a team of dedicated helicopters (£23 million: helicopters not included).

The agony of not having a child talented enough to come up with paintings that sell as much as Willem de Kooning's continues for Hertfordshire fertility couple

For Sarah and Sion Bradley, the struggle to have a child, already difficult because of Sion's fertility problems, has been compounded by the fact that none of the five children they've had so far has shown any interest in developing artistic talent that can match that of the Willem de Kooning original (\$123 million) that hangs in the hallway of their Harefield home (£23 million). 'It's been heart-breaking,' says Sion. 'They're all great kids, but none of them has got what it takes. One we can cope with, but five? What are the chances? But we'll get there. I know we will.'

News for the poor

(If you are rich, there is no obligation to read this.)

There are fewer puddles underneath the new Rémy Martin Bridge than there are under Westminster Bridge

This is the startling new finding of some people who've been down there to watch the tourists look at St Paul's. For added value, one end of the bridge gives you a brilliant view of the new St Paul's Cathedral optimum observation area, where you can see all sorts of people coming to look at St Paul's. Free.

'Rain is good for you,' claims scientist's friend

If your natural inclination, after a hard day's walking, is to abandon the wet for somewhere dry, it may be you're missing out on one of nature's most life-giving properties. That's the finding of a man I met this afternoon who, when he was at university twenty-seven years ago, knew some students studying science subjects.

Free Prince CDs promote more restful sleep

That's the claim of several people I met underneath the Rémy Martin Bridge the other night. They said that if you gather up all the free Prince CDs attached to unbought copies of last week's *Daily Mail*, you can lay fifty of them out in a flat oblong big enough to act as a bed. 'The hard plastic has the same chiropractic effect as a futon,' said one happy layabout, 'and it keeps you off the damp ground.' 'There's nothing wrong with damp,' shouted his colleague. 'Water is good for you.' But he was punched.

The naked truth about life at No. 10

The entry for Thursday, 1 December 1994, in Alastair Campbell's diary reads: 'I went in to see TB [Tony Blair] who was standing stark naked reading the *Mail*.' The Labour leader's nudeness is not referred to again, and there's no explanation as to why he was naked in the first place. Until now. The truth is that the diaries were heavily censored but, thanks to my connections, I can publish the

whole account below using the diary entries Campbell deleted from the book.

28 October 1994. Work with TB on a speech about opportunity and transport. He looked agitated, and wanted to talk to me about Cherie. I said we had two hours to sort out our take on what cars of the future would look like or we were all stuffed. He said, 'Bollocks to cars.' He was worried Cherie had become too close to Carole Caplin. He said he didn't understand this new-age stuff they were both into but he showed willing by going to a psychic evening with them. I said, 'Are you mad?' and he said, 'Don't worry, there were no photographers, but I've been a fool.' TB tells me what happened.

A lot of people tried to sell him crystals, and he just smiled at them and said, 'I don't do crystals.' Then a hypnotist came by. TB thought he was one of the funny ones that do variety shows and get people to bark like dogs whenever they click their fingers. The hypnotist made a bee-line for him and said, 'Go on, this is just a bit of fun.' TB said, 'No,' and the hypnotist said, 'Can't you take a joke, or are you like all the other politicians?' This was a red rag to a bull. TB stopped and turned and said, 'Right, you've got one minute to make me look like I can laugh at myself.'

The hypnotist waved his hands in front of him and said, 'When I say the words *Daily Mail* you will take all your clothes off.' Cherie immediately freaked out, and said, 'We've got to get out of here. I'm sorry, Tony. I'm really sorry.' They ran off before they could undo the spell. 'It's awful, Alastair,' TB said. 'Every time I see or

hear, "The *Daily Mail*" I strip naked. This is going to seriously disrupt my plans for government.'

12 January 1995. Rang Paul Dacre at the *Mail* and asked if there's any way he can stop printing his paper ever again. He laughed at me and called me a 'hilarious c**t'. I told him that unless he stopped all production of the *Mail* on a permanent basis, there'd be no way his newspaper got any exclusives from us. He put the phone down, laughing. What an unreasonable prat.

12 September 1996. I had to bundle TB into a basket and take him out by the kitchens when he removed all his clothes during a recording of *Blue Peter*. Despite stringent checks, nobody told us they were going to make a papier-mâché No. 10 Downing Street out of wet newspaper.

2 May 2002. Can't believe it. We've been in government five years, and managed to keep TB's 'problem' under wraps. ('Unlike you with your cock,' I joked. He didn't laugh.)

5 July 2004. A breakthrough. TB agreed to film a small charity viral with the cast of *Little Britain*. They all met up this morning. I found Matt Lucas's baldness mesmerising. He has perfect skin. I was captivated. Lucas performed his 'Look into my eyes, look into my eyes, the eyes, the eyes' hypnotist sketch and both TB and I flinched.

However, by some quirk, this has accidentally succeeded in reversing the spell. TB no longer gets his balls out in front of the *Mail*. He tells me he's decided to stay on for a third term.

6 July 2004. Unfortunately, Matt Lucas's act has affected me. Walking down Pall Mall I automatically bare my chest and shout, 'I'm Tarzan!' whenever I pass a bald man. I ring TB up and tell him I've decided to leave front-line politics.

David Cameron writes exclusively for this book about heterosexual marriage

Hi. Nice to see you. Our country is sledging into a moral quagmire. This is a broken Britain, where contempt is top of the menu and sarcasm the chef's special.

The only cure is the institution of marriage. That's why I have been setting out policies which use marriage to straighten our bent society. These are:

- A reverence for the institution of marriage. We will fund a national billboard campaign starring celebrated married couple Timothy West and Prunella Scales in which they state categorically that 'Marriage made us talented.'
- The police will be given powers to marry people on the spot. If a policeman sees an unattached male and female making excess noise in a built-up area, he will automatically marry them. If their behaviour doesn't improve, he can issue them with a compulsory order to treasure and love each other till their dying days.

- Under certain circumstances, doctors will be permitted to marry people injured in gang warfare, even if they are unconscious.
 - Single mothers will be entitled to an imaginary husband.
 - A married couple with a history of domestic violence will themselves be married to another couple. It's possible for up to eighteen people to be married together as one super-couple in this way. I've asked a senior Mormon to advise on the best methods.
-

Resign gracefully? Not likely

All political careers end in failure and, most certainly, resignation. For those interested in politics, here's a crash course in Resignation Studies.

1. Learn to recognise the 'Look, why should I resign when I've been perfectly honest and up-front?' defence. It rests on the mistaken assumption you can be excused a folly just by admitting to it. Imagine where we'd be with that one if dogs could talk. 'Yes, I've done a turd in your lounge. What's the problem? I'm not trying to hide the facts. The turd is there. I admit it. I did it. Now, really, what we should be concentrating all our efforts on is how to clean it up. Actually, could you do that since I've not got opposable thumbs?'

2. The next defence to spot is the 'I've made a mess and it's now my responsibility to stay and clear that mess up' gambit. This is easily demolished. Why, for example, does no one point out that if you've just admitted to being incompetent, the last person we'd want to work further on a project is yourself? It's like a dog saying, 'Yes, I know I'm incontinent, and have been incontinent all around your house, but it's my responsibility now to stay on as your dog and be continent.' Our natural reaction would be to shove the dog into the garden with a cork up its arse.
 3. The final justification to look out for and one any prime minister relies on ceaselessly to explain why he'll be staying on at No. 10 is that he 'needs to complete the job he set out to do'. This is the maddest excuse of all, since it assumes there's no other human being alive who could possibly complete it for him. Again, it's like a dog saying, 'Look, despite the turd business, I need to stay on here to keep being the domestic pet I started off being.' The owner could easily say back to him, 'That's very nice of you to offer to stay, you uncontrollable turder, but, you see, I'm going to buy a cat. Now leave, you mangy, stinking crapper.'
 4. The final point, and the only rule you have to remember, is that, despite all the above arguments, the person involved will still resign.
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Terrorist alert: do you really know what your pooch is up to at night?

Attention! Attention! Stop what you're doing right now and keep reading this.

We are in Situation Orange. Be heedful of all around you. Everyone you know, your family, your loved ones, may be at risk. For they may be terrorists.

Following advice received from MI5 and the Committee for National Equanimity, we announce today that there are literally 459,208 terrorists at large in this country. It is the duty of each citizen to report any terrorist he or she sees or is related to. It is the duty of any terrorist reading this to hand himself or herself in as soon as possible.

How you can tell if someone is a terrorist

1. If you see them not reading this notice all the way to the end. That indicates there's something about it that's already familiar. No prizes for guessing what that is. Pass on their names.
2. If someone tells you they are scared of what may happen if they go on the bus, then they are terrorising you and must be reported immediately as terrorists.
3. According to the Six Degrees of Separation theory, everyone is no more than six social connections away from a terrorist. You know someone who knows someone who knows someone who

- knows someone who knows a terrorist. That makes you an accessory and therefore a terrorist. Please turn yourself in immediately.
4. Do not believe those who play down the terrorist threat. They are terrorists. The shocking truth is, a London bus gets blown up every day. If you do not believe this, then you are playing down the terrorist threat and you must hand yourself in immediately as a terrorist.
 5. Animals such as dogs can sniff out explosives. But how many of you have a dog? Keep an eye on it all the time. Do you know where your dog goes at night? If you know of a dog that has the ability to sniff out explosives, ask yourself this: is it not but a small step away from learning how to smuggle explosives into the country from the porous Iraqi-Jordanian border and setting up an operative cell, possibly with other like-minded dogs, with the sole purpose of disrupting the very fabric of our buses? Then you train terrorists.
 6. Do you know of anyone who sneered at the unveiling of the designs of the 2012 Olympic stadium? They are most likely a terrorist.
 7. Do you know of anyone who looked closely at the designs of the new Olympic stadium? They, too, are terrorists.

8. Have you in the past few weeks heard anyone say, 'I'd rather not watch *Spooks* tonight'? They are a terrorist.
 9. Do you know of any children who have dropped modern languages in favour of chemistry and politics as GCSEs? They are most likely potential terrorists and must be watched and then turned in.
 10. Do you know of anyone who is critical of the actions of our home secretary? If so, do they claim once to have been a home secretary themselves? There are many former home secretaries in this country, so many in fact that it is often not possible to keep accurate records of the exact number. It is probably best you turn them in.
 11. If at any point you feel the need to turn yourself in, you are a terrorist and must turn yourself in.
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It's no wonder the Royal Family is going bonkers

When Prince Edward announced he was giving up business as a TV producer for renewed life as a royal, I couldn't help feeling he was making yet another bad career move. The Royal Marines, wiring Andrew Lloyd Webber's electric plugs and, finally, running a television company specialising in documentaries about the history of cannons in the Queen Mother's bathroom were all bad

enough, but Being a Member of the Royal Family is now just about the most pointless job, with diminishing prospects, that anyone can choose to do.

I'm not a principled anti-monarchist, though I am anti-Edward. It used to be that I was against Edward not because he was a royal but because he was clearly an idiot. I thought that, just because he was duff at business, it didn't mean other royals couldn't work in the commercial sector. All it proved was that Edward shouldn't.

And Edward's inability to see how stupid it was to think you could run a major television-production outfit simply because you'd once met Kylie Minogue at a party and your mother does a long-running Christmas show confirmed this.

When the television industry laughed at Edward for producing tat like *A History of Plantagenet Cumberbunds*, *The Monarchy and Squid* and *How Many Corners Does Sandringham Have?*, he went off in a huff to America and complained that in Britain they despise success, forgetting that what people were despising in his case was utter, utter failure.

So ran my original set of anti-Edwardian attitudes, and I thought nothing of imagining Edward naïvely ploughing on these past years, running out of royal things to film himself standing in front of and reduced to making programmes about the history of himself, like *Edward on Edward on Edward*, in which Prince Edward recounts the story of the successful commissioning of a film about his great-uncle, King Edward.

But my take on Edward has recently changed. If before I was against him not for being royal but for being an

idiot, I now firmly believe he's an idiot because he's a royal. But I think this is our fault, not his, because it's our approach to the monarchy that's idiotic. How can the Royal Family expect to remain mentally stable when the emotional demands we impose on them are so completely contradictory?

On the one hand, we expect them to be special, to be radiant, superior, something exclusive and different, so we flagellate them when they have flings and emotional traumas, swear, get fat, are caught speeding, make stupid remarks, smoke dope or perpetrate conduct unbecoming of a royal. We want princes, not bankrupts, princesses, not sluts. Yet we simultaneously vilify our royals for being odd, detached and profoundly un-normal. We praise Anne for being 'down to earth' and laud the likes of Viscount Linley for pursuing a normal career as a carpenter. The royals we like best are the ones who seem least royal.

It seems we can't decide whether we want our royals to wear tiaras or overalls. Do we want to see them look dignified, or should we demand they cry? As they approach us, should we hug them or bow?

To be born a member of the Royal Family is to be born into a life of contradiction and confusion. Take away the divinity and the power (and the beheading of Charles I did that pretty permanently), and all you're left with is wealth and public status.

That just about puts you on a par with Alex Ferguson or the creators of *Bob the Builder*. And no more. You're nothing special, but you're expected to act as if you are. That's the trauma through which Edward's family has

been going, probably subconsciously, for the past three hundred years. They've been living a purposeless, thumb-twiddling existence, knowing that, for the rest of their lives, all they'll be is rich people waving at children while opening day-care centres.

No wonder they're going mad. The public's support for the continuation of the Royal Family is, in the end, an act of unmitigated cruelty and a pretty good subject for a royal documentary.

Suppose we woke up to discover America was a lie?

Monday. It suddenly dawns on me that though I think *Casablanca* is one of the best films ever made, I still haven't managed to see it. I've heard a lot about it, though, and today I decide to go and speak to all those people who recommended it to me.

It turns out none of them has seen it either. I ring Warner Bros, but it goes quiet and tries fobbing me off with a free ticket to see *Scooby-Doo*. I think something's going on.

Tuesday. A scandal in Hollywood. Warner Bros admits that *Casablanca* was never made. When pushed, it also reveals that Humphrey Bogart was mostly wishful conjecture. 'We had an actor under contract in the 1940s and 1950s who looked a bit like what we imagined Humphrey Bogart to be,' said a Warner Bros spokesman, 'and we'd always planned to make something like *Casablanca*, but never got round to it. Then, when people

started talking about how good it was, we just played along with it.'

Soon every other major Hollywood studio makes a similar confession: 20th Century Fox admits that *The Return of the Jedi* was never made, while Francis Ford Coppola confesses to having made *The Godfather, Parts Two and Three*, but not *Part One*.

By nightfall, I sit stunned by the realisation that the American film industry does not have as successful a back catalogue as it has always claimed. I go to bed furious, just as Gregory Peck is arrested for claiming to have been in more than thirty-five films, when in fact, for the past fifty years, he's just been a baker.

Wednesday. Wake up to hear America admit it has only one-twentieth of the wealth it claimed to have. The dark news emerges when all the casinos in Las Vegas confess they've been operating for the past seven years on an average profit of four hundred dollars.

By noon, most of the board of directors of the Disney Corporation is being taken in for questioning for saying their company is stinking rich when in fact it owes someone ninety pounds. The discrepancy was spotted by a quick-thinking FBI official, who realised that nobody had ever liked Mickey Mouse and therefore Walt Disney's claimed wealth may not have existed.

Thursday. Philip Roth is taken away from his house in handcuffs. He may have written only one novel. It's now dawning on the world that, for about the past hundred years, America has been taking us all for a ride.

The Statue of Liberty turns out to be made of cork. Mount Rushmore is a back-lit projection. The Lincoln Memorial is a giant hand puppet. The film *Capricorn One* was filmed entirely on a studio lot on the Moon.

With every hour, it's becoming clearer that America has been pretending to be more influential than it actually is. Its official claim to be a superpower is slowly being rescinded as people learn that its intelligence network is dumb, its armed forces unsuccessful and the bulk of its population incapable of affording the most basic of medical attention.

Friday. Hysteria in America when 100 million people suddenly become confused; the mental strain of spending a lifetime trying simultaneously to oppose abortion and support the death penalty turns them all to idiots. Millions of God-fearing capitalists confess to thievery and agnosticism.

I wake up to the morning of the first day in the modern era, in which no one believes in America any more. And it doesn't feel good, just frighteningly ridiculous.

Oh, look – Harriet Harman without her ministerial briefs

Here is a chance to catch up on some news stories that you may have missed.

Nude ministers may have to resign

Fifteen cabinet and junior ministers may have to resign after posing for the media naked behind their desks. It's

customary for ministers to call photographers and television camera crews in to shoot them sitting at their desks, opening their dispatch boxes and looking through some of their papers. While this is always expected to be done fully clothed, unfortunately, on Monday, fifteen of them were mysteriously advised to pose naked.

Harriet Harman said, 'I was surprised at first, but one of the camera team said, "It's OK, love, what we do is shoot you naked and then afterwards we digitally paint in the clothes that are relevant to the time of year the footage will be shown." So I just went buff.'

Another minister, David Miliband, said he had been told that clothed shots were for British news broadcasts, but he also had to do an additional nude shoot for the European and Asian markets, where everything is a lot more hardcore. 'I feel such a fool now that everyone can see me in the skuddy,' said Miliband. 'Everywhere I go, people shout at me, "Oi, hairy tits, ever thought of shaving your shoulders?" That's not going to help me become prime minister.'

England manager chooses cartoon character for World Cup squad

Fabio Capello courted controversy last week when he announced that one of the twenty-three-man England squad for the World Cup finals was going to be a cartoon character. It's 2D, full name Stuart Tusspot, who plays keyboard and lead vocals for the animated indie-band Gorillaz. Said Capello: 'It's a bit of a gamble, I know, because I haven't seen 2D actually play any football. But he's well drawn and moves really slickly.'

However, Capello's troubled build-up to the finals received a fresh blow when it was revealed the FA is in dispute with 2D's animators over who should draw him. Gorillaz's co-creator Jamie Hewlett had thought he'd be invited along to South Africa, but now it appears the FA is insisting that 2D will, instead, be drawn by Capello himself. 'This is ridiculous,' said an angry Hewlett. 'I went to art school, so I can draw. Capello's draughtsman-ship is that of a five-year-old having an asthmatic attack. And if you're wondering what that looks like, here it is.'

He then drew something terrible on a piece of paper and held it up to the cameras. Everyone was suitably impressed.

Sale of high-definition television allows viewers to see deep into the souls of TV presenters

High-street electronics stores were bombarded with complaints from terrified customers who'd bought high-definition TV sets that work so well that it's possible to see behind the eyes of any host and gaze straight into the very depths of their soul. An ITV spokesman said, 'During Monday night's Bafta show, we received thousands of complaints regarding the poor quality of the programme. Thankfully, we can now attribute this to people seeing the deadness behind Davina McCall's eyes, a look of lifeless fear, which I'm afraid no makeup can ever hide.' Viewers of *Deal or No Deal* are reportedly 'now rather glad' that Noel Edmonds didn't win a Bafta.

The hate that dare not speak its name

Blue Stabbers is the true story of the violent political rivalry between David Cameron and George Osborne. Here's an appetiser from the book, containing extracts from some of the juiciest paragraphs.

From page 92

It's a badly kept secret that David Cameron, forty, and his shadow chancellor, George Osborne, thirty-five, have harboured a destructive animosity towards each other for the past twenty years. These two political geniuses, the unquestioned leviathans of the Westminster scene, find themselves locked in the bitterest of rivalries even though each knows the other needs both of him as much as he needs the other.

From page 107

Night after night shouts could be heard from David Cameron's office. One night I heard David scream, 'I tell you, George, if you're not going to back me up on the choice of software we use to set up the website then, goodness, I don't know whether I'll be able to trust you on anything ever again. You're dead to me.'

From page 23

'George always stayed alone in his office brooding. After we'd all left, he'd stay there, just sitting in silence. He'd stay there until about ten o'clock, and then he'd go home and go to bed, or watch the news, then go to bed. That was the lowest point.'

From page 786

'George resented the way Cameron got all the glory. You know that bit in the Cameron webcast where he says, "Watch out BBC and ITV, we're coming after you!" while doing the dishes? George gave him that line. And nobody thanked him for it. Weasels.'

From volume four

'It was the angriest I'd ever seen the two of them. Dave was shouting, "If you don't back my Wellbeing Agenda by noon tomorrow then something awful's going to happen to your dog.'"

From the last page

"Dammit, you hellface! If you can't take a turd in the mouth over this tax policy, then you're not fit for human consumption."

"Just own up to it, mate. I'm the brains behind the pair of us, you're just the Kate Moss figure. I do the maths, you strut your arse on the catwalk getting the paparazzi wet."

"Yeah, but just remember, when we take control, I'll be steering the goddamn ship, and I'll be using your head as a rudder. Got that, boy-breath?"

'That was the worst I'd ever heard them.'

The book was written without the authorisation of either David Cameron or George Osborne, although both of them co-operated fully in giving confidential information about the other.

A quiet word with the prime minister is all it takes to quell a rebellion

A lot of people have written to ask me what exactly happens during a backbench rebellion, so I've spent the past few minutes or so asking MPs prone to rebel.

Stephen Dorrington MP (Lab, Upper Moreish) on why he didn't rebel against the invasion of Iraq

I'd always made clear my opposition to the war with Iraq. Prior to the final vote, on the eve of the start of war, the chief whip summoned me to her office to meet the prime minister. He explained that if he lost the vote, he would have to resign, the Tories would get in again for fifteen years, and all our hospitals would be sold off to pay for fat cats. I said that, on a point of principle, I still couldn't vote for a war I thought was illegal.

He said he respected my position, but that he had little respect for my actual position. I asked what he meant by that, and the chief whip said, 'You know what he means.'

The prime minister then said, 'Look, just suppose the war has already started. Would you still oppose what our troops were doing?'

I said, 'No, of course not. Once our forces are engaged, it's our duty to give them our full backing.'

The prime minister then explained that if I voted against the motion, the troops wouldn't be able to go in and that therefore I would not have the opportunity to give our troops my backing.

I immediately saw he was right, and voted in favour of the war.

Margaret Houghy MP (Lab, Chester-le-Dorset) on why she didn't rebel against NHS reform

I'd always made clear to the health secretary my opposition to the idea of foundation hospitals within the NHS. He said he understood where I was coming from but disagreed with the method of transport.

I asked him what he meant by this and he said, 'You know what I mean.' I said, 'No, I don't,' but he ignored me and asked me to come into his office.

I walked in and was greeted by the prime minister, who said, 'Look, if we don't modernise the health service, the Tories will get in and they'll modernise it even worse. You don't want private funding under them, do you?'

I said no, and he persuaded me to vote for private funding under Labour instead.

Barnie Baloney MP (Lab, Hilariously Poole) on asylum seekers

I had always made known my principled opposition to the home secretary's measures on the expulsion of asylum seekers. However, when I received an invitation to come and meet the home secretary and the prime minister to talk about it, I was thrilled. (But also more determined than ever to make my position quite clear.) So I entered the home secretary's office and before I could say anything, the prime minister said: 'Look, we perfectly understand your point of view, but what neither of us understands is the point of view that you're adopting.'

Then the prime minister said, 'Look, if we don't push these initiatives through, then I tell you the BNP will

grow, and before we know it the BNP will be in power, possibly next week. If we don't push forward in pushing out of this country people who the BNP will make an issue of, then we're turning our backs on perhaps the biggest opportunity to reduce the BNP from a party of opposition to a tiny vocal minority in your lifetime.'

I saw sense and voted with the government.

Iain Duncan Smith MP (Con, Flummox)

The prime minister explained to me that he was conducting a war on health, a war on crime, a war on education and a war on winning the Olympic bid.

I stated that, given we were engaged in war, it was my duty to give him our full support.

I'm genuinely sorry that I have been found out

Here are last week's personal statements from MPs to the House of Commons.

Mr Tim Flammond, MP for Liverpool South-west

Mr Speaker, I would like to make a personal statement, relating to the recently completed construction of the M704 motorway between London and Liverpool. It has been pointed out to me that the final five miles of this motorway have been crazy-paved and lead away from the main route to Liverpool and draw up to the front door of my house.

I would also like to point out that I've now been made aware of the fact that I am the only person to drive on this stretch of motorway on a weekly basis. I would like to

apologise unreservedly for not spotting all this sooner and can only put these circumstances down to my being too distracted by my parliamentary work as chairman of the House of Commons Transport Funding Select Committee.

Mr David Stoddard, MP for Layton Ferry

I would like to apologise for inadvertently putting 'Dundee' down as my children on a tax form and then claiming child maintenance for 143,000 people. This was purely a factual wrongdoing and in no way was intended to be criticised. Thank you.

Oh, how careless – now they've mislaid Harriet Harman

Here's a round-up of some of the news stories you may have missed . . .

Labour 'will not contest' the next general election

Schools secretary Ed Balls today angrily denounced the Conservatives for 'making mischief' with their suggestion that there should be a general election in the next year or so. 'This is pure gimmickry,' said the pudgy-faced schools boss in response to Tory leader David Cameron's challenge yesterday that his party 'will resign our seats *en masse* within the next two years and provoke a general election in which we can talk about the government's record'.

'This is single-issue politics gone mad,' said Balls. 'There are a number of things this government is committed to. Our record is only one of them. The public

would prefer us to concentrate on the job at hand rather than get sucked into this sort of publicity stunt. And, anyway, how much is having a general election going to cost the tax-payer? Wouldn't that sort of money be better spent on funding a new curriculum review instead?'

Commons leader may have been left behind on a train

An angry Gordon Brown was today said to be 'so furious it started looking quite funny' when he was told of another embarrassing security lapse by the government involving leader of the House of Commons Harriet Harman, who may have been left behind on a train. 'At this morning's cabinet meeting, it was clear that Harriet wasn't there,' said an anonymous under-secretary, 'and when the PM asked where she was an embarrassed foreign secretary [who also wished to remain anonymous] put his hand up and said he may have left her behind on a train getting in late from Gloucester.'

Eyewitnesses report seeing the leader of the House of Commons being used on a train at about eleven p.m. the previous night, then not being put away when she was finished with. 'We're all terribly worried,' said the insider. 'People think of Harriet as being a bit serious, but in reality she yaks away like a burst water main when she gets half a chance. She loves being leader of the House of Commons and she's always boring strangers with some of the juicy stuff she gets to see on her desk.'

Respected MP paid for Kirstie Alley as his researcher James Purnell, a senior Labour MP and former cabinet minister, faced criticism from fellow MPs when it was

revealed he'd paid for the former *Cheers* star Kirstie Alley to act as his researcher. The actress was hired to answer constituency letters and was paid a weekly salary of £30,000, all of which Mr Purnell has claimed back on expenses. 'Kirstie normally nets two to three million dollars a movie,' said Mr Purnell, 'so I was only charging the sort of rate she would expect.'

Ms Alley was said to do all her research from 'her homes' rather than the Palace of Westminster. The row follows on from similar expenses rows. For example, MP Douglas Hogg claims £320,000 a week for using Bill Murray as his PA, while backbencher David Heathcoat-Amory claims £245,000 for Rolling Stones guitarist Ron Wood as a 'transport adviser' who works from Wembley.

Second-hand paperback editions of *Papillon* to be given to all troops on their return from active service in Iraq and Afghanistan

The defence secretary today announced plans for the official welcome home of British forces on active duty overseas with a public declaration that the government will set aside sufficient funds to see that each soldier and airman will receive a second-hand copy of *Papillon*, the bestselling autobiography of convicted felon Henri Charrière. Those seriously injured in combat will also be given a half-bottle of rosé and a vacuum-wrapped slice of Edam cheese. 'This government recognises the bravery of our troops, and the sacrifices they have made,' he told a packed House of Commons. 'Edam is the final choice of a panel of fourteen experts, so there cannot and must not be any criticism.'

The defence secretary is also facing down fury about

poor standards of accommodation for British troops, many of whom were just given some sticks to live in or else were put up inside a live volcano.

Jack Straw may have left his PIN number on a lap-dancer

Justice Secretary Jack Straw today apologised publicly for another embarrassing security lapse when he admitted he may have left his PIN number on a lap-dancer last night. 'I didn't have any money on me,' he said, 'so I wrote down my number and pushed that in her thigh-thong. I realise now I should have thought that through a bit more.'

Mr Straw appealed for anyone who came across his PIN details to hand them in immediately to the police. The PIN number is 4721 and his MasterCard number 3321 3345 7820, with an expiry date of 07/11.

Richard Branson to launch fifty-foot mechanical eco-hare service

Rich travelpreneur Richard Branson has come up with a novel way to beat high fuel costs and environmental concerns about his airlines. 'I saw a hare hop across a field yesterday and I think a fifty-foot-high mechanical hare that can house forty to fifty customers is the solution.' The hare will be able to hop more than two hundred yards on hydraulic back legs, getting people from Cardiff to London in three hours. 'There are safety issues,' said Branson, 'but I'm sure these can be dealt with by next Wednesday.' In a nice environmental touch, the mechanical hare's legs will be coated with the skin of real hares.

Dialogue of the deities

I am delighted to host a discussion between Barack Obama and David Cameron.

DAVID CAMERON: Mr President, it's delightful to meet you at last.

BARACK OBAMA: I know it is. As I travel this great world of ours, from the high plains of Montana to the deepest fjords of Denmark, from the small villages struggling to buy a first dishwasher in southern Spain to the magnificent rolling *autobahns* of Germany, I'm met with a humbling sense of how delighted people are to meet me and to share in my simple story of a simple, humble man who can bring change to his country and to the world and to the rest of history for ever.

CAMERON: Yes and I can identify with that humbling humility, too. You see, I also share your burden of having the hopes and dreams of a nation stuck on my shoulders. I, too, travel the great land I call my country and as I cross the vast central plains of Shropshire and Wiltshire, from the deep, rolling streets of Twickenham to the vistas of uncontrolled housing schemes in Sunderland, I also hear the call of a sick nation praying for medicinal change.

OBAMA: That's great.

CAMERON: I know. It feels good. But the fundamental question I'd like your help to address is: what should I actually do once I get into office?

OBAMA: You know, I come from a background that is magnificent testimony to this great nation of mine, the child

of a Kenyan father and a mother from Kansas. We can all be proud of the path I've trodden to come through to this, the greatest moment in the history of civilisation.

CAMERON: Yes and similarly I, too, am from an exciting mongrel mix of cultures and values. Born of a mother from Kent and with a friend from Hull, I share and sniff the sense of wounded anger that blights this broken society I come from. So, as I say, what should we do about it?

OBAMA: Listen to the deep well of yearning within the hearts of the people. For example, what does your friend in Hull think you should do?

CAMERON: Well, he was born in Hull, but he doesn't live there any more. I think he owns some of it, though. But what I really want to know is: what are you doing?

OBAMA: You're right to want to know what I am doing. Wanting is a noble aspiration. Of all the aspirations, wanting is the most yearnest. I come from a vast chord of yearning that stretches—

CAMERON: In the name of Christ, just tell me something! I'm desperate here.

OBAMA: Sure. I am doing change.

CAMERON: Doing change?

OBAMA: Change.

CAMERON: Change?

OBAMA: Change.

FIFTY THOUSAND PEOPLE: Change!

CAMERON: Who let them in?

OBAMA: [*much louder now, on a constantly rising podium that has behind it a statue of five eagles rescuing a small child from a wolf*] Change is what I do.

CAMERON: OK. Well, I'm all for change, as you can imagine. For example, take knife crime – we have a real problem with that in this country. And I'm trying to change people's attitudes towards the solution, asking if maybe we should spend some time trying to understand the social factors that prompt people to do it. Now, that sort of compassionate talk from an ostensibly right-wing politician is different, I think.

OBAMA: Precisely. Change it. I'm from a nation of bitter, small-town people who cling to guns or religion to explain away their frustrations, and I love and admire every one of them, but I, too, want to understand them, so I change.

CAMERON: So, for example, you might argue for gun control or something?

OBAMA: No. I've changed my mind on that.

CAMERON: More compassionate prison sentencing?

OBAMA: No. I've now decided murdering bastards should be executed.

CAMERON: Right. So where's the change?

OBAMA: Well, I've changed my mind. And have been brave enough to do it very publicly. In order to understand my bitter public, I have changed myself into one of them. I have the audacity to change.

[*Screams and roars of approval from the audience and the press.*]

CAMERON: Right, so my hug-a-hoodie stuff . . . ?

OBAMA: Needs an injection of some real change.

CAMERON: So I should say something like . . . I come from a nation overrun with hoodies. These hoodies have problems but, frankly, they're problems of their own making . . .

FIFTY THOUSAND PEOPLE: Change!

CAMERON: . . . and they should be imprisoned along with their parents, who probably eat too much pastry and then blame doctors for not stopping them getting fat.

A HUNDRED THOUSAND PEOPLE IN A ROW OF FIFTEEN STADIUMS: Change!

CAMERON: This great nation of ours is a nation of stabbing, miserable, obese, surly, ungrateful, selfish, scrounging, greedy egotists, whom I admire and who one day, I fervently hope, will elect me as their leader. I am not Gordon Brown.

[A million people faint in admiration.]

OBAMA: Unbelievable. I'd vote for you.

[Sixteen thousand people rush to the front and lift David Cameron above their fat, surly, thankless shoulders and march him off to their homes, where they pass him round and toy with him.]

The secrets of Showman Dave's *tour-de-force* speech

Exclusive: discarded notes from David Cameron's conference speech

Opening

Hello/Hi/Hiya, babes and fellas

Cowabunga!/Fellow Conservatives . . .

See how you feel when you get up there.

My heroes!

Thatcher?/George Best?/Adrian Chiles?/The man in *Heroes* who bends time?/William Hague? Go with Hague.

Redwood: Make sure there's *no* mention.

Key words and phrases

Pissed/chundering Britain/broken immigrants/streets littered with twats/brighter change/towns and countryside walking together/let's reinvigorate our pensioners/Brown bastard (PM, not immigrants. Maybe lose this)/families are what we're here for/tightly knitted mother . . .

Upbringing

Eton: Fun, eye-popping. My great-great-grandfather was just a lollipop man.

What I believe

Optimism/Modernism/Cubism?

Too weird? Maybe next year, or on steps of Number 10, whichever sooner.

Jokes

George Osborne is my fag?

The election

Let's roll!/Up and at 'em!/Do you want some? Do you?/Mr Brown, are you talking to me or chewing a brick?

End with a song?

The Grand Old Gordon Brown
 He doesn't really know when
 He'll march us straight to the polls
 Or march us back again
 And when the polls were up, they were up
 And when they were down, they were down

And when he was only up by half a per cent
He put on his great big gobshite frown

If it falls flat, say it was William Hague's idea.

Things to say to my wife at the end when I 'forget' the microphones haven't been switched off

Kiss me on the head, you love-witch, then come back-stage and blow me off the Richter scale/Golly, that audience was sensational, my team are sensational and, what's more, I think our policies are sensational. I genuinely think we can turn this country around. Let's go and get an early night, for tomorrow, we have much work to do/I almost feel sorry for Gordon Brown now, because I was so ass-wipin' articulate/I could do with a shower. I feel clammy . . .

It's official: Tories to tax tall people

Some of David Cameron's new policies you may have missed:

- Household recycling to become easier by making it mandatory for all new houses to be built on landfill sites, thus cutting out the middle man. Rubbish simply to be tipped out of the back door or first-floor windows.
- Anyone taking a long-haul flight must pay for two seats. The seat next to the passenger to be occupied by a tree, to be planted at the destination.

- All cars to be edible and consumed at end of journey.
 - Wellbeing. The sound of salsa music to be played in small businesses at beginning and end of day.
 - Britishness. All lessons in school to use imperial measurement system, e.g., 'The Sun is approximately five hundred billion billion inches from the Earth and weighs two hundred and thirty-three trillion pounds and four ounces.'
 - Carrot-and-stick approach to car pollution. Research into whether it's possible to come up with a car engine that runs on carrots and sticks.
 - Help for farmers. All school textbooks to have covers made from British beef.
 - Everyone to wear a permanent seatbelt, which they then attach to whatever motor vehicle they get into.
 - A height tax to encourage couples to have shorter children.
-

Things for Gordon Brown and David Cameron to say to each other in order to reach their shared aim of putting an end to Punch-and-Judy politics once and for all

GORDON BROWN: I'd like to thank the leader of the opposition for his remarks and look forward to his co-operation on this matter in the weeks to come, though why I should expect co-operation from a spoon-faced snivel-merchant like him is beyond me.

DAVID CAMERON: I'm more than happy to co-operate, usually, but when it's with a catatonic thumper who wouldn't know what time to get up without having his alarm clock ask a focus group first, then the last thing I'm going to do with a feeble-headed schizoid like him is co-operate.

GORDON BROWN: Well, don't, then, you puffin-mouthed squeakabilly from Gentryshire. If I need help from a bag of poisonous eels in a suit, then I'll come calling. But in the meantime, hell off.

DAVID CAMERON: Sorry, the prime minister must be mistaking me for someone who listens to talking shitbags. If I want to spend my time debating with a heavy-bottomed mammal that has all the charisma of a hamster, I'll do it at my local zoo. In the meantime, the prime minister can go suck himself.

GORDON BROWN: Piss in a toaster, you fart-breathed bum-gobbler.

DAVID CAMERON: Come over here and make me, you pair of twits stuck in a fat man's skin.

GORDON BROWN: No, you come over here and I will, Captain Twinkle-Poof, and just you watch me, Dreck-Features.

DAVID CAMERON: Come near you? I'd rather haemorrhage my own head into a cesspit of gimps.

[*Cheers all round.*]

Slipped discs and dodgy donors aren't the half of it, Gordon

Twelve Ways in Which Things Could Possibly Get Worse for Gordon Brown Over the Next Few Weeks

1. A junior official in the Home Office confesses to having mislaid a prison.
2. Scientists have accidentally released a strain of bacterium into the atmosphere that gives everyone in Britain mild diarrhoea for five months.
3. A decimal point has been in the wrong place at the Treasury for the past twenty-three years and we're actually a third-world economy.
4. Harriet Harman unwittingly gave Carlos the Jackal refuge for two months in 1989.
5. Jack Straw is spotted lying drunk and face down in a wedding cake at a reception to which he was not invited.
6. Jack Straw gets into a punch-up with Jemima Khan.
7. Harriet Harman admits to having run over a badger in her car and then driving off.
8. Ed Balls finds out that he's an illegal immigrant.
9. Squirrels chew a hole in the Thames Barrier.
10. A plane carrying a hundred tons of Andrews

Liver Salts accidentally crashes into Lake Windermere, resulting in the permanent shutting down of Cumbria.

11. David Miliband once had a pet hamster called Little Allah.
 12. It is announced the 2012 Olympics going to London was actually a clerical error and they're going to Paris after all.
-

Barack Obama: I'm sure we've seen him somewhere before

Like Will Smith, who in the film *I Am Legend* wakes up to find himself the last man alive in a world of zombies, am I now the only person left on the planet who finds Barack Obama a little bit dull? Every time I listen to him, I start off thinking I'm about to wet my pants, but a minute and a half later find my mind wandering, asking itself things like 'What does "the challenge of hope" mean?'

Yet I turn and look around and everyone is shouting and screaming. Obama chants, 'Something better awaits us if we have the courage to reach for it,' and there's a collective swoon from grown pundits and hardened reporters, all of them tearing off their shirts and pleading for Obama to sign their chests with indelible marker pen. Will Smith woke up to a world of zombies: in my personal nightmare, everyone around me has an overactive thyroid.

So why does Obama, billed by everyone as a cross between Gandhi and Abraham Lincoln, but without the

terrible looks of either, just leave me puzzled? Maybe it's because his is a rhetoric that soars and takes flight, but alights nowhere. It declares that together we can do anything, but doesn't mention any of the things we can do. It's a perpetual tickle in the nose that never turns into a sneeze. Trying to make sense of what he's saying is like trying to wrap mist.

But, rhythmically, it's quite alluring. It can make anything – even, for example, a simple chair – seem magnificent. Why vote for someone who says, 'See that chair? You can sit on it,' when you can have someone like Obama say, 'This chair can take your weight. This chair can hold your buttocks fifteen inches in the air. This chair, this wooden chair, can support the ass of the white man or the crack of the black man, take the downward pressure of a Jewish girl's behind or the butt of a Buddhist adolescent. It can provide comfort for Muslim buns or Mormon backsides, the withered rump of an unemployed man in Nevada struggling to get his kids through high school and needful of a place to sit and think, the plump can of a single mum in Florida desperately struggling to make ends meet but who can no longer face standing. This chair, made from wood of the tallest redwood felled in Chicago, this chair, if only we believed in it, could sustain America's huddled ass.'

Maybe Obama is so successful because he's the supreme master of what American politics excels in: high-flown language that denotes as little as possible. America is curious in that it is the most powerful, most influential nation on Earth. It's a doing country, but its politicians rarely spend time on the stump specifying what precisely

they will do in case it makes them lose votes. Instead, they settle on emotive, intangible phraseology.

This abandonment of specifics is the opposite of how politics is articulated in Britain. Here, politicians have less power, less international influence, and are at the mercy of the markets and even the weather, so they try covering this up with language that is all about pledging and specific target-setting – anything, in fact, that sounds like action.

‘We intend to provide a chair, which, over the next five-year period, will guarantee stability for anyone who sits on it’; ‘We will introduce the most sweeping measures yet to ensure that all four chair legs are of exactly the same length and we will measure every leg on the chair twice a year and place those results in a national chair-leg database’; ‘We will stop other people coming over to use the chair before us.’

American politicians take time out from their busy lives to make speeches that sound empty; British politicians fill the emptiness of their lives with words that make them sound busy. The chair, by the way, was made in China.

Gordon half-baked? You decide

It was the greatest in a series of great scandals to hit Gordon Brown’s government. Ministers argued ‘scandal’ was the wrong word for it. It was a policy. There was nothing duplicitous. But somebody leaked it a bit early. The press got hold of it, started asking questions. The opposition fanned the flames. The usual media gangbang broke out and now the prime minister was facing the sort

of torrid headlines he hadn't faced for several weeks. But to call it a scandal was to tinge it with the sort of corrupt criminality the PM had always convinced himself he abhorred and condemned.

The policy had been simple: it was, from this autumn, to institute a weekly Happy Hour every Friday between three and four p.m. The simplicity of the ambition was admirable. All goods and services would be half-price for one hour (apart from alcohol). The difference in cost would be paid for by the government from a special fund, set up to cover the new National Happy Hour.

So, between three and four p.m. every Friday, everything, from fridges to concert tickets, cars to milk to plumbers to sausages to zoos, would be half its original price. This would kick-start a failing economy, increase productivity, strengthen Britain's leisure industry, secure employment and only cost about £85 billion. It was this last figure that caused the uproar.

A small, buff-coloured, Treasury-issued document had printed the figure in a footnote. A parliamentary question confirmed it was accurate. 'Eighty-five Billion Pounds?' roared the headlines, together with the blustering jackals across the chamber of the House of Commons.

'What kind of financial rigour does this government exercise when it suddenly finds it's got eighty-five billion pounds this year that it never had before?' shouted the leader of the opposition. 'Where did it find it? Down the home secretary's arse-crack?'

Opposition backbenchers whooped and hollered like laughing gannets round a beached whale. The government backbenchers pounded the air while the front bench

looked at the floor, unable to take part in the drama because they were collectively nurturing a grim realisation: the opposition hadn't picked up on the fact that the figure of £85 billion applied not to the year but to the week.

The worst was yet to come. And because the worst hadn't happened yet, the laws of news narrative dictated that the worst would be much worse when it did for it was committing the crime of happening later than right now. The rules say that things get worse or better – they never stay the same. Action had to be taken right now.

'Not only has the government conducted itself with such financial probity that it has secured enough money to finance a Happy Hour fund,' chipped back the PM, 'but it has done well enough to fund it on a weekly – yes, weekly – basis!' He sat down with an attempted look of superiority on his face, already webbed with the cracks of crumbling confidence.

Uproar! Appal writ large! Whats and hows burst on to the floor like the afterbirth of a street riot. People used words made especially for occasions such as this, words like 'unconscionable'. But the government stood firm, nailed firmer to the floor by a further Downing Street announcement: 'We confirm the great news that all goods and services in Great Britain will be available at half-price at the times indicated. Our Treasury model shows that the cost of such a subsidy will be more than offset by the enormous profits generated by increased demand. Between three and four p.m. every Friday will be a period of astonishing growth for the British economy as well as a time of much-needed cheer, setting up a great weekend for everybody.'

What the Treasury model hadn't calculated was the enormous cost involved in the hospitalisation of thousands of people every Friday at 2.59 p.m. as they got crushed against windows. It had failed to pick up on the projected costs of prosecuting and imprisoning any of the demented public who, at 4.01 p.m., lobbed their fists at shopkeepers who'd just doubled their prices. It hadn't shown any sign of processing the untested economics of the National Happy Hour: loan sharks furious that their debtors chose 3–4 p.m. on Fridays to repay the interest on credit, Happy Hour gridlock on toll roads, Amazon and eBay bankrupted in the first week and forced to close permanently, Comic Relief only raising half of its expected total and being forced to announce that it would 'have to let Africa go'.

National Happy Hour was a disaster. The chancellor, then the prime minister resigned within a fortnight of each other. The House of Commons, disgusted, moved that their resignations should be officially entered into the records only at three p.m. the following Friday, so they would be entitled to only half their pension and secret-service protection.

But the boil could never be lanced. The new prime minister could never withdraw the National Happy Hour. How do you explain to a nation delirious with joy and pregnant with purchasing anticipation every Friday afternoon that those times were going to be abolished and Britain was going to be officially unHappy?

Impossible. The status quo would have to be maintained and any opposition could only prove effective if it demanded improvement. And so it was that the morning

after the general election, David Cameron, the new prime minister, found it perfectly reasonable to justify first the sacking of the old government for coming up with the National Happy Hour in the first place and, second, his own appointment as head of a new administration elected on the back of a manifesto commitment to introduce it now on a daily basis.

The All-new Adventures of the War in Iraq

Yes, Minister: nothing changes

Twenty-four years isn't a long time in politics. Hutton's Inquiry may have shown the machinery of government to be shoddy, and his subsequent report may have revealed how speedily the Establishment can close ranks when under attack. But none of this should come as a surprise to anyone who remembers *Yes, Minister*, the fantastically funny depiction of Whitehall one-upmanship that starred Nigel Hawthorne and Paul Eddington and was first shown in 1980. It remains one of the funniest and deadliest comedy series ever transmitted.

These kinds of solid, literate and intelligent programmes just aren't made any more. The series, written by Antony Jay and Jonathan Lynn, spent the 1980s and early 1990s being showered with awards and, more important, was one of the most popular programmes on the box. It demonstrated that broadcasters needn't talk down to their public, and that, provided you aim to keep the quality high, a wide public will find and appreciate your efforts. I wonder whether broadcasters are now so concerned

about politics being a turn-off that, if somebody came along with an idea for a political comedy depicting the daily conflicts between a minister and his permanent secretary, the note coming back from the commissioning editor would say something along the lines of: 'Nice idea, but could we change "political" to "celebrity-based", "Whitehall" to "Jordan's house", "conflicts" to "ideas for decorating the master bedroom", "government minister" to "hidden camera", "permanent" to "interactive", "departmental" to "telephone vote" and "secretary" to "secretaries from Hell"? Then, let's go for it! (On BBC4.)'

Yes, Minister is the best, most useful warning we've ever had of how we can go on convincing ourselves we operate under a properly functioning democracy while the truth is that the blindnesses and obstinacies of those with any sort of power clumsily conspire to make that democracy dysfunctional. *Yes, Minister* was a revelation. There were no television cameras at Westminster when it first went on air, so it became the first realistic view the public had of the internal workings of Parliament and Whitehall. The writing felt accurate: the scripts were bursting with so much detail that viewers felt what they were watching must be close to the truth. In fact many of the plots were based on information passed on by government insiders at the very highest level. What we were watching felt like documentary, and yet we laughed. This was the unsettling thing: we were laughing at the truth, because the truth was so clearly absurd.

In particular, *Yes, Minister* was the first show on British television to dramatise with deadly accuracy the twisted and contradictory logic that passes for standard political

dialogue. It was, for example, Jim Hacker, MP, who famously uttered the line: 'I don't want the truth; I want something I can tell Parliament.' And it was in an episode from series three called 'The Challenge', that we saw how the government succeeds in exerting pressure on the BBC by applying the best twisted logic the executive machine can deliver. Hacker wants an embarrassing interview he has recorded with Ludovic Kennedy to be prevented from going on air because he has uttered some misleading information. Sir Humphrey Appleby argues that, while you can't censor the BBC, you can 'persuade them to withdraw programmes voluntarily if they're not in the public interest'. 'Well,' replies Hacker, 'it's definitely not in my interest, and I represent the public, so it's definitely not in the public interest.'

Later, Hacker and Sir Humphrey meet the BBC's director of planning over a nice club lunch and suggest they might set up a select committee to scrutinise BBC expenditure, with particular reference to corporate boxes at Wimbledon, Ascot, Wembley and Lords. The shocked director stoutly maintains that there can be no question of the BBC giving in to government pressure, but agrees not to broadcast the interview anyway. His reason? If the minister says something misleading in the interview, that constitutes factual error, and the BBC can't broadcast factual errors since it sets the highest possible standards of journalistic accuracy.

If all that seems depressingly relevant, it's easy to forget how revolutionary the programme was when it first went out. Then politicians queued up to praise it, thinking it was merely an attack on the Civil Service. Viewing it now,

I am struck by how bitterly it attacks everyone: Number 10, the offices of state, the BBC, the press, the Church, the armed forces, industry, doctors, trade unions – everyone in it is a clown. *Yes, Minister* portrayed a Britain run by a comprehensively inept in-crowd, and the sad thing is that it's taken us years to realise the truth of this. We've had to undergo the collective trauma of revealed miscarriages of justice; hospital consultants extracting organs from dead children; train companies mismanaging investment to the extent that people die; policemen responding too slowly to black assault victims; farmers feeding their cows with bits of other cows; MPs taking cash bungs; and churches hiding sex-offender priests from the law. Only now can we appreciate *Yes, Minister's* warnings about the complacency within our state institutions. The programme didn't imply these people were evil; rather, that they were dangerous because they were convinced they were doing the right thing, and therefore flabbergasted by criticism.

It's become more pertinent these days to ask if the BBC dare not put on a show like *Yes, Minister* now, not because it is too cerebral, but because it fears the consequences. After all, when a government uses the Hutton report to get the BBC's chairman and director-general turfed out because one of its reporters let slip an allegation made from a single uncorroborated source – even though that government acted on intelligence that came from single uncorroborated sources – then you know you're in a political landscape no different from the one *Yes, Minister* portrayed on a weekly basis. Was it in *Yes, Minister* or was it in real life that a minister was charged with the task of trying to abolish himself? The answer lies with Lord

Falconer, the once Constitutional Affairs Secretary, who, as Lord Chancellor, spent a great deal of 2003–5 trying to come up with a Bill that abolished the post of Lord Chancellor – and who, when he returned, still hadn't managed it. If it's easy now to imagine the absurd conversations taking place in the corridors of power that led to these arguments, then that's because *Yes, Minister* so effectively provided us with the template. It's a mark of its subversive influence that we now cannot trust a politician if he sounds like a character from *Yes, Minister* or deploys the sort of malformed logic for which the programme was famous.

If it's depressing that this sort of logic is still used, it's a cause for rejoicing that we now have the means to identify it. So I urge you to run out to buy the DVD if only to equip yourselves with the means to hear certain conversations you're really not meant to hear. Here's one of those possible conversations you were never meant to hear.

'Minister, what shall we say about our reasons for going to war?'

'We'll say that was all covered by Hutton.'

'But, Minister, Hutton says the reasons for going to war weren't part of his remit.'

'Well, exactly, and he's a very honourable man, so if he says he shouldn't discuss the reasons, neither should we.'

'But, Minister, I think the party will want an inquiry.'

'Fine, but make sure it's chaired by an honourable man.'

'What should be its remit?'

'That it doesn't dwell on the past.'

'Minister, why not?'

'The past was covered by Hutton.'

'But, Minister, you've just accepted that Hutton decided not to cover all of the past.'

'Precisely! He covered all of it and came up with the conclusion that not all of it should be covered. And, if I may say, he did a pretty thorough job of not covering all of it. So thorough, in fact, there's no need to do it again. Do I make myself clear?'

'Yes, Minister.'

The report, the iceberg and Lord Hutton's intriguing theory of the subconscious

At the height of the David Kelly affair, Boris Johnson wrote of his astonishment at Tony Blair's exoneration, coming as it did after weeks of predictions that the prime minister's destruction at the hands of Hutton was 'as pre-determined as the convergence of the *Titanic* and the iceberg'. My immediate thought was to imagine what a distant relative of Lord Hutton would have made of the *Titanic* disaster. Following the logic of the Hutton report, the inescapable conclusion would be that he'd completely exonerate the iceberg. After all, he'd claim, he was asked merely to look into the deaths of the passengers and crew on board; anything beyond the confines of the ship, such as water or ice, though the subject of widespread controversy and debate, would not have fallen within his terms of reference.

Also, he would continue, on the matter of whether the captain and chief navigator's intelligence that there were

no icebergs in the vicinity was accurate and reliable, provided the captain thought the intelligence was reliable at the time, he could not be faulted for driving his ship into a huge block of ice. Therefore, the ancient Hutton would conclude, given the crew and ice were not to blame, the cause of the sinking incident must be placed squarely on the passengers, some of whom might have been considerably overweight (these were probably journalists). The report would be published, the head of WeightWatchers would resign, and all surviving passengers would be asked to make an apology.

Though everyone agrees Andrew Gilligan's story about the 'sexing up' of the forty-five-minute claim was inaccurate, it's very difficult to find another human being who shares Lord Hutton's benign view of the government and Whitehall. Attempts to understand Hutton's treatment of these bodies are thwarted by the grammatical contortions he goes through when describing them; the closest we get to chastisement is in the following passage of hesitant, almost embarrassed, qualification: 'I consider that the possibility cannot be completely ruled out that the desire of the Prime Minister to have a dossier which, whilst consistent with the available intelligence, was as strong as possible in relation to the threat posed by Saddam Hussein's WMD, may have subconsciously influenced Mr Scarlett [then chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee] and the other members of the JIC to make the wording of the dossier somewhat stronger than it would have been if it had been contained in a normal JIC assessment.'

Since Lord Hutton himself seems happy to apply the subconscious to his inquiries, so should we when reading

his report, because the above passage is a masterpiece of emotional repression and intellectual diffidence towards the Establishment. It's as if his lordship has to fight against an upbringing and instinct that teach him to consider it treacherous to question the moral integrity of those in public office, as journalists and the media do, of course, on an almost daily basis. 'Subconscious influence' is a flabby proof of innocence: if you get caught for speeding, just try telling the police that you may have been subconsciously influenced to drive somewhat faster than normal. And remember, most psychopaths are locked away precisely because they're subconsciously influenced into killing. But the flabbiness is part of Hutton's bashful reluctance to engage with unpleasantness. Elsewhere, he clearly can't cope with the phrase 'sexed up' and tries to provide a clinical and somewhat anal definition of what the term might mean. And he runs away entirely from the tell-tale extract in Alastair Campbell's diary in which Campbell relishes the idea of releasing Dr Kelly's name to 'f— Gilligan'.

Perhaps the coarseness of the language was simply too much for his lordship, who excludes all mention of the passage. It seems, then, that if, in the eighties and nineties, public servants could not lie but were occasionally permitted to be economical with the truth, at the start of this century a few of them are permitted to be subconscious with it. And among the questions left unanswered by the Hutton report was this: what evidence is there to prove that Lord Hutton was himself not subconsciously influenced by his background to write a report that would give the Establishment the benefit of the doubt?

The American dream goes underground

And so, after the terror, it was time to take stock of where America was and how it should move on. The war had been an undoubted success, with all its aims achieved: most of al-Qaeda was now somewhere else, the Taliban had been pushed to another bit of Afghanistan and everyone was afraid. But back home there was still the contentious issue of how best to fill the space tragically cleared at Manhattan's lower tip. What was to replace the Twin Towers?

There were two camps of thought. On the one hand, the minimalists argued there could be no more moving memorial than a beautiful empty space. Amid the chaos and clutter of Manhattan's otherwise crowded avenues, the emptiness of Ground Zero would take the beauty of eternal verities and give it a clear shout above the din. But this argument was generally recognised by most people to be weird.

The more popular view was that, since the World Trade Center was a monument to the capitalist ideal of the American dream, the best form of memorial would be a building in which as many people as possible could make money. And the building would have to be big. Space was at a premium in New York, and overcrowding in the city had got considerably worse now that everyone refused to fly or move more than a mile away from their house. Because of this fear of travel, in the space of five months the population of Manhattan had trebled. The city fathers clearly had to find something these people could go and work in. Something the size

and shape of the original Twin Towers would seem to fit the bill.

So there was stalemate. The advocates of the replacement Twin Towers held back, fearing it would look both embarrassing and provocative to come up with a memorial no different from the building being remembered. The proponents of empty space, though weird, were, like all weird people, rather loud and forceful, and swiftly gained ground.

It was at this point that the new mayor suggested the compromise solution of going for both options. The Twin Towers were to be rebuilt, copied exactly from their original designs, but built downwards into the ground. The two structures would soar fifteen thousand feet beneath the surface of the Earth, bottoming out with a restaurant on the hundred-and-tenth underground floor, from which tourists could look out on spectacular views of sedimentary rock.

Building was completed two years later, and thirty thousand people dropped to work each morning. Free from the threat of airborne attack, sealed by solid granite that could muffle the most intense fires, the subterranean towers looked magnificent and impervious. Soon the idea caught on, and more and more very low buildings were being sunk all across America. By 2024, it was estimated that nearly half of the population lived and worked underground. Entire cities dropped beneath the surface. People got used to waking up to panoramas of mud, and in San Francisco a new tourist industry grew up providing underground helicopter tours of the San Andreas fault.

More importantly, America discovered it could

withdraw from what its president described as 'Earth's troublesome surface'. Tired of hatred and opposition from countries further afield, it could now quietly get on with its own deep concerns. Now left to trade only with itself, it had few geopolitical interests above the earth's crust. By 2032, all of the United States disappeared from view. What it left behind was not the lush paradise environmentalists had hoped for. Thousands of miles of ventilation turrets peeked from boggy marshland, the habitation and breeding ground of racoons and pink flamingos that later proved a pestilential threat for most of the rest of the Americas.

But beneath the surface, caked in soil, the United States grew strong and happy and encased.

Why we must go to war with Iraq by six p.m. tonight

By White House Deputy National Chief of State, Stanton Thirsk

The time has come for the talking to stop. Now is the moment for acting. Men have talked for more than three thousand years. Surely that is long enough.

It is time for us to read the lesson of history. I have read all history and discovered there is only one lesson, namely that Hitler should have been stopped before 1939. To those who say, 'Hang on, what about all other lessons of history, and, in particular, those concerning military ventures that escalate out of control?' I say, 'Are you for the future or the past?'

If you're for the past, you're welcome to these lessons. You're welcome to live in the Crimean War, the First World War, the American Civil War, the Franco-Prussian War, the Boer War and the Vietnamese War, but you'd look a fool because they're all nearly over. And were horrific.

History is littered with brief military flashpoints – for example, the Six Day War, the Thirty Years War and the Hundred Years War – that do not disturb the arch of time's arrow, but instead point to the one overriding message of all time, namely, that Hitler should have been stopped before 1939. And that, once he was stopped, all of Europe, from the Soviet Union to West Germany, was at peace with itself.

In Saddam Hussein we have another Hitler, a moustachioed, anti-Semitic paranoid Austrian with his eyes on all the Gulf's oil supplies. And just as our conflict with Hitler culminated in his dropping the atomic bomb because we left it too late to oppose him, so, too, must we stop Saddam before he drops the nuclear bomb that it was necessary to invent to deter tyrants like him from dropping.

History is a series of facts, all of them more or less clear-cut. There is only one obvious interpretation of history and that is that democracy must prevail.

Abraham Lincoln so eloquently expressed the focus of history at Gettysburg, by declaring the necessity of preserving government of, by and for the people, then went on to kill another three hundred thousand men who attacked democracy by wanting to have their own country.

And so bloodshed is inevitable. But avoidable. A lot of

books have been written about what Saddam might do. And I have read all of them. They build up into a minute-by-minute account of his possible actions, and they make horrific reading. And damning evidence.

And what the historians of Saddam's future agree is that, at some point, we will find proof that, at some point, Saddam might unleash nuclear weapons if we attack him. The only way to avoid this is by attacking him. If we succeed, he will not unleash his weapons and we won't have to attack him.

And so it is time, because there is no time. Terror could strike at any minute. We must act swiftly. However, we must also be patient. We must proceed immediately, but also delay until we've exhausted all other options.

How can we do this? The international community is vital. Without its support, without its conviction of the rightness of our cause, things might get done a lot quicker. But that cannot be our way. We must persuade our allies of the evil that we all face by goading Saddam into using it.

So let this hour our watchword be: time is up. We will strike at six o'clock this evening. But before we do so, we will spend several patient hours exploring every diplomatic avenue.

And then, at six, we will begin comprehensive discussions with the international community, in which we tell them that we've just attacked Saddam Hussein.

Our opponents may dwell in the past. I dwell in the future, and I say we must stop Hitler. And we can. For today our knuckles stand four-square round the shaft of history.

Why the world now has proof of Saddam's evility

By White House Deputy National Chief of State, Stanton Thirsk

In my previous argument, I reasoned that, unless Saddam Hussein allowed unconditional entry of UN weapons inspectors, we should all attack Iraq. I would now like to argue that, if Saddam Hussein allows unconditional entry of UN weapons inspectors, we should all attack Iraq.

The pages of history are littered with the CVs of masters of deception. Tyrants like Stalin and Henry VIII brought the world to the brink of nuclear destruction. Which is why today, in the present, the only present we have, we must tread warily when we deal with contemporary monster madmen. We must brook them no inch. And we must remember that whatever they say could be a ploy or optical illusion.

Everything Saddam does is designed to beguile us into believing that he's conceding to our demands. Saddam says he will accept weapons inspectors. But is this not too suspiciously exactly what we want to hear? If he lets these inspectors in, and allows them to inspect, is this not exactly what he thinks we want to happen? If the inspectors then discover weapons of mass destruction and are allowed to destroy them, is this not his way of making us feel we've won total victory?

See how easily we have been duped? Saddam's readiness to concede to our demands is nothing less than a smokescreen for his more vile strategy of not conceding to

any of our demands. If UN weapons inspectors are permitted into his country and are able to locate and destroy all weapons of mass destruction, Saddam will have succeeded in using this as a distraction from his more ignominious aim, of harbouring weapons of mass destruction.

This is why, precisely because he has agreed to let in UN inspectors, Saddam has let slip his moustache of evil, and why we must attack him before he lets us destroy any of his weapons.

Some, of course, would argue that our victory is genuine, that Saddam has caved in under pressure and that the threat is now neutralised. But just think of where all this would lead. By caving in, Saddam will have shown himself to his people to be weak. The already considerable but silent opposition within his ranks will surface, he will face an internal challenge, and either be killed or driven from power, encouraging the US and its allies to depart an Iraq now managed by a more democratic form of representative government.

And so Saddam will have duped us into withdrawing from Iraq, allowing him once more to go about his business, dead but unhindered. This evil madpot has shown in the past he has no qualms about abusing his own people; this time he could suck them into a despicable plan to topple and disembowel him. Which is why it is vital we now attack him before he is overthrown and killed.

UN resolutions cannot go unheeded, but neither should they be heeded so blatantly and simplistically. The moral authority of the United Nations is at stake here.

For years now, America has become more and more shocked at how easy it is for her to defy UN resolutions on Israel and Palestine, and this has strengthened her resolve to stand by the UN at this our hour of greatest time. We must come up with a new UN resolution that sets out the precise requirements for the disarmament of the Iraqi menace machine. These should be:

1. That Iraq accepts it must be attacked by America.
2. That Iraq allows this to happen.
3. That Iraq does not impede this process either by accepting UN weapons inspectors or allowing its leadership to be overthrown.
4. That, if Iraq fails to comply with the above resolutions, America is authorised to attack it until it does.

These resolutions will only mean anything if they're voted for by all members of the UN, including Iraq. America is allowed to attack Iraq until all the votes are counted.

'Bush failed to see that Iran and Iran were the same'

Interim report of US Senate and House Judiciary Committee hearings into shortcomings of federal intelligence-gathering on al-Qaeda

After several weeks of investigations we can now issue a provisional response to the question everyone in America is asking: how much did President George W. Bush know

after September 11? It's become clear that most of his actions since that date betray a massive failure of intelligence. They are as follows:

1. The President sought to draw the Western European powers into a diplomatic coalition against al-Qaeda while imposing tariffs against European steel exports, thus actually annoying most of Western Europe. All the evidence points to the President not knowing that France, Britain and Germany were Western powers. One official testifies to seeing the President point to those countries on a map and saying, 'But, dammit, they're east.'
2. The President did not realise that, when focusing all of America's military power on Afghanistan, there was a possibility that bin Laden and the al-Qaeda leadership might decide to leave for other countries across the Afghan border. Testimony reveals this was because the President did not realise Afghanistan had borders with other countries. One State Department official told us, 'The President focused so much on maps of just Afghanistan that he thought it was the same as Cuba.'
3. The President unrealistically overestimated how much the Arabic world was open to American values. One White House intern testifies to seeing the President look at a picture of the

Sphinx and Pyramids in Egypt and hearing him say, 'Hey, they're building their own Las Vegas!'

4. Immediately after September 11, the President said, 'This is not a war against Islam,' but has proceeded to impose security checks on all incoming Muslims. The committee has concluded that someone within the FBI or the CIA has abrogated their responsibility by failing to inform the President that all Muslims practise Islam and all Islamics are Muslim. There was a failure here to piece together two separate items of information.
5. The President used diplomatic channels to open up ties with Iran, winning their tacit support for the war in Afghanistan and praising Iran as a 'useful counterbalancing force in the region', before then declaring them part of an 'Axis of Evil'. He then called them 'our friends' and 'scum', saying he would love to visit the beautiful country of Iran some day but only if he were 'a living zombie programmed to do so by a Satanic child'. In the end, the President clarified his attitude towards Iran by calling it a 'gracious, marvellous dump'. The committee has concluded that the President failed to make the connection that Iran and Iran were the same.
6. The President said the war against terror was about eliminating bin Laden and al-Qaeda while

simultaneously issuing the qualification that the war was not necessarily about eliminating bin Laden and al-Qaeda. There is sufficient witness testimony to conclude that the President may not have passed on information to himself before making these remarks.

7. The President proposed support for 'regime change' in Iraq, then backed off, then advocated it more aggressively, then said there were no plans to invade Iraq, then prepared plans to invade Iraq, then said there were no plans to act upon the plans to invade Iraq, then said he disagreed with the idea of plans. The committee has as yet found it very difficult to draw any single conclusion from these actions, as has the President.
8. Above all, the President failed to spot that his actions in Afghanistan would have a knock-on effect in Pakistan, India, Israel, the West Bank, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Russia, Germany, the UK, Australia and America. Witnesses testify that the President 'did not realise there were so many countries nor know that they all fitted together'.

The President is unaware of the complex, jigsaw-like infrastructure of international power politics and the Committee concludes that a good first step in rectifying this might be if someone went out and bought him a jigsaw.

Torture – fun for all the family

An Everyday Guide to Safe Torturing For All Ages, by Ed Handling, Senior Special Overseas 'Operations' Co-ordinator for the CIA

Hi, kids, hi, moms and dads.

You hear a lot on the television about how bad torturing can be, but that's because it's probably not being done right. Believe it or not, torturing is one of the quickest and easiest methods available for getting to know people with interesting things to say and for finding out stuff that's not only fun but operationally useful, too. A word of warning, though. Like all activities, torturing is not without its risks, which is why I've written this handy guide to explain how it can be done safely with no harm to the torturer and as little harm as is needed to extract information from the victim.

Follow these guidelines and you should be safe to inflict controllable amounts of physical and mental pain on someone withholding information without risk of their demise in front of you or your own protracted legal battles with human-rights authorities.

- Be a wholehearted torturer. One of the most common causes of injury happens when a torturer doesn't put quite as much commitment into torturing as he or she should. If you try dunking a man's head into a bucket of ice and water and blades and Korans while thinking, halfway through, Is this appropriate?, then there's every

likelihood that the gentleman in question will see your hesitation as an opportunity to swing round and cuff you in the chest or eyeball with free bits of his body. Always be alert if close to pieces of serrated glass. Really go for it, and the torturee will appreciate he's in the clamps of a professional.

- Be an undoubting torturer. Our president teaches us that torture is a perfectly legal way of extracting information from someone, provided it's not done on American property and the person doing it doesn't realise he's torturing someone. This last specification is easy to meet, since very often the torturer is so appalled at the terrorist crimes the torturee has committed that he's driven into a medical condition known as a Blind Rage that temporarily prevents him being responsible for his actions. This is a perfectly legitimate excuse for spontaneously attaching someone's genitals to an extractor fan. Of course, in order to be provoked into a Blind Rage, it's necessary to hear what terrorist crimes the torturee has done, so it may be necessary to torture him first to find these out and then collapse into a Blind Rage retrospectively. But the principle still applies.
- Make the torture last the whole evening long. Some people rush torture, so it's all over in several hours. But remember, torturing is all about

intimacy. You're getting to find out quite a lot about your victim, but equally he's getting to know you. Make an evening of it. Put on music and put out some scented candles; you can use these later to drop hot wax on to your victim's stomach. Soft, absorbent rugs on the floor add to the intimate atmosphere and colourful absorbent hangings on the walls dampen sound.

- Be safe. Constitutionally, it's legal to torture someone as long as you don't know who it is you're torturing. For this reason, it may be necessary to prevent a victim from identifying himself. Obviously, the sole aim of torturing is to extract information, so at some stage or other, he's going to tell you who he is – otherwise you're not doing it right. If he does blurt out his name, stick your fingers in your ears. If he keeps doing it, stick his fingers in his eyes and his ears in a kettle.
 - Follow the Torturing Code. There are some tortures that are beyond the pale and we don't do those lightly. We don't Water Board, Nut Hammer or Digit Shave. However, this leaves plenty of other, non-specified torturing opportunities to explore. Ever thought about forcing a man to eat his elbows? Try it. I guarantee you'll be delighted by the results. Other tortures worth trying are ankle knotting and filling a man's stomach with rice then hot water.
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**Colin Powaell's Gulf-related Miscellanae:
being a collection of Colin Powell's Useful Facts
relating to the Proposed Actions in the Gulf
Region of the World**

**A. Seven proofs of links between Saddam and al-
Qaeda**

1. On an audiotape, Osama bin Laden calls Iraq a 'stinking cesspit of socialist debauchery'. This criticism is much less hostile than the sort of thing he says about America, thus proving that al-Qaeda has warm feelings towards Saddam Hussein.
2. Our surveillance has picked up chatter from al-Qaeda operatives talking about organising a 'rendezvous'. 'Rendezvous' is a French word, and France has constantly obstructed American attempts to impose regime change in Iraq. So, again, we see a clear connection between al-Qaeda and Iraq.
3. Our spy planes have photographed Saddam's deputy prime minister being driven in a motorcade of Mercedes cars. Mercedes is a German automobile, and Germany is in league with France to destroy America, like al-Qaeda. Therefore, etc.
4. The number plate on one of these cars was A03A0 1A, which, in the rear mirror of the car in front, spells 'al-Qaeda'.
5. The motorcade was moving in an easterly direction through Baghdad. If you move in an easterly

direction through France, you get to Germany.

6. Saddam is another Hitler. Germany had a Hitler. Again, a direct link with al-Qaeda.
7. Al-Qaeda operatives have recently been arrested in London. The prime minister of London, Tony Blair, then visited France for a meeting with Jacques Chirac. Chirac then visited Bonn to celebrate forty years of his alliance with Gerhard Schröder of Germany. Schröder had a meeting with Putin of Russia, who then received Hans Blix, who went to Baghdad. Again, proof of a direct link.

B. Three fascinating facts about Iraq

1. Iraq was once part of the Ottoman Empire, a land mass which, if turned into flour, would be enough to feed bread to the children of Iraq for a hundred years. But Saddam refuses to do this and instead spends his money on presidential palaces, which, if converted to milk, would be enough to fill all the oil wells of the Middle East for a fortnight. That's why we have to stop him getting to the wells before he does this.
2. Iraq contains twenty-two thousand square miles of irrigated land. That's the equivalent of three hundred million bottles of anthrax laid end to end. So where are they?
3. Iraqis consume 27.3 billion kilowatts of electricity every year, enough to power one *Star Wars* style anti-missile system. So where is it, and who's it pointing at?

C. The United Nations constitution explained once and for all

1. The UN has a fifteen-member Security Council, of which France, Britain, China, Russia and America are permanent members, with veto rights.
 2. The UN charter allows for the permanent members to use their veto to overrule any majority decision of the council with which they disagree.
 3. This is not applicable in cases where France, China or Russia use their veto in unreasonable cases, 'unreasonable' being defined as a veto against any recent council majority decisions supported by Britain or America.
 4. In these cases, the charter will probably allow America or Britain to veto that veto, thus upholding the earlier unvetoes of the council, unless the council arrives at a majority decision contrary to the wishes of America or Britain, in which case all the permanent members of the council ought to be obliged to veto it, or to veto any attempt to veto the veto.
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From My Baghdad Journals 2003

As you know, I'm currently embedded with the Iraqi Republican Guard, so cannot reveal my exact location or whether any of the facts in my report are true. However, I've still managed to compile a pretty thorough overview of the latest war situation through writing down anything

I've heard people in uniform say. Here's the more exciting stuff:

War 'may not have started'

There is growing evidence from reporters embedded with coalition forces in Iraq that the much-reported war in the region may not have started after all. 'The situation's very fluid at the moment,' said US military commander Tommy Franks, 'and until we can separate fact from hearsay we're not confirming or denying anything, including the war.' If the war is found really not to have started, then it's thought this will come as a major source of embarrassment to all the military personnel, press and television reporters, and Iraqi civilians who, for the past few days, have been saying it has.

Saddam's likely death another stalling tactic, claims Pentagon

The Pentagon now says it has firm evidence that Saddam Hussein is dead. It has indicated that in the recently broadcast video footage showing Saddam laughing with his cabinet, his skin is mostly black and green, and someone can be clearly seen under the table working his arms with sticks.

'At one point,' said Tommy Franks, 'Saddam laughs so much his jaw comes off and crashes on to the table, before an aide quickly sticks it back on again. He's clearly dead. Dying is just the sort of devilish tactic this man, who sees no distinction between life and death, would try out to delay capture. But somehow we still aim to capture him alive.'

Rumsfeld denies reports that original US invasion plans involved only one soldier

US defence secretary Donald Rumsfeld has angrily denied reports from unnamed Pentagon sources that he was confident Saddam Hussein's terrible regime could easily be swept from power by just one US soldier. 'No, that was never the plan,' he said today. 'All I was indicating was that, in the event of no UN support and the British being unable to provide back-up because of their unique parliamentary system, the United States would have been willing to go it alone on Iraq, though, if none of my generals was able to agree a battle plan, I would have been prepared to enter Iraq by myself if need be. That's an entirely different hypothetical possibility from the similar one you're suggesting.'

British 'capture' of Basra an April Fool

The world's media saw the funny side of the war today when it was revealed that Tuesday's MoD announcement of the capture of Basra was simply an April Fool designed to make the press look silly and that in fact the situation is much, much worse than has yet been reported. 'That's why we like the British,' said one local Iraqi, fleeing the city for his life. 'They have a much more developed sense of humour than the Americans.' Privately, British generals are reported to be well satisfied with their forces' ability to win Iraqi hearts and minds more effectively than the Americans. Instead of wearing sunglasses and hard helmets, British troops have been seen in the streets wearing clown makeup and constructing funny balloon animals for the amusement of orphans.

American rules of engagement clarified

America, stung by broadcast footage of innocent civilians being shot at by American soldiers, including one boy wearing combat trousers in California who was shot at by an Apache helicopter, has tried to clarify its rules of engagement with Iraqi civilians. They are:

1. If approached by anyone who clearly represents a potential threat, demand to see some form of ID by shooting it out of their pocket.
 2. If you inadvertently kill him, gauge whether this has enraged any other family travelling with him to such a degree that they might one day consider retaliatory action against the United States in the form of suicide attacks. If so, shoot them too.
 3. Apologise.
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I'm getting reports that the CIA is closing in on a statue of Osama bin Laden

Baghdad, 11 April. I am currently embedded with several of Saddam's sons underneath a restaurant in downtown Baghdad. The news I'm getting here is very confused, but I'll do my best to separate fact wheat from rumour chaff as the constantly changing sifting process unfurls.

We're getting reports that the Baghdad that's just been liberated may not be the real Baghdad, but a perfect double of the city. The situation's very confused at the moment. And with Saddam's whereabouts still unknown, President

Bush has now restated his war aim, which is 'to capture the statue of Saddam Hussein, dead or alive'. Meanwhile I'm getting news that, in northern Afghanistan, the CIA says it is closing in on the statue of Osama bin Laden.

I'm also getting reports that, after disagreements among American politicians over the best way to govern post-war Iraq, fighting has broken out between the Pentagon and State Department officials. Shots were known to be fired into Colin Powell's mouth by diehard supporters of the US defence secretary, known as the Rumsfedayeen. I'll bring you more on that when I get it: the situation's very confused.

And reports are coming in that several of Saddam's sons are hiding in a giant hen. As I say, the news is very confused at the moment.

Baghdad, 8 April. As I write, I'm witnessing the horror of war. After a loud explosion, I come across a young girl who has just been liberated from her old hands and legs and eyes. I tell her that British hands and legs and eyes will be given to her, so she can properly dance with those around her in celebration.

Time after time, the terrific troops I'm currently serving with have been confronted with examples such as this of the horrific logic of war. Like the young paratrooper with whom I share a tent and a tank, and to whom, when we return home, I have pledged my car. He knows that to clear a path through the old district of Baghdad to get urgent hospital supplies to the sick, he will have to blow apart thirty market-stall owners with a bunker-buster.

But his concern is alleviated by the knowledge that medical attention for these men will itself arrive more quickly now that a path has been cleared.

Basra, 11 April. I stand in the middle of Basra, as our forces, splendid men, stop and pray, using the text provided by the Archbishop of Canterbury after much thought. I leave you with the words of their heartfelt prayer:

O God, we grant thee beseech us, that in thine mercy our missiles are guided by the angels of pinpoint laser accuracy, and detonated by the patron saints of minimal civilian harm.

And we pray also that, if in thine infinite wisdom, the innocent do receive the fullness of amputation, burns, bereavement or death, that in their agony they are granted wisdom to understand the inevitable collateralness of their situation, and enter into the fullness of the long-term view, placing their plight in the context of the overall liberation that inflames the hearts of your people.

For in war there is naughtiness, but God, loving Father, who have reigneth through all eternity, you are old and may not understand how war has changed since the old days.

And, yea, you must accept that, though we mourn any fallen foe or friend, this mourning does not necessarily constitute guilt or responsibility. And so we grant unto thee, Heavenly Father, the

courage to admit that you were wrong in opposing this war, and the wisdom to support us all the way until we get the job done. Amen.

What happened there?

The chic philosopher Jean Baudrillard famously stated that the 1991 Gulf War never happened. It's perhaps more true to say of the second war in Iraq that an explanation of it never happened. Restricted and controlled media access distanced us from the reality of the first war, while the impression that we had uncontrolled and continuous media coverage of the second war focused on the immediacy of the moment and discoloured analysis of the war's effects and causes.

Baudrillard was talking about the anaesthetising effects of broadcast news; real conflict in 1991 was turned to animated computer game, encouraged by Pentagon briefings that focused on graphically generated images of bombs hitting their targets. Because we were denied the close-up reality of war, we felt detached. It was like watching a battle on PlayStation, and the language of 'collateral damage' and 'softening up' convinced us we were participating in a virtual game.

Conversely, the second war brought us too much reality. Rolling news coverage and embedded reporting took us, apparently, right into the heart of the horrific action. And yet the coverage of this war was noted for both its inaccuracy and lack of objectivity. If we were getting facts around the clock, why did so many of those facts prove inaccurate? Given we were being taken into the heat of

battle, why was our understanding of the causes and motives of the war confused, and why were political opinions never fully analysed?

Perhaps because our interpretation of the war was once again conditioned by the favoured media format of the moment. Programmed over the past few years to watch endless numbing footage of ordinary people trapped by television producers in an artificial situation, we, the viewers, felt we were watching reality TV on a massive scale. As Rageh Omaar, John Simpson and Bill Neely swapped smart suits for combat gear, we realised we were watching a People Show. Rageh and John and Bill were Jo Public, ordinary bods whom we'd had in our living rooms once or twice a week over the past few years. Now we were watching them placed in a hostile environment, with cameras pointed at them twenty-four hours a day, while a whole nation gawped and took bets on which one would crack the most. My favourite was ITN's Bill Neely, who stormed Saddam's empty Basra Palace in full combat gear like an SAS supremo trying to get the Queen out of a SARS ward. Why he was in full combat gear I don't know. He started his report by saying there were no hostile forces inside, and ended it by handing over to the main presenter, who was standing next to him in a jacket. I remember we did an item on *The Day Today* fifteen years ago when a khaki-clad reporter handed over in a bombed-out house to a newsreader standing next to her in a suit. At the time we thought it absurd; now it appears to be the norm.

The decision to embed reporters with troops led to great footage but lousy reportage. No reporter, his or her

life literally being protected by the military round them, was going to file a report saying, 'The troops I'm living with are disgruntled. Their equipment doesn't work, they're probably blowing up children, and one or two of them are going to die.' Instead, objectivity melted faster than a division of the Republican Guard, and these seekers of the truth were reduced to gasping excited commentaries, such as, 'Over there some bastard Iraqis are firing on us. If, in a few minutes' time, some of these wonderful men of Britannia to whom I've pledged my daughter don't shoot them in the guts, then I'm damn well going to do it myself.'

Everything is a selection. Even live coverage is subject to the whim of a news editor who chooses the most exciting location from which the coverage should come. But the popularity of rolling news has forced emphasis on the immediate at the expense of the longer overview. And this has played magnificently into the hands of those who were driving the war. Because we as viewers were forced headlong into the immediacy of the moment, all queries about the legality of the war, the purpose of it in the first place, to disarm a dangerous tyrant of his very real and present weapons of mass destruction, seemed so much like yesterday's old news. Even earlier, in the build-up to the war, Tony Blair's assertion that he would not go to war without a second UN resolution soon became too boring to cover for more than a week. Within days of the start of military conflict, Peter Hain was allowed to get off scot-free, blaming the French for vetoing the resolution, despite the fact the veto was never issued, and that at least seven or eight other Security Council nations had

indicated they were either going to abstain or vote against.

The urge to provide a continuous forward momentum to news coverage meant that dull casualties had to be left behind where they had fallen. The need to fill our schedules with breaking action, with fresh troops of information, plus the automatic reflex action of the broadcasters that, once the war had started, it was our war, that it was against an 'enemy', and that it was about 'liberation', led to a total breakdown of intelligent and dispassionate analysis. Hence, a battle that had started on the basis that there were horrific weapons of mass destruction to be found was, by common consent, ended when a statue was toppled and, with it, all hope of objectivity.

Mr Blair's awfully big adventure

The Peace Conference that no one thought would ever happen opened up for its first session. Delegates from around the Middle East, some of them sworn enemies, patiently filed in and posed for the cameras sitting sociably next to each other and in front of bottles of Perrier water and gavels. Syria was there, and so was Iran. Their arrival had been difficult enough to organise, but was simplicity itself compared to the fraught negotiations expended in bringing representatives of Sunni and Shia militia groups into the chamber. Here sat Hezbollah; opposite them (a triumphant *coup de grâce* for the conference organisers) the leadership of al-Qaeda.

At one end of the table sat the US President, at the

other, the UK prime minister. The latter looked best pleased as this his lasting legacy was put into place in front of him at this table. He who had woven his placatory skills so spectacularly all those years ago in Northern Ireland, who had single-handedly wooed Olympic delegates in Singapore, who had unfurled a lasting dynasty of specialised school systems in front of a disbelieving and confused British public was now about to embark on his greatest and eternal triumph: no less than the total elimination of all Terror. The delegates smiled and posed, the cameras shuttered and flashed, and soon these moments of levity were over, the journalists left the room, the doors were shut, the gavels were clacked, and the serious business began.

In seconds, the American President leapt into action. Hurling a smoke bomb at the door, it went off, THWANG!, as it hit the ground, spewing out a mind-deadening cloud of pink fumes. The delegates started to cough and splutter on the acrid puffs of pink pain, while the American President at one end of the room and the UK prime minister at the other swiftly covered their faces with masks concealed in their documents.

As all the other delegates slumped forward unconscious, the President pulled two automatic weapons from his attaché case, hurling one of them, SLLOOOOM!, across the polished oak table to his UK colleague, who smiled back at him a sweet smile of boyish excitement. All those months of special training had been leading up to this, all those briefings, the jousts in the midnight dust, the painful brawling sessions in pitch black with men called Jock and Stan, real soldiers of men, and in his head he was

running all those complaints from those around him, 'Why don't you go, go now, leave us? We've had enough of you,' and rerunning too his constant mental refrain: 'They don't know. I need time to do this. I need to learn this right.'

Wait! One of the delegates had come to and it was a matter of mini-seconds for the prime minister to conch her unconscious with his steel-rimmed boot. BRAAFF! Through the noxious smog he could see it was his own foreign secretary. Friendly fire. He smiled at the irony.

Meantime, the US President had pointed his weapon at the al-Qaeda delegates and pulled the trigger in a shock of noise: BOOFT! BOOFT! BOOFT! The lifeless, cracked heads of the three greatest threats to the world's security fell limply to the ground like half-peeled lychees, slumping on to the intricately patterned carpet. SLOOTHP! SLOOTHP! SLOOTHP!

The remaining manoeuvres were carried out with android precision. TWOOM! Another bullet in the head, this time through the eye-socket of the leader of Hezbollah. SKRRRINK! A garrotte to the neck of the spokesman for Hamas. Like slicing through a ripe pear. BNUB! BNUB! Two quick reports into the brains of the Sunni insurgents. CHLUP! A pen in the eye of the Iranian military attaché, a mark of warning, mightier than any sword.

By now, the inevitable bangs on the doors were being heard. Crowds and forces had gathered outside, ready to burst through. The US President and the UK prime minister caught each other's gaze, and knew instantly what their next action would be. In among the groans and mayhem, the blood and the Perrier, they slowly walked

towards each other, arms outstretched and connected in embrace.

The hug was heartfelt, and final. A pull of the cord from the US President, a slight look of momentary surprise from the UK prime minister, and up they went together, KRUBOOOOM!, blown apart in terminal self-detonation, their limbs and brains mingling with the chosen colours of the explosive smoke-canisters strapped to their inside legs, red, white and blue.

In the patriotic chaos, their heads flew across the room like drop-kicks from a fateful Jonny Wilkinson, the American President's head displaying grim, quiet certainty, the UK prime minister's showing the startled look of a man who hadn't been planning this bit but, now that it was happening, was happy to go along with it.

For here, at last, he had met his triumph: everything had truly been sorted out once and for all. The two heads hit the floor with a THUCK! and a SPLICK!, which is why it is these two words we remember for ever as the words carved on their tombstones.

The above account is all based on true events, as they might happen.

So you think you know all about Iraq? Well, take my test . . .

The war in Iraq has been officially declared a complete disaster. In fact, the sheer wrongness of the Iraq venture has become so obvious that it has now attained the status of scientific fact. On a scale of one to ten, where ten is the internationally recognised unit of Absolute Wrongness,

then most computers have calculated that Iraq comes out at 46.8, which is pretty wrong (or PW, as it is commonly known).

Since there are now fewer people in existence who believe that Iraq was the right thing to do than believe in the existence of the yeti, I thought it would be fun to set a general-knowledge quiz to test your knowledge of how objectively and verifiably wrong the whole Iraq idea was.

So, here are a number of factual questions, with a number of multiple-choice answers. Enjoy yourselves and remember: for each question, there is at least one factually correct answer.

Those MPs in the Labour Party who, in the build-up to war, grumbled a bit about the importance of the UN but went on to vote for war on the basis of Tony Blair's evidence to the House of Commons are:

- (a) Mental plankton so incapable of doing anything of their own free will they probably have to eat fourteen pounds of Viagra before they can even kiss their mum goodbye in the morning.
- (b) Gullible zeroes with less mental originality in their heads than the contents of a worm's thought-bubble.

Newspaper columnists who, to this day, still bang on about what an amazing difference democracy has made to the lives of normal Iraqis are:

- (a) Incapable of processing any events in front of their faces. In fact, they're so detached from reality that they can't form any coherent assessment of anything involving people, places, sensory experiences, communicated signals or experiential phenomena of any kind. They're the journalistic equivalent of Helen Keller completely off her face on cider.
- (b) Reanimated zombies, being the souls of journalists from the time of the Boer War but inserted into the lifeless body of the likes of Melanie Phillips. She may look like Melanie Phillips, she may write like Melanie Phillips but, in fact, she's the ranting thought-pus of a brain-dead Victorian.

American neocons are:

- (a) The neo-bastard offspring of a sex bout between a swarm of locusts and the unfrozen sperm of John Wayne.
- (b) The human equivalent of a bowel movement.

People who were in favour of the war but are now in favour of a withdrawal are:

- (a) The sort of people who like vomiting in front of their pet dogs, then asking them to clear it up. And then posting them the bill for a new carpet.
- (b) About as reliable as a car made from cream.

Lib Dem MPs who've spent the past four years bleating about how they never voted for war but who went quiet as soon as it started for fear of looking unpatriotic:

- (a) Deserve a special place in hell reserved for people guilty of half-hearted support. In this special sector of the Underworld, Satan spends all eternity ripping out their fundamentals with his teeth, then fashioning surgical supports for them made out of half their hearts.
- (b) Are tits.

British television's ranks of news and current-affairs journalists who failed in the build-up to the invasion of Iraq to broadcast how crap an idea it was are:

- (a) Still mostly in employment
- (b) Worse at their jobs than a claustrophobic lift attendant.

Tony Blair is:

- (a) A spiritually broken manslayer, doomed to spend the rest of his living days haunted by the failings of his foreign policy and facing thirty years of people shouting, 'Lying failure!' at him when he goes for a walk, which may sound a horrific fate but at least it's not as bad as having your arms ripped out by a cluster-bomb.
- (b) That's it.

Modern Life is the Most Bang up-to-date It's Ever Been

The best bunch you ever did see

Presentation by Steve Jobs of new iPhone in front of ten thousand screaming technology experts.

Lights go down, roof retracts to lower Mr Jobs, seen reclining on a large green-velvet Victorian chaise longue suspended on wires. Audience whoops and hollers. Chaise longue touches the stage floor. Mr Jobs gets off, stands up and shouts: 'Compress chaise longue!' At this point, the chaise longue flips in on itself many times to fold into a small, sleek, oblong, hand-held device, which Mr Jobs picks up.

JOBS: 'Hellooooo, technology experts!'

CROWD: 'Hellooo, King of Glory!'

JOBS: 'Tonight we make history as I present to you the new Apple iPhone. [Audience cheers.] The iPhone, as you have just seen, can fold out into a *chaise longue*. [Audience screams.] Yes, my friends, the days of not being able to recline on your cell phone are over! [Audience stands up and sings, 'Thank you, Lord God, for your gracious gifts' to the

tune of 'She'll Be Coming Round the Mountain When She Comes'.]

'So now let me take you through the superb array of functions the iPhone can bring into your life. First, enhanced picture quality. I simply point my little finger at this icon here and a screen appears on the phone. Now, what's this? [*Grainy green video footage appears on the phone and is projected on to a large screen at the front of the hall.*] Why, it's the notorious video-phoned footage of Saddam Hussein's hanging. This footage sent shockwaves throughout the world. Many people were appalled by what they saw. I was appalled. [*Meaningful pause.*] I was appalled at the poor picture quality of the images! [*Audience laughter, which lasts for three minutes.*]

'Surely, in this day and age, it must be possible to come up with a cell phone that can film the execution of vicious heads of state in a resolution greater than twelve hundred by eight hundred pixels! A death-cell phone, if you will! [*The laughter causes cracks in the roof.*]

'See here, I simply wink at this icon at the bottom and the Saddam footage is now ten times clearer. [*On the large screen, the mushy footage has now been transformed into high-resolution images of a man with spit in his beard having his neck snapped.*] You can see the angle! [*Audience yelps like ruptured wolves.*]

'Now, of course, it would be wrong to film anything and everything. We are all entitled to our privacy. And the iPhone knows when to stop. For example, here is a photograph of Prince William of England's girlfriend, Kate Middleton.

‘Now, here’s what happened earlier this week when I tried to film her coming out of her house. [*The screen shows footage, beamed from the iPhone, of a front door of a house. The door starts to open and, just as a young woman is about to emerge, the screen freezes, and a caption saying, ‘STOP! THIS IS WRONG!’ flashes over it. The audience gasps for air, applauds loudly and then kisses each other.*]

‘Yes, the iPhone knows when to stop. But it also knows not to spoil your fun. Of course, it’s wrong to film Kate Middleton of England, but it’s not wrong to speculate on what it would look like if we had filmed her. So the iPhone has an inbuilt bank of fourteen thousand images showing what Kate Middleton would look like if you had carried on taking photos of her for years to come. [*Waves his nose at the phone and a series of images come on to the screen.*]

‘Here she is looking as if she’s running away; here she is looking like she’s crying; here she is looking like she’s been filmed through a window shouting at William of England and William of England’s father, who’s trying not to look at her, and here she is as if she were taking tranquillisers. [*General silence from audience, as if in simple adoration.*]

‘The iPhone has many more functions there simply isn’t time to talk about today, though if you click this icon here, you actually get extra time. The iPhone can work out a solution to the Middle East crisis, prove to all doubters that there was a Holocaust and plant a hedge in the Amazon jungle [*polite applause*] but what I will finally reveal now is its best function: the ability to unblock drains! [*Applause that only a sun god gets.*]

'Apple has done a deal with the makers of Mr Muscle to ensure that wherever you go, whether at home or in the office or on board a train with ridiculous plumbing, if you happen to have a blocked drain in your vicinity you can deal with the menace with one squirt of the iPhone. [JOBS squirts his iPhone and a jet of Mr Muscle shoots out, unblocking a large, clogged plughole. The audience screams: 'Mr Muscle! Mr Muscle! You Don't Tussle With Mr Muscle!']

'As the powerful liquid dissolves clogged hair and food grease, my iPhone can film the obliteration of mess and beam the pictures back to my children. I am the Lord of All Things, the Master of the Universe, and Tomorrow is my Winged Steed.'

[JOBS disappears into his iPhone, which ascends into the roof. The people fling off their clothes in rapture. A voice is heard saying, 'The iPhone is on sale for four hundred and ninety-nine dollars' and the audience shouts, 'That's too much,' and hurriedly leaves.]

The confession of Annabel de Souza

'It started with the Channel 4 programme launch of April 2004. That was when the channel announced the start of *Total Celebrity Famewatch Appendectomy*. A series of round-the-clock programmes devoted to watching members of the public in enclosed spaces performing appendix operations on each other was to be broadcast continuously for fifteen months. Afterwards, when the contestants had all become famous, they would be entitled to take part in a series of celebrity versions of the same programme for the next fifteen months.

'The project proved popular, and was soon copied by all the terrestrial channels and at least thirty-eight new digital ones, some of which were owned by people who'd convinced their banks to lend them enough money to start up TV stations on which they would be made famous enough to repay the original loans.

'By the summer of 2006, it was estimated that at least 64 per cent of the population of Britain had become celebrities. This crept up to 93 per cent by 2007. The world was transformed. I would go into a butcher's shop and hear the butcher discuss with his customers who was the best voiceover agent to hire. Pensioners would buy fruit and veg, then hurry off to a photo-shoot for British Gas.

'Imagine how I felt not being famous. What made it worse was I was a professional actress. Even my four-year-old son was famous, being offered the lead in a new series of *Gimme, Gimme, Gimme*. It felt dreadful going out every day and having to bypass fifteen hundred photographers, each photographing the other. I couldn't go to visit my parents in Leeds because Leeds was closed for filming. There were certain London Underground lines that were for celebrities only.

'By February of this year, I calculated I was one of only two people left in the country who weren't famous. That was when I hatched my grand scheme. If I could track down this other person – he was a surgeon specialising in appendectomies and, given the rise of a population who had learnt from the telly how to do them, spent most of his time out of work – I could kill him and be left as the only non-famous person in the country. Once it was known I was the only ordinary person in Britain, I would

become the focus of intense media attention and actually become more famous than anyone else.

'I traced my intended victim to a home in Cardiff for destitute surgeons. Newspaper reporters and regional camera crews were already outside, having received a tip-off that someone unimportant lived there. I gained entry to the building dressed as a quizmaster, and shot my victim in the head until he lay dead on a rug. I fled through a back window and immediately looked the incident up on the Internet. I was amazed to discover full coverage of the crime, but no mention of me.

'Because of shoddy journalism, a rumour had spread that the surgeon had been the last non-famous person in Britain and, such was the public interest in seeing the body of someone ordinary, the surgeon was embalmed and placed in an open casket in Trafalgar Square. One million people a week trooped by to see the Extremely Unknown Man. I tried many times to explain that I, too, wasn't famous but people would have none of it, frequently confusing me with someone who looks a tiny bit like me in an advert for pasta sauce.

'I went to the police, but they turned me away, saying that, since I was ordinary, there wouldn't be sufficient public interest in my trial. They said they needed a bigger fish, and arrested Jack Dee.

'And so I leave you this, my confession, in the hope that my life might make an interesting film or three-part series on a minority channel. Its discovery will make you famous if, that is, you're not famous already, in which case, please pass it on to someone you've never heard of.'

**Iannuccae's Contemporarae Miscellanae: being
a compendium of useful facts and curios
relating to contemporary life.**

A. Useful Information in the Form of Helpful Rhymes

Any games or downloadable software pack
Are probably not compatible with a Mac.

A small lump behind the ear it is clear
Means you've only ten months or at most a year.

In a herd of sheep, if a boil or blister is caught
The safest thing is to burn the lot.

Bush will deflect
Our lack of respect
That he hasn't got the leader
Of al-Qaeda.

Little Peter Pippins rode his pretty postillion.
The dead of World War One were roughly nine
million.

The construction of a thirty-mile-wide massive wall
Will not solve the Palestinian problem once and for
all.

B. Thirteen Astonishing Facts

1. The English national anthem was written by
Jesse James.

2. You have a one in fifteen hundred chance of being allergic to spray.
3. Gandhi's real name was Barney O'Herne.
4. It costs two thousand pounds to become an oik.
5. The most popular programme on terrestrial television for Monday, 4 September 2002, was Channel 5's *The Most Evil Men In History Subsequently Found To Be Innocent*.
6. All employees of Sellafield have a half-life of thirty-two months.
7. Raymond Baxter used to be a village idiot.
8. All mental illnesses are imaginary.
9. The Bishop of Oxford is allowed to perform door-to-door baptisms for four pounds.
10. Yoko Ono is an anagram of Brian Eno.
11. Simon Schama was paid a record advance of £350,000 to write *A History of David Starkey*. David Starkey was paid a record advance of £450,000 to write *A History of the Wife of Simon Schama*.
12. Sound travels at half the speed of silence.
13. Jack Straw is a fool.

C. Weight of British Cathedrals

1. Durham: 7340 tons
2. Liverpool Roman Catholic: 6008 tons (without candles, 5008 tonnes)
3. Coventry (ruins): nine tons

D. The Top Three Best-Selling Flavours of Crisps in Western Europe

1. Smoky Puffin

2. Torpedoed Grape and Chive
3. Poor Student's Kidneys

E. The Crazy World of Advertising

1. The most expensive advertising campaign in history was mounted by butcher Kevin MacCorkindale, who spent £10 million placing an advert for his shop in every page of every British newspaper on 17 January 1989. The copy ran: 'A taste of mystery, a taste of adventure. MacCorkindale's the Butcher, 17 High Street, Chepstow. For rind.'
2. The most controversial advertising campaign in British history was for the 1998 Nazi Memorabilia Winter Catalogue. The copy ran: 'This winter, keep snug and warm with the Nazis: trench coats, boots, maps of North Africa.'

F. Interesting but Obscure Rules of Sport

1. In netball, the fifth team member is permitted to have a pimp. (Applicable in Netball League, not Netball Union.)
2. In shinty-diving, competitors are allowed to dive in their own language.
3. In National Championship Darts competitions, as recognised by the International Darts Federation, previous champions are entitled to throw the dart from horseback.
4. In shinty-shinty, the shinter is allowed to shint on either of his opponent's shins.
5. In Association Football, the defender is allowed

to throw carbolic acid in the face of an opponent, provided the referee's line of vision is obscured by the ball.

6. In naked yachting, the yachtsmen have to be naked both fore and aft the Cape of Good Hope.
 7. In live bull-dropping, the bulls can be dropped only on spinsters.
 8. In shinty-newsreading, the newsreader has to be at least ten yards away from bad news.
 9. In shinty Shinto, the Japanese are allowed to construct a religion that deifies the cast of *The Shining*.
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If a diet's good enough for Kenneth Clarke, it's good enough for me

For the past eleven days I've tried out thirteen diets, and have lost more than three times my own body weight. Here are the best ones.

The Watkins Diet. a high-protein, high-carbohydrate, high-fat, moderate *hara-kiri* diet. Followers of the diet are told they can eat as much as they like, whenever they like, as long as they insert a small sword twice a day through their midriff and gouge out the contents of their stomach. Johnny Depp is said to swear by it.

The Space Diet. Followers are provided with a book showing the calorie makeup of every brand of food. Food with above the recommended daily calorie intake can only be eaten in space, where it is much, much lighter. Participants must also weigh themselves only in space. Very popular with extremely rich people who have the

resources to get themselves into space. Most famous British practitioner is Noel Edmonds. One day, it is hoped that most people will be able to get into space on the NHS.

Stay Slim the Andrew Gilligan Way. Tubby BBC reporter Andrew Gilligan's best-selling book explaining how you can lose five stone in two months. Gilligan outlines how you establish your initial weight by weighing yourself without anyone else around to confirm it. What you put down as your starting weight is therefore entirely dependent on your say-so alone. Don't keep overly detailed notes of this weight. If, after two months, you claim to have lost five stone, who else is there to prove you haven't done so?

Scare Yourself Thin. A simple diet involving the follower being frightened witless shortly after each evening meal. Comes with a kit allowing the family to simulate sudden explosions, police raids, planes hitting the chimney, and includes a plastic hanging 'aunt', and leg lying by a thresher. Also a plentiful supply of absorbent clothing to contain the subsequent loss of bowel control. Very popular with Geri Halliwell and Sadie Frost.

Brainstorm Your Way to a Thinner You. Promising 'the delivery of blue-skies thinking to the digestive process', the Brainstorm Diet applies cutting-edge management techniques to dieting. Dieters are asked to come together in groups, and suggest types of food they might like to eat. The course convenor then gets them to write down these ideas on Post-it notes, which are stuck up on the wall. The room is then divided into two. Those on the left get to wear red hats and those on the right green. The

red-hat group lobs bits of food at the green side, while the green side has to think of a number. At the end, the Post-it notes are taken down and eaten.

The rest of the day is spent brainstorming ideas for new things to put food on, 'the more outlandish the better'. Ideas that have come up so far include mountain-tops, priests, piles of other food, and men. At the end of the day, everyone goes home having had so much fun they don't realise they didn't stop for lunch. Cost: £23,000 a delegate.

Smoke Your Way to a Healthier You. A 'scientifically proven' diet that suggests if you ate a little bit less, but smoked a little bit more, you'd look and feel great. All the scientists who have proved it works are employed by the tobacco industry, which, they say, goes to show they all know what they're talking about. Very popular with Kenneth Clarke.

The Low Fibre, Low IQ Diet. Followers are asked to cut down their food intake by putting all their money into a special offshore fund set up by the diet's official nutritionists. With no money, the followers slowly starve themselves into a more manageable body:fat ratio. A combination of gratitude and malnourishment usually stops most followers bothering to try getting their money back. A hit with Robbie Williams and Nastassja Kinski.

Eat Glass Diet. Followers eat glass instead of food. Scientists remain sceptical, saying that the prolonged eating of glass could have 'untold consequences for the body and guts', but both Elizabeth Hurley and Buzz Aldrin swear by it.

Teach an old dog new tricks

My family took delivery of a puppy last week. We have another dog, who's eight and who looked a bit offended when a clearly more youthful and interesting arrival started sucking all the attention away from him. So, on top of the usual instructions being tried out on the pup, like 'Fetch!' and 'Wee outside!', I've found I've had to teach the older dog a new command: every hour, I get him to sit in front of me while I shout, 'Live with it!' very firmly. This works a treat and has encouraged me to draw up a guide to further training exercises we could give our dogs to cope with the increasing demands of a complicated world. Here are the main ones:

1. If there's someone whose appearance on the telly makes you want to throw things at the screen (such as actor and writer Julian Fellowes), teach your dog to respond to commands along the lines of 'Attack the Fellowes!' so that the animal hurls itself at the screen with so much force that the whiplash from its tail will nudge the channel button to another station.
2. For a similar reason, when lining your puppy basket with newspaper, teach your dog to respond correctly to the command 'Poo on Simon Heffer!'
3. Give it a phone and teach it to wait for you when you've been put on hold in a telephone queuing system. Shout, 'Hold!' and teach it to bark once every two minutes if nothing's happening and

twice if you've reached the front of the queue. At this point, pat your dog, give it a treat and say, 'Good call!'

4. Shout, 'Spam' if you want it to delete your unwanted emails. A good idea to begin with is to print off an unwanted email and let the dog sniff it so it recognises the smell.
 5. Other instructions you can teach your dog are: 'Help with the packing!'; 'Apply for planning permission!'; 'Shortlist the novel!'; 'Meet Mr Netanyahu halfway!'; and 'Sort out Iraq!'
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Gang Ho! The Weekly Bulletin of Gang News for all Gang Members and Gang Enthusiasts

Advice Corner: gang members with problems write to our resident expert, Dr Anthony Stores, PhD and Dog

Ay, yo, readers. I start with an interesting letter from a regular Homey in the Mix, who lives in Dorset.

Dear Anthony

What do I do if I think my gang's too fat? I noticed the other night, as we were knifing a shopkeeper, that I was slightly breathless doin' the jakin'.

Looking around me, I noticed that my fellow G's were overweight. Is there a fitness or dietary regime that we could turn to, ma slammin' expert?

Well, Dorset, no diggity, I get asked this question a lot and your first port of call should be the gym.

There should be one in your turf that advertises special midweek Gang Nights, where you and your gang can book up to 18 or 19 treadmills at once, so that you can all jog together while swapping street signs and speaking in slang. It's good fun and healthy exercise. Ask at Reception about cheap rates for gang members; if there aren't any, hit that pipehead on the face with the end of your shooter until he bleeds.

You might find swimming is more your thing. It's good all-round exercise for tired joints (and by 'joint', I don't mean groove weed). You'll need 20p for the locker, which you can get by smashing open another locker. There's a Gang Hour in most pools, where the pool is closed to members of the public and divided into 23 lanes. Totally dope.

My next letter's from a ruka tagged 'Martha the Hard Chola' from Canterbury, who writes:

Dear Dr Stores

My gang is thinking of moving to the country. What are the advantages and disadvantages of this, ma click?

Ese vato, Martha. First of all, make sure there are good transport links to the inner cities. At most country stations, there's a signal you can vandalise to stop most trains whenever you want. Schooling is different in the country. Class sizes

are smaller, with sometimes fewer than three gangs to a class. On the downside, that's fewer kids to sell your crack to at the gates. On the plus side, the education's better, especially if you move to within the catchment area of a Church of England gang.

And finally, this sad missive from Simon, a Rooster from Bristol:

What's wrong with me and my gang? We can't find another gang to fight. I can't believe that with all the gangs out there, the right one isn't just waiting round the corner. Is it our looks? Or am I being hopelessly idealistic?

Let me assure you, Bristol Rooster, it's tempting to think there's something wrong with you, especially when you see all the other gangs getting down with their cranks. But please chill out and listen to ma mess. Have you tried speed fighting? It's a well bang activity that's becoming more popular with gangs for whom the night's drug-dealing leaves no time to meet other gangs. You and your gang go to a large warehouse out of town, where there are about 40 other gangs. Each gang has two minutes to fight 10 gangs in succession. There's about 600 of you chingasos in there and you're bound to hook up with some real muvvers. It usually ends at 11 p.m.

Don't worry if you are in a bind, boys, the au pair will help

Following the massive success of *The Dangerous Book for Boys*, I'm delighted that I have managed to wangle exclusive extracts from its follow-up, *The Dangerous Book for Middle-class Boys*.

- How to make a fire: get some sticks from a nearby timber yard (your au pair can drive you there or you can ask your parents' gardener to bring some along next time he comes to the house) and place them in a pile on top of a gas-powered barbecue. Switch on power and – hey presto!
- How to make a catapult: take your weekly allowance and buy a train ticket to a local museum. In the museum shop, purchase a toy replica of a Roman catapult. And – hey presto! If you do not live near a local museum, then use the Internet. And, again – hey presto – just the same!
- What to do if there's a burst pipe in the house and your parents are out: find some balsawood and fuse wire. If there is neither in the house, phone your father's office and ask him if one of his employees has some. Get him to drop it off or, if it's more urgent, courier it to your house. Take the balsawood and fuse wire

and out of it fashion a primitive directory of phone numbers of local plumbers. Choose the plumber you've heard your parents say is OK, phone him and, as they say, hey – we've got a presto!

- How to skin a rabbit: if you live in a city, ask your parents if you can move to the country. If your parents are divorced, it may be that one of them has done so already. Then make a booking at a nearby restaurant run by a named chef. Ask for rabbit. And once again, hey – there's your presto! Ask for pesto sauce with the rabbit, and it's hey pesto!

Truly, Tesco is the other son of God

Sunday. I wake up to hear that all the Christian churches have got together and decided they're going to launch a new, fourth member of the Trinity designed to appeal to a younger audience. He's a friend of the Son's, called the Holy Mate, and sits next to the Messiah but in front of the Holy Ghost. I hear a Church of England spokesperson on the radio say: 'No doubt there'll be some older people who won't like us changing theology like this, but eternity's nothing if it's not about moving with the times. If young people get into the Holy Mate in a big way, then they might go on to like some of His more sophisticated colleagues in the Trinity, such as the Father. This is much the same way that BBC3 feeds a more youthful audience on into BBCs 1 and 2.'

Monday. Early in the morning, I hear a muffled, regular thudding outside. I wake up to discover Tesco has won planning permission to build a superstore over my house. I go out of the front door to see my bungalow is now situated somewhere in the fruit section. It's the bit where stuff is sold loose, rather than pre-packed, and the noise I woke up to was the sound of shoppers clumsily dropping apples. A small note is popped through my letterbox: it's from Royal Mail, explaining I have to change my street name to Aisle Three. They also say they called to deliver a parcel, but I didn't hear them knock. The sound was drowned out by the noise of lots of loose ripe plums thlopping on to the floor. They say I can collect the parcel if I go to the local sorting office, which is currently somewhere in the toiletries section.

Tuesday. Drive up to Leeds. Am intending to take the M1 but, on the way, learn that Tesco has been granted planning permission to build on it and it's now called the T1. It's a two-hundred-mile-long drive-through supermarket. I enter the store in London at top speed and a basket is slammed on to my car roof as I pass Luton. At Northampton I spot some bread. I honk my horn and a robotic cannon hurls the goods at the car at 120 miles an hour. My credit-card details are spotted by a tiny camera close to Derby, and I pick up my receipt from a junior staff trainee sitting by a check-out desk in Sheffield. He asks if I want cashback, which I get just past Wakefield. Fags have to be bought separately on the outskirts of Leeds.

Wednesday. Get back to my house to discover a forty-foot-high photo of the Tesco store manager on the outside wall. I think this is madness and dial 999 to get the police. A voice at the other end of the line says, 'Tesco's emergency service, can I help you?' I ask if they can come right away. The voice says, 'All Tesco's emergency services are very popular right now, so the next available slot is this Saturday between one and two p.m. Shall I arrange for the services to be delivered, then?' I put the phone down and decide to go out and shop.

Thursday. Wake up to hear on the radio that the Holy Mate has been such a success that Christianity is thinking of launching a further 320 new members of the Trinity, each one based in a local area. All the other religions are saying it's unfair that Christianity can flood the market with new members of the Trinity just like that. A spokesman for Buddhism says, 'This really stifles competition from some of the smaller independent religions.'

Friday. Tesco's emergency services arrive at my front door. I explain that I'm unhappy. They tell me that's because I'm not near enough to a Tesco. I say that I can't physically get any nearer to a Tesco given that my house is actually inside one. They explain that's still not near enough and that I would be closer if I had a small Tesco implanted in my stomach. An elderly lady comes forward holding a tray carrying several small plastic thimbles full of liquid. She asks if I would like to smell a free sample of their trial-offer Tesco morphine. Before I have the chance to say, 'No,' I fall comatose to the floor.

Saturday. Wake up feeling groggy. My stomach is bloated, as if I've eaten a heavy meal. Have I dreamt all this? I look down and see some stitching around my navel. I prod and can feel a small, hard, box-like object under the skin, and hear the very faint traces of a Tannoy announcement coming from somewhere near my ribs. I put on the radio. In my haze, I hear that Tesco is now launching its own cut-price god.

Want to be mildly rich?

Though the economic downturn means fewer people are buying books, it also means more people are buying books about how to make money. For eighteen quid, the price of a kidney, you too can have a copy of *Millionaire Unleashes the Secrets of a More Wealthy You*.

That being said, things have changed subtly in this market. Maybe business leaders are feeling the pinch because a closer examination of the self-help books published this year indicates that financial gurus have been forced to make ends meet by writing a new genre of book that inspires readers to aim only for realistic and achievable financial targets. Here's a summary of the latest that are sliding off the shelves.

Sir Alan Sugar's *You Too Can Make Fifty Pounds*

Renowned business mongrel Alan Sugar produces a quick guide to making fifty pounds in just under three weeks. Alan Sugar writes in his introduction:

Making fifty pounds can look simple, but it's as hard as mountain climbing. Some people think the obvious method is to try making fifty pounds in one go, but it's my bet that most of these idiots will come a cropper through lack of staying power.

Success will come to those who use their bonce and patiently stick to my Fifty-Quids-In business plan, in which I show you how to launch fifty different business ventures that each makes a pound of profit. Over three weeks, you will learn how to learn from your mistakes [a business venture for computer software written in Braille launched on the first morning that loses three pounds] then earn from your successes over the Tuesday and Wednesday [by forming a company that makes carrot-and-coriander-soup-flavoured dog biscuits and earns five pounds in profits before it collapses on Thursday].

Delia's How to Hoard

With world food prices rocketing, Delia Smith sets out a hundred quick-to-follow methods of hoarding the best stuff from supermarkets. Including simple-to-follow explanations of the best way to disguise yourself so you can go into a supermarket five times in one day without anyone thinking anything of it, and recipes for what to do with fifty tins of skipjack tuna. Also contains diagrams of how you can fit extra cupboards into the bathroom.

Donald Trump's *Some of You Too Can Be as Successful as I Once Was* Remaindered.

The Willpower Pathway to How to Get Absolutely Something of What You Want

Adopts a new psychological approach to material goal-setting, using a methodology known as 'transformative goal adjustments' whereby the individual is taught by means of a number of sophisticated breathing exercises and bladder-control techniques to convince him- or herself that their material ambitions are set slightly too high. They are then given ten days in which to experience for themselves how they have no money anyway and therefore that it's just as well they downgraded their ambitions.

Noel Edmonds says: 'This method is great. I always wanted to own fifty helicopters by the time I was sixty-three, but, by using the Transformative Goal Adjustments breathing apparatus and prostate clamps, I have retrained my material self to demand from me only three or maybe four helicopters at a push. Since I already own these due to my quiz show success, I have instantly achieved all my goals.'

Self-harm Your Way to Millions

This year's most successful book. A poverty-stricken Dorset farmer's wife outlines how she thinks a fortune can be made from depression and self-harm. Diagrams and photos made this book a curio, but so many people seemed interested enough to buy it that it went straight to

the top of the bestseller list. Soon word spread that the farmer's wife actually had made millions out of self-harm and the craze took off all around the world, resulting in more tragedy and injury, from which the farmer's wife gets a commission.

Hear me out? No, you listen to me

Every now and then I get sent emails that begin, 'I know you're very busy, but I wondered if you could just . . .'. The senders are usually researchers from television production companies requesting an appearance on a television programme like *The Top Five Hundred Oats Commercials of All Time* or *When Celebrities Fire Puppies From a Cannon*.

But that's irrelevant. What interests me is the ploy used in the opening gambit 'I know you're very busy, but . . .'. This is an example of a devious communication strategy I've noticed is becoming more common now, namely the attempt to make a problem disappear simply by acknowledging it. The sender seems to think that the solution to the problem that I'm very busy is simply to say that he knows this. As if, somehow, by his saying I'm very busy, I'll quite magically stop being very busy and have fresh quantities of free time to appear on *When Headbutts Go Wrong* or whatever goat's mess of a programme he's working on.

This technique is a false resolution striving for the consequences of a real one. It's as ineffective as going up to someone lying sprawled in the road and saying, 'I know you've just emerged from a car crash, but I

wondered if you'd like a leaflet about the new branch of Domino's Pizza.'

It's a technique politicians use a lot. For example, here's Tony Blair in a Labour Conference speech defending recent anti-terror legislation: 'The whole of our [justice] system starts from the proposition that its duty is to protect the innocent from being wrongly convicted. Don't misunderstand me. That must be the duty of any criminal-justice system. But surely our primary duty should be to allow law-abiding people to live in safety.'

Now read it again and see how deftly he wants us to think he's dealt with the problem of human rights simply by acknowledging that human rights exist.

Resolving a problem by restating the obvious is an increasingly popular conversational gambit. For example, how many times have you phoned up a monolithic corporation to complain about bad service, practically spewing tears as you relive the fifteen-month frustration you've just been through, only to be told, 'I hear what you're saying'? As if, though on the phone with you, they weren't hearing what you were saying but were in fact hearing what a Tweenie was saying, or even doing something entirely unconnected with hearing what someone was saying, like launching a cruise liner or putting sausagemeat inside a car battery.

Of course they're hearing what you're saying, but it's no more effective a solution to your problem than declaring, 'I'm sitting on my buttocks.'

I didn't intend to spend so much time on verbal-abuse techniques, but I feel, now I've started, you should hear me out. In fact, 'hear me out' is possibly the most devious

offender. People say 'hear me out' when they don't want to hear you or your counter-arguments at all. If the previous verbal examples depend on the speaker thinking that a problem disappears simply by acknowledging it, the utterer of 'hear me out' thinks that a solution has more merit the longer it takes to outline it.

It doesn't really matter about the content: the speaker might be saying, 'I think the quickest way we can drive to Bournemouth is by the M23, then turn back up along the M40, then take the ferry to the Isle of Man, kill all the Jews and the gipsies, then use Jupiter's gravitational pull to swing the car round to the M4 . . .' but he thinks any objection to what he's saying can be overruled on the basis that he hasn't been heard out.

The only effective counter-argument to this is a hefty kick in the loin.

I'd rather have a giggle than be grown-up

Whether you're a male thirty-something metrosexual or a demi-detached ruraphile in her mid-twenties, whether you're a left-leaning professional or a core-issue swinger, a fit vegetarian or a sick motorist, all categories now mean nothing. Though we probably collectively spend billions employing marketing skills to identify which of the thirty-three thousand socio-economic tribes each of us belongs to, I think I can now save us any further expense. That's because the older I get, the more I come to realise there are basically only two types of human being: the Adult and the non-Adult. That's all you need to know; as far as being able to sum people up goes, none of the other cate-

gories has even entered the stadium. In business, this sort of simplification is called 'rationalisation' and usually leads to the announcement of redundancies. My hope is that, in rationalising all of humanity, I may have inadvertently reduced the need for highly paid marketing executives to stay in their jobs.

Whatever the economic consequences, I've had my moment of insight and am stuck with it. It was a categorical epiphany, and it hit me at a barbecue. I like barbecued food, but that's not the same as saying I like barbecues. I like the heat they give out on what are usually cold summer nights. But that's it. I'm happy to take the black chicken pieces and run indoors. But there are some people, I've noticed, who love barbecues. They love playing with lighter fluid and standing around in semi-circles with like-minded friends, poking steaks with a piece of metal. Above all, they love talking about the barbecue: 'Ah, there she goes'; 'That's getting good and hot, there'; 'Watch this now – this is where she really gets going'; 'Nice sizzling'; 'Good and sizzling'; 'Sizzling beautifully now.'

I found myself at a barbecue standing next to a group of these people, and was tempted to say something like 'Yup, it's sizzled parallel char lines down the chop's underside' – but couldn't bring myself to. I realised I was with people who had no sense of humour, unless they got big laughs from flipping flat meat around. These people, it dawned on me, are Adults. Adults have nothing interesting to say when they're away from the work situation. To them, work is for Grown-ups, and one's principal function in life is to act Grown-up. Anything

else is trivial and not worth considering. Or even talking about.

Because they were Adults, and I felt different, I realised that had to make me a non-Adult. And it struck me the world can be divided into these two categories, the Adult and non-Adult, and the categories apply irrespective of age. I'm forty-five and I'm a non-Adult, clearly. After all, I'm writing this and not some piece of Grown-up dust about the situation in the Middle-East or the place of religion in politics. I'm interested in these issues, but just can't quite believe I'm the right sort of person to comment on them.

I occasionally turn up on Grown-up programmes such as *Question Time*, but all the way through them, I can't help thinking, Look, that's David Dimbleby! I giggle at the absurdity of being there and quietly take a photo of Mr Dimbleby on my phone to show my mum. Clearly, I'm not an Adult, and never destined for high office. I'm not what my friend David Schneider calls a 'Tall Person'.

Adults, the Tall People, stand around in pubs, even when there are plenty of empty chairs. Adults stand around their friends in gyms and count the number of bench-presses each one's doing. Adults say, 'Yah beauty,' when someone gives them an extra helping of shepherd's pie. Adults think *Bremner, Bird and Fortune* is near the knuckle but spot-on. Adults can say the word 'branding' without feeling sick. Adults can drink more than two pints of beer without feeling sick. Adults eat cheese for pudding – even when there is very clearly a sherry trifle on the dessert trolley. How is that possible?

Adults also very much like to think they have fun. In fact, when they're convinced fun is happening to them, they say so. 'Yeah, me and the crew all get together on a Wednesday lunchtime and try to form anagrams out of the episode titles of *Coupling*. It's just a bit of fun'; 'Went para-fishing in Leeds the other day. Now, that's really fun. You must try it'; 'Wore a Nazi uniform to an Empire and Colonials fancy dress party. Just a bit of fun.'

This last point brings me to Prince Harry, whose case requires tremendous sympathy. This is because Harry is an Adult trapped in a non-Adult's body. Harry and thousands like him spend their lives trying to act childish because they still look twelve. But they can't quite hack it: every gene in their body, every hour of schooling they've had, unwittingly betrays their basic seriousness and Adulthood. These tragic cases can be spotted by their very, very bad sense of humour. Their attempts at comedy look and sound like jokes, but just aren't. Instead, they're just things that collapse, limp and lifeless, when spoken, like a dying jellyfish on the shore.

There are some children who are Adults from an early age. If they swagger about at school with one hand in their pocket and the other pinching a cigarette, they're Adults. If they tell their careers adviser when they leave school they want to set up a sports-injuries clinic, they're Adults. Why they want to be Grown-up when being childish is far more interesting defeats me.

Don't get me wrong – I don't think Adults are bad, or inferior to non-Adults. Since religion is non-rational, most religious people fall into the non-Adult category; and

since religion has been responsible for most war, some torture and the spread of a lot of Aids, it's fair to say that the non-Adult need not be proud of their legacy. Plus they can't make things.

Both categories, then, have probably contributed equally to the sum total of the world's misery. Non-Adults do so through general incompetence, Adults through overly aggressive acts that they convince themselves are just bits of fun. (And, here, I'm going to draw my most controversial distinction. When it comes to sport, non-Adults don't have a preference while Adults like rugby. This makes sense. After all, you can only cope psychologically with playing a game of choreographed butchery resulting in someone's giblets being wrapped around an opponent's leg if you regard it as just a bit of fun.)

There are no victors. Us and Them, non-Adults and Adults, are just different. And unless we accept this difference, unless we concede that there are two distinct human species on the planet, we won't resolve any of the political or social problems that divide us. Never mind reconciliation, lessening the gap between rich and poor, or multicultural integration. Just keep these two tribes in roughly equal numbers, and as far apart as possible, and we might all survive another century.

The present is becoming vanishingly small

The past is pretty big these days. More people would rush to an airport to touch the hem of Simon Schama than they would the Pope's. Meantime, the future is where we

locate all our mythological heroes. Once we told tales of Sinbad and Jason and Robin Hood and Christ; now our adventurers, like Luke Skywalker and Buck Rogers, haven't been born yet but have already saved the world. Today we spend quite a lot of our time engaged in house renovation and the restoration of public buildings, going on heritage trails and genealogical searches, while coming home to watch sci-fi movies, read novels depicting a 'terrifying vision of the future in which rebel eco-warriors liberate a hundred suns from a supernova farm', and generally spend our spare hours filling in insurance details, pension plans and application forms for a living will; it's quite likely we spend more time contemplating the past and fretting about the future than we do observing the present.

Could it be that the present is actually getting smaller?

To confirm this, look at the average newspaper. It reports quite a lot of the future. Global warming, forthcoming meteor strikes, the end of the book, how the EU might ban grapes, and a new plastic that can bend into the shape of thought: these are the typical subject matter of pages six and seven of most daily papers, reporting news so new it hasn't even begun. I sometimes wonder if journalists get together in the summer and pay for a group of scientists to put on a conference just so they can come up with predictions that would make good page-seven stories. Such as 'Scientists Predict Car Cloning by 2043', and 'Expert Transportologists Predict Trains the Size of a Postage Stamp: Passengers Will Post Themselves to Destination'. If journalists aren't already behind such conferences, I predict one day they will be.

There was a rather odd technological prediction in the *Daily Telegraph* a while ago: an item about a 'Jerk-O-Meter'. It's a mobile phone that has software to analyse the owner's pitch and intensity of voice to let him know how he's coming over. During the call, it flashes up messages such as 'Be a little nicer now' and 'Don't be a jerk'. I assume this is all true. It's a frightening development if it is, but also utterly stupid. After all, how can you read the messages while you're on the phone? 'Excuse me a moment, I'm just going to read if I'm a jerk.' Or perhaps another scientist is developing a second device worn around the wrist that flips out a small camera to record what it sees on your phone when you hold it up to your ear. This is broadcast to a tiny television set that's dangled from a titanium skull-cap you wear on your head. A fourth device monitors all this and lets you know whether you look a jerk as well as sound one.

I'm very interested in people's predictions. H. G. Wells is the one to beat on this: he may have failed to predict Tom Cruise, happy-slapping, beach volleyball and articulated lorries, but his fantasies did predict nuclear war, air battles, the United Nations and genetic modification. In *The Shape of Things to Come*, which takes the form of a history book from the future that someone in the 1930s accidentally gets their hands on, he predicts there are very few records of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries and that consequently people in the future will know very little about that period. Hopelessly wrong? Well, when was the last time you backed everything up on your computer or printed off the contents of your digital camera?

Pampering is such a cut-throat industry

This morning, packed in a train full of commuting hominids, you begin to scream inside. Your body cries out for some pampering.

Well, now there's good news, because the pampering industry is the fastest-growing in Britain. Where before we used to put up car factories and Homebases, we now construct Wellbeing Clinics, Holistic Body Zoos, Inner Spirit Rescue Centres and Rural Relaxation Retreats (some of which have retreated so far from rural areas that they're in the centre of town).

In this era, in which homoeopathy is spreading faster than swine flu, the rest-and-relaxation industry is now the most competitive market on the map. See all those people with whom you commute into work? At least 60 per cent of them are yoga instructors, while another 14 per cent work in a spa. All of them are taking the early train so they can get their mats and towels set up before their market rivals.

Pampering is actually quite a cut-throat industry, and most professional pamperers burn out in their late twenties because of the stress. Many of them go on to do something more relaxing, like banking. The pressure to come up with new therapies is relentless. Among the treatments on offer are:

Shake and Vac. Full-body shiatsu massage followed by colonic irrigation.

Vertical Clam Rub-down. The patient is showered with an

overturned vat of clams in their shells. The clams help remove dead and living skin.

Squirrathrapy. Have your shoulder and neck muscles massaged via the natural power of squirrels. The mood music of Enya is pumped into the room, while the patient lies flat and nuts from seven different local woodland areas are gently placed across the neck and shoulders at the body's seven Equilibrial Nut Zones. A group of squirrels is then released on to the back, and the effect of having squirrels crawl and munch on top of your neck muscles probably eases tension.

Open Air Sea-salt Assault. The patient is tied to a rock by the coast and sworn at by dockers. You leave refreshed by the natural saltiness of the workmen's breath.

Wormwood Scrub. A vigorous massage in the showers.

Enya Body Wrap. The patient lies flat while the singer Enya is gently lowered from a ceiling harness. Once the patient is entirely covered by Enya, the lights are switched off and she sings for an hour, leaving the patient in a lifestyle.

All-over Aviary Stretch. The body is re-energised by having the limbs attached to four flocks of migrating birds.

Internal Body War. Two groups of bacteria, hostile to each other, are inserted in the mouth and posterior and get rid of toxins by fighting a war in the torso.

Full East End Body Bend and Wax. Using ancient Cockney techniques, the body is beaten up about the face and stomach, then bent into a reef knot. The patient lies there for an hour on the floor while listening to the Clash, and is then completely hot-waxed to smooth the limbs so he can untie himself and leave.

All-body Colonic Irrigation. A complex irrigation system is gently inserted through the colon and into the arms and legs. The pressure of flow is adjusted to control the movement of each limb separately via a central system of taps at the clinic's head office. The patient's body is then manipulated to perform massages on ten other patients, and walked into the reception area to process their credit-card payments.

So Gordon, am I too old to vote for you?

In the past Labour have indicated that they might lower the voting age to sixteen, presumably in the hope that children who have grown up never knowing anything but a New Labour government will vote for another before they realise there's actually a choice.

The government's interest is all part of a cross-party worry that young people feel totally alienated from the political process. Moves are being made to talk to the iPod generation in a language they understand. A worthy aim, to be sure, were it not that the language was the problem.

For a start, the phrase 'iPod generation' is meant to refer to young people but doesn't really. I've got an iPod and I'm forty-five. And I'm in a generation. The phrase

'iPod generation' has both a surface and a buried meaning. On the surface, it says, 'I understand the young,' but deeper it means simply: 'I've heard of iPods.' In an attempt to connect with someone younger, it actually confirms the sayer as middle-aged.

After all, why else would they want to bang on about something that, to the young, is so everyday that there's not much point in drawing attention to it? As such, it does much the same work as the phrase 'I'm eighty-two, you know.'

There's a word for people like Noel

I've decided to start compiling a dictionary of modern usage. These terms are all you'll need to understand contemporary life.

Noellation The malignant satisfaction experienced by Noel Edmonds now *Deal or No Deal* has convinced him his critics were all wrong.

McNabbery The guilty pride someone left-wing has in the SAS.

Dehyflation The exorbitant price of dried fruit.

Fisckling That thing Gordon Brown does with his mouth.

Technoyance The note of disdain software engineers have still not managed to remove from the voice of a sat-nav system.

Artiquated Adjective used to describe the sense of amazement we sometimes have that, even in the twenty-first century, we still have to hire an artist to do drawings of what a trial looks like.

Blipindustry The time and effort sound-effects people spend putting noises on to shots of laptop graphics in movies, even though laptop graphics don't make noises in real life.

Pudge-fencing The ability of David Cameron to get away with saying he wants to put an end to Punch and Judy politics while still making extremely spiteful personal remarks about Gordon Brown.

Huw-fluffers People with their jackets off who walk around in the background of TV news studios.

Shittering The art of cutting eye- and mouth-holes in the makeshift balaclavas that terrorists wear.

Neckinism The sense of resignation felt by people over fifty as they realise fewer news reporters are wearing ties.

Mawkinternational The disappointing décor in most company boardrooms.

Crook-hancing The disparity in looks between a crime victim and the more handsome actor playing him in a televised reconstruction.

Teepression The overwhelming sense of sadness one experiences when driving past a golf course.

Noelancholia The depression felt by long-term critics of Noel Edmonds now that Noel thinks he's proven them all wrong even though they know they're still right.

A slimmer nation – it's in the bag

We are constantly urged to get healthy by taking lots of exercise and changing our diet. But losing weight is not all it's cracked up to be. Far easier methods can be applied, as I hope to demonstrate now with my Eightfold Plan For Achieving Reasonable Weight Loss.

1. At home, clear a space in your house where you can exercise and work out. Then don't. Clearing the space was probably enough exercise in itself.
2. About once a week, drive to the local gym and for an hour sit in the car watching the sad sacks come in and out. Notice there isn't a single smile on their face. Laugh and laugh. This releases energy and burns calories. If you laugh a lot, you may want to compensate by eating a bag of Monster Munch.
3. Eat a bag of Monster Munch anyway. You'll start to feel guilty. This causes stress, which burns calories.

4. Roast lots of potatoes. Technically, you are burning calories. You deserve a reward. Eat the potatoes.
 5. If, after five weeks, you find you're actually gaining weight instead of losing it, please don't worry. This is normal.
 6. Campaign for the redefinition of obesity. At present, it's an absolute measure, defined as being overweight by 30 per cent of the ideal body weight for someone of your height. Instead, work tirelessly to have official health organisations redefine obesity as the possession of a body weight higher than the national average. Once you have done this, then you will only be obese if you're a lot heavier than most people. All you then have to do is encourage more people to get fat. This will get the national average weight up and so decrease your chances of being above it.
 7. If you succeed in this campaign, you will have burnt a lot of calories organising petitions and leafleting. You may therefore be seriously underweight. So celebrate your victory by having a banquet. Every night.
 8. Congratulations. You're now no longer officially overweight. Have a Mars Bar.
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Things to tell people who know nothing about football, but who take an exaggerated interest in the World Cup

1. Apparently, Fifa has changed the rules so that, in the next tournament, the ball will be made of solid brass.
2. Each team is allowed to let a quarter of its squad lie fallow for a year.
3. Say things like: 'With Rooney out of the squad, and with injury trouble at both the back and middle, I reckon they'll go for a 1-1-1-1-1-1-1-1-1-1 formation.'
4. Most of the qualifying stages next time will be done on the Internet.
5. Say things like 'Isn't the keeper offside?'
6. Mention that all the fourth officials have their own tournament in the winter.
7. Apparently, Rooney could be out of the game for twenty-three years.
8. A good thing to yell at the telly, in front of people, is 'England are in the driving seat, but of a parked car.'

Coming to terms with Davina . . . and a dying badger

Carrying on with my dictionary of modern usage, here are some more vital terms you need to know to get through a normal twenty-first-century day:

Davinaaaaaarghwaaaaghmamaaaaaah The sound you hear in your head when you turn down the volume of a failing chat show.

Nanotriumph The length of time it takes before a new set of Venetian blinds doesn't quite work properly.

Standroid A rail commuter who knows precisely where to position himself on the platform so the train door comes to a halt right in front of him.

Gloomabebies The cloud of depression that hits a children's TV presenter the day he turns twenty-seven.

Psychoplunge The brief but overwhelming depths of terror passing through the mind of an air-traffic controller after she's just made a mistake but before she realises actually she hasn't.

Mockunormity The sensation you get going into a restaurant that's much bigger than you expected, before realising you've been conned by mirrors.

Attenbash Marvelling at how surprisingly large a badger is before running it over with your car.

Dunk Surprisingly solid noise made by a badger against the bonnet of an oncoming Toyota.

Attenburial Place where a driver has buried a dead badger.

Digiblip The half-second pause between picking up a remote for a DVD player and knowing where to point it.

Noeldorado The tabloid headline Noel Edmonds imagines appearing above a story about the new luxury house and gardens he's just bought on the back of the success of *Deal or No Deal*.

Blue zingerman The man who writes David Cameron's prepared one-liners.

Boistercutter Perfectly pleasant individual who turns out to be a self-harmer.

Crust dust Mess on a table caused by breadsticks.

Letdown A shop that looks open but, when you get to it, turns out to have been lying empty for four months.

Sluts Akimbo All the tabloid headlines a trainee journalist has come up with but never yet had the chance to use.

Lackland A country you will never visit. For example, Benin.

A free guide to everything in life: a cut-out-and-keep wall chart of useful information you will need for a number of things that could arise at various moments

Interesting facts to drop into conversation:

- 'Smack My Bitch Up' was written for Lassie.

- The word 'boompsadaisy' was originally the name given to a type of manure worn by farmers on their eighteenth birthday.
- Kent is home to an astonishing eleven boffins.
- 'Thrace' means running a race for a third time because of two false starts.
- Leonard Cohen's song 'Bird On The Wire' was actually written for a wire.
- The world's smallest ladder is only eighteen feet high.
- There is a bonsai rainforest in a house in Brazil.
- It takes a million red ants thirty-six hours to change a video.
- In nuclear physics, a protino is formed by the coming together of a positive ion and Tina Turner. So far it has never happened.
- If you find yourself trapped in a room with Michael Winner and all exits are blocked, it's perfectly legal to kill him.

The slang expression most likely to become commonplace in the next twelve months: 'Gadzooks, you tit.'

Things to say if you are the ringmaster of a circus:

- Tonight you will believe a crow can fly.
- Tremble at David Mellor, the human freak.
- Who's that eating bread? Why it's Dan, the human man.
- Please welcome Roberto, a man who can fart ringtones.
- Cower in fear as you watch the tightrope being walked by our death-defying ants.
- Tonight you'll believe a man can flap.
- And now here they come, they were all born out of wedlock, it's the Four Tumbling Bastards.
- Marvel at Derek the Colourblind Clown – he makes his collapsible car go through a red light.
- Roll up, roll up, try laying Stan, the Human Egg.
- Is that the circus ring bending away at the edge? No, it's Luke Sorba, the human camber.
- Applause, please, for the world's flattest man.

- Here is Déjà Lou, the memory man who remembers things he can't quite put his finger on.

Useful dates for your diary:

- 14 March is a Cockney Day of Rest.
- 16 October is the anniversary of the signing of the treaty between France, Germany and Denise van Outen.
- Remember that on 12 October all taxis go back a mile.
- Monday, 12 May, is a bank holiday for the Living Dead.

Slogans for countries, to be erected at arrivals sections of international airports:

- Welcome to the USA: Home of the World's Ugliest Backsides.
- Chad: Birthplace of Children's Toys.
- Great Britain Welcomes Careful Terrorists.
- You are entering Lebanon: soon to be the most peaceful country in the Middle East.
- Fancy A 'New Finland'? Welcome to Newfoundland.

- Welcome to Colombia: Birthplace of the World's Dearest Defender.
- Come to Britain and Find Out if Simon Schama's a Liar.

Things to say if you are asked to supply the commentary to a wildlife documentary:

- The junkbird attracts the attention of its prospective mate by opening wide a tail-fan of feathers spelling out, 'You have already won a prize.'
- Betty and Bobby Muskel have, for forty years, been painstakingly charting the movements of this tiny nest of starlings, which they're going to use now as bait to attract that fantastic alligator.
- The male salamander playfully attracts the female with his colourful prick.
- And so the elephant, this beautiful giant of nature, returns, like many elephants before him, to this, the elephants' gymnasium. Here, elephants come all winter to lose weight.
- Suddenly the alligator is depressed because it's just realised it's got a big nose.
- The salmon, programmed to return to its spawning ground, flips itself out of the water and books a cheap flight on the Internet. However, danger lurks on the flight itself, as the salmon is cooked and served up to business-class passengers. But even then its determination is unbounded. It lodges one of its bones in a business-class pas-

senger's throat, forcing the plane to land at the nearest airport, which happens to be at Salmon International, the airport for all returning salmon, where it lays its eggs, then sends them in a taxi to the river at the top of a hill.

Fresh lyrics to add to Paul Simon's song '50 Ways to Leave Your Lover' (should you be required to add further ways to leave your lover in addition to the four he mentions):

- Hire a contract killer, Mrs Miller.
 - Bury her alive, Clive.
 - Cut off your knackers, Alastair.
 - Have sex with a mango, Jango.
 - Push her off a cliff, Cliff.
 - Simply hide, Clyde.
 - Go to Relate, Kate.
 - Talk it all through rationally so that nothing's left unresolved when you leave, Steve.
 - Change your name to Paul, Simon.
-

MRSA is so old hat

For those of you thinking of falling ill, here's a handy cut-out-and-keep guide to current hospital superbugs.

Amphylactic Syniaiasis A new bug that lactates a gallon of milk into each of your sinuses, causing the nose to spasm and the eyes to boil slightly. Very painful and only curable by taking two hundred garlic pellets packed into a cluster-bomb.

Tweaky-leaky One-inch bug shaped like the end of a Phillips screwdriver that punches small holes out of your bladder, then crawls out of you so it can go and get a really good view of you suffering from what it's done.

Thespopractic Tremens Small bug that makes you think you're renowned method actor Daniel Day-Lewis. Normally fatal, especially if the real Daniel Day-Lewis is preparing to play the part of someone who's dying. The only known cure is to form a production company that raises enough capital to fund a project in which Daniel Day-Lewis plays the part of someone who is cured of a superbug.

Phlegmationis Vastens A fourteen-inch superbug that literally spits on your grave. Only worth worrying about if you have a fatal illness (see all of the above).

The Top Ten funny virals found on the Internet

1. Footage of three men in Toronto dressed as rabbits, daring each other to sit on the highway and stare at the headlights of oncoming traffic.
 2. Footage of attack on Twin Towers with voice-over saying the bodies are falling out the building to form the words 'Jews Are Behind This.'
 3. Clip of Barack Obama bending down, re-edited to make it look like he's standing up.
 4. A girl in New Delhi singing 'Smells Like Teen Spirit' into a hairdryer, while the sound of her parents laughing can be heard behind the camera.
 5. Local news footage of a small girl losing control of a bobsleigh and sliding into a tornado.
 6. Amateur footage of a clown having a heart-attack.
 7. Bill Gates's sex tape.
 8. US Marines in Iraq shooting at what they think is a group of insurgents only to find it was a very rare chicken.
 9. Homecam footage of two drunk fifteen-year-olds banging their heads on a wastepaper basket in time to *Torchwood's* theme tune.
 10. A priest wearing just underpants, smearing himself in butter, sticking communion wafers all over himself, rushing into his church and shouting, 'Body of Christ,' as he hurls himself at his congregation.
-

Dictupdate

A few more entries for my ever-expanding dictionary of modern usage.

Nanopology A newspaper retraction less than one-sixteenth of the size of the original untrue story.

Projustination Vain attempt to make a delay seem shorter than it actually is by placing the word 'just' in front of it. For example: 'Apologies for the delay in disembarking. I'm assured by air-traffic control we'll be ready to open the doors and let you off in just a couple of days.'

Chloribaking The practice of setting the temperature of swimming-pool changing rooms at an unfeasibly high level.

Quaver fluid Saliva collected from a clarinet after ten minutes' playing.

Guff scattling Art of expanding a political speech by repeatedly using the phrase 'the challenges ahead'.

Diamond presentation Thick jumper with geometric pattern worn by businessmen at home on weekends.

Judignoramus A high court judge who's never heard of the Arctic Monkeys.

Rabblechiselling The ability of the central character in a drama to push to the front of a densely packed crowd of three hundred.

Guinnessassin A very jolly middle-aged man who turns out to have been a terrorist.

Kirstadonia Proposed economic trade zone controlled by the Kirstys Wark, Lang and Young.

Twathollering The over-the-top cheering a fringe candidate in a parliamentary by-election gives when his total of twenty-two votes is read out.

Twatrospection The prolonged period of self-doubt a fringe candidate in a parliamentary by-election undergoes when his over-the-top cheer at his pathetic result is met by stony silence from the rest of the crowd in the room, each one of whom has selflessly given many years of active service to the cause of bettering the social plight of local constituents and who sees no cause to celebrate the denigration of the democratic ideal with the juvenile bleatings of him and his large, and quite ugly, purple hat.

Salmanela The whining of a disappointed Booker prize nominee.

Retrotopicalism Tendency for the central character in a drama to read the back page of a newspaper, the front page of which contains a large headline about him.

Sunnymoon Short period between a government medical officer saying everything is OK and the arrival of proof that it's not.

Bi-husbandrist Man who has two families, neither of which is aware of the other.

Toss jockey A person who can use the phrase 'branding' in everyday conversation without any display of self-consciousness.

Noelimony Yearly income Noël Edmonds derives from taking people to court.

Episcodelia The sudden rush of pleasure derived from knocking a bishop's hat off.

Newsikinesis Ability of a central character in a drama to know in advance what a major television news item about her will contain, so that she need not watch all of it but instead switch off halfway through the opening headline.

Gielgud Meridian, the The point in a theatrical production when you realise you've wasted forty-five pounds.

Creepchart A map of the soft entry points to Noel Edmonds's house.

Erminevitability The state of knowing that the man appointed by the government to launch an inquiry into

the sale of political honours for money will himself one day be given an honour.

Bin Round-up

Household refuse must now be sorted and allocated to the following bins:

1. Blue bin: any glasswear and plastic packaging that has been in a room while someone has shouted.
2. Pink bin: small objects bought in France.
3. Yellow bin: train tickets and cheese (apart from French cheese; see above).
4. Large purple cylinder: small purple cylinders.
5. Grey bin: fridge magnets and relatives' ashes.
6. Average-sized orange bins: sandcastles, monacles, old stadiums, shadows, books of Chinese proverbs, coriander, video recordings of *Later . . . with Jools Holland*, anything with blood and fingerprints on it that has to be got rid of quickly.
7. Small lilac bin: blue, pink and yellow bins.
8. Fifteen-foot-thick, lead-lined, sealed metal boxes buried 150 metres underground: the London Olympic logo.
9. Tall red bins: poems about the futility of war and giblets (collected once a year, on Thursday).
10. For any paper, brown-glass bottles, children's clothing and organic matter, please lie in the middle of the road holding the items. A lorry will come by at some time in the week. As it passes

over you, please force open one of the flaps on the underside of the vehicle and hurl the refuse in. Please note: the lorry will not stop and items bigger than a chair will be too big and fall back on your face.

11. White bins: sinister stuff and cartons.
-

Life: A Road Map. Being a collection of miscellaneous interesting and useful facts to help you through the month

Leisure

Recently opened: the Holy Give-way Sign of Egham. A new religious relic. According to the Church, if you give way at the sign on three successive Fridays, anyone knocked over by your car will go straight to Heaven.

The Freelance Museum in Caldecote: a whole history of the short-term contract; includes many short-term contracts in glass cases.

Be sure to visit the ancient monastery in Brent Cross. Excellent tourist facilities, including tea room, international food hall, Currys, River Island, Boots, eighty-nine other shopping outlets and parking facilities for 20,000 cars. No monastery.

Dads can now take their kids to see Barney's Grave at the top of Selfridges, where they can spit on it.

Amazing Facts

Little Miss Muffet ran away because she noticed that the spider that had sat down beside her was in fact a tiny scrum.

Archaeologists in Piedmont recently unearthed the remains of an early Roman celebrity, later confirmed by discovering, twelve feet away, the skeleton of its stalker.

Famous Last Words

'I did not interfere with teenage boys, or may God strike me dead.' (Jonathan King)

'Right, there are two doors. One marked "café" and one marked "leopards". I think he said the toilets were through the door marked "leopards".' (Anon.)

New Video Releases

Sparks' Park Sparks: the pop group Sparks introduce video footage of American fires started by faulty wiring that go on to burn down parks.

Michael Palin's *The World's Five Funniest Deserts*.

David Starkey's *The World's Worst Wives of Henry VIII* and *The World's Funniest Reign of Elizabeth I*.

Discontinued as a result of poor sales: Anne Robinson's follow-up to her *Weakest Link* video, *You're the Second Weakest Link: Can You Stay A Bit Longer?*

Cinema Prequels

Hollywood sources reveal that plans are afoot to release the following prequels to highly successful films: *I've Just Met An Axe Murderer and He's Really Nice*; *The Milagro Beanfield Argument*; *Patch of Grass* (the prequel to *Shallow Grave*); *The Saddling-up of the Light Brigade*.

New Ways of Making Zoos More Humane to Animals

1. Put an end to the practice of allowing children to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear.
 2. Cheer the animals up by legislating for all companies to test cosmetics on zoo-keepers.
 3. Give the animals more to do at night, with small bistros or ten-pin bowling centres hung from the cage for them to swing on.
-

Dream Charts

I invited people to send in their dreams for publication. The best and, indeed, only ones so far are these:

1. 'I dream that I am riding a horse at Royal Ascot, but the prize is my own head. I don't know what to do. I really want to win because that's the only way I'm going to earn enough money to get to Hastings, where I've got to take some taps back to Damon Albarn's dad, but then if I do win, I'll be beheaded. In the end, I win, but no one beheads me because they're all distracted by the Internet being on fire.'

2. 'I dream that the new Olympic logo gives me a succession of epileptic fits. However, the rate of fits is such that each one is a quarter of a second long and they recur with a frequency of one fit every half-second. What this means is that to everyone else I look like a strobe effect, which in turn causes other people with epilepsy to have a fit. Soon the whole country is fitting and from space Great Britain looks like a flashing logo, which causes the occupants of the Space Shuttle to crash, resulting in millions of journalists all over the world using a lot of flash photography.'
3. 'I dream I'm a political adviser to the best political party in the country, and their leader gives me three hundred thousand pounds to come up with a campaign slogan and I unveil a green banner saying "THE TIME FOR PREVARICATING IS NEARLY OVER", which I think is good but by then I'm a snail so anything green is good.'
4. Gordon Brown writes: 'I dream of a Britain where opportunity and investment in our future go hand in hand with help for the less well-off, but I'm only wearing a vest.'
5. 'I dream that I'm fighting in the Somme during the First World War. The British and German soldiers are bombing bits out of each other, but

then suddenly the sun comes out. It's the middle of June. The sound of gunfire stops and a strawberry is lobbed into our trench, followed by another, and another, then a punnet. Me and my troops think for a second and then dig out some cream, which we lob back over to the Hun. Soon, we all come out, and for one day we and the Germans have a garden party in the Somme. We like it so much we resolve to carry on fighting for as long as possible so we can have another party the same time next year.'

6. 'I dream that Richard Dawkins is furious when he hears Allah's been given an OBE.'
7. 'I dream that God has been asked to stand down because he's too old. There is an outcry: people think the Holy Trinity has become ageist. The Son and the Holy Ghost call a press conference, saying, "God the Almighty Father has made a gigantic contribution to the Holy Trinity over the years, but long-running religious systems have to be refreshed periodically and we are no exception." God the Father is said to be "in discussions" about other projects, including a post as presenter on al-Jazeera, but in the end he lines up with US private equity firm Kohlberg Kravis Roberts, which mounts a leveraged buy-out of the Trinity, putting God back in as head, but

replacing the Messiah and the Holy Ghost with the brothers Peter and Christopher Hitchens.'

8. 'I dream I go joyriding in Hoxton with Ken Hom. He's more irritating than I thought he'd be.'
-

If nothing is what it seems, are you sure this page is real?

As I walked out the other morning, I was hit by a suspicion that the day was completely false.

It started when I bought a newspaper and found out that British Airways had been fined for view-fixing their flights. The BA chairman appeared on the front page apologising to his customers. He admitted that quite a lot of the holidays people had been on were false. The planes never took off. Passengers went on board and then British Airways staff outside would run past the windows holding cardboard clouds and smaller toy planes, while bashing the sides of the fuselage with logs to simulate turbulence.

At 'touch down', the passengers would be shepherded out through the back kitchens of a busy pizzeria to make them think they had arrived somewhere warm, then taken to a staff member's house plastered with Spanish wallpaper. 'I really didn't know any of this was going on,' said the chairman, 'so imagine how I feel.'

Returning home, I turned on the television to watch a documentary called *Watch a Man Die for Real*, in which filmed footage of a man dying was shown to

moving music written by composer Bill Bailey. But, as the programme progressed, I grew suspicious. At what was advertised as the 'actual point of actual death, really', the camera started moving closer to the man and I could see it had clearly cut to actor James Bolam going, 'Woooagh!'

I was puzzled. There was nothing in the TV listings about this being a film of the death of James Bolam and when I rang the ITV switchboard for clarification, they went all quiet. Eventually they rang back and said, 'No, it was definitely footage of someone dying. You must have got signal interference at that point, which maybe made the picture look like it was just James Bolam . . .'

A long pause.

'Yes, quite a lot of people got that, apparently,' she said. She then said, 'James Bolam's very popular,' and put the phone down.

I didn't know what to do. Who to turn to? My perception of reality was questionable. Was I mad? I went out for a walk in the park. That was when the incident with the bird noises started. I could see a tree full of pigeons and heard cooing noises come from the branches. Then a dog barked and the pigeons all took off. Yet I was sure the cooing still came from the branches a full half-second after the birds had flown.

Later, I mentioned it to the park-keeper and he went quiet. I asked him why and he pulled me inside his hut and said, 'Promise me you'll tell no one, but we transmit the bird noises from tiny speakers sewn into the leaves. We have a computerised network of speakers

dotted all over the country controlled from a centralised bunker underneath Jodrell Bank. We follow flocks of birds around, then co-ordinate squawking, cooing and tweets from designated leaf-hailers nearby. The birds are silent, always have been. Everybody who works in park-keeping has known that for years. No bird has ever been heard to make a noise. But the public wants bird noise, so we give it to them. The Jodrell Bank bunker is paid for by fines we collect from people dropping litter. Please don't let on. The media would have a field day.'

I went home and rang the media. I asked to be put through to their reality correspondent. I said to her, 'Everything's made up. Reality is all a con. We're being edited to make it look like we're far more interesting than we actually are.'

She said, 'I know.' I asked her to explain, and she said, 'Don't tell anyone, but we ran out of stories five years ago. So now we encourage other people to make things up and falsify reality so people can report them to us and we can use it as a story.' I asked her if she was making this up and she said, 'I don't know.'

I put the phone down and ran out of the house. I wanted to report this story but didn't know who to report it to. Instead I decided to withdraw from the real world until I was completely satisfied it was no longer false. I found the location of a sensory-deprivation tank somewhere on the outskirts of the city and I booked myself in for a twenty-four-hour session.

Soon I was half submerged in a heavily salted tank of water, seeing and feeling nothing and hearing only the

sound of my thoughts and the noise of my breathing. However, in a return of suspicion, I removed my eye mask and looked across. I noted that two tubes were connected to my ears and ran back to a small window in the tank. Behind it there were two men with some electronic equipment. One was playing a tape marked 'Breathing Sounds'. The other man loaded a CD from a box marked 'More Thoughts' and gave me the thumbs-up. I suddenly thought everything was all right.

Top five names for massive prisons

Crook Cathedral

Buggerplatz

Her Majesty's Pleasure Castle

Chessington World of Remand

Slopping Centre

Get those tomatoes ready: it's time for oaths of allegiance

Findings of a report into how best to celebrate Britishness

1. National Build-them-up-only-to-knock-them-down Day. An annual celebration of the British genius for stoking up the fame of individuals so they can be taken down a peg or two all the more humiliatingly. Children around the country are dressed up as Kate Moss, Sir Alex Ferguson and Natasha Kaplinsky, then pelted with over-fermented fruit.

2. Train-crash Friday. Weekly memorial to all the victims of public-transport disasters of the past and of years to come. (Please note: some trains will be running to a bank-holiday timetable on these days on some routes. Which routes and which trains have not yet been agreed, but it's thought that any potential confusion still outweighs the risks.)
3. Disappointing sports days. All schools will be taught how to cope with the constant years of disappointment bordering on anger generated by following our national sports teams. This will be effected by holding annual sports days in which the best competitors will be randomly asked not to do quite so well as everyone had hoped.
4. Screaming headline competitions. A fresh take on the tradition of having a town crier. Each city, town or village will elect a member of the public to be their headline screamer. They will stand in a public place every morning and shout out sensationalist headlines in a tabloid fashion, such as 'NOW MADONNA ADOPTS AFRICAN BISHOP!' or 'ALL MPS MUST SHOW US PICTURES OF THEIR ARSES!' The role of headline screamer will go to whichever member of the local community can most convincingly scream an exclamation mark.

5. Swearing of oath of allegiance. This would normally be to the Queen, but in recognising that Britain is now a diverse nation, members of the public will be given the chance to swear an oath of allegiance to a member of the Royal Family of their choice. For example, boys or drunks can swear to Prince Harry, while those who disagree with the Royal Family in principle but who admire one or two of them for the work they do can swear an oath of allegiance to Zara Phillips.

Royal oath of allegiance: special opt-outs

Scotland. Scots uncomfortable with swearing allegiance to the Queen can cite 'reasonable grounds for not expressing loyalty to rich English bastards' and pledge allegiance to a rich Scottish bastard instead, namely Sean Connery. Those taking the oath will be asked to sound like Sean Connery as they say it. This can be done by changing all *s* sounds to *ssch*, as in, 'Being of sschound mind and dissschposschisschion, I pledsssche allegianscchee to my Sssschkottisssh sschoil.' Words like 'sschancity' and 'sschucsschesschful' will be added just for fun.

Mohamed al-Fayed. He will recite the standard oath of loyalty to the Queen but will be permitted to add the words 'fooking', 'fugging', 'murderer' and 'bitch' at any point.

Foreign nationals. Though not expected to pledge allegiance to the Queen, foreign nationals will be expected to pledge allegiance to Mr Bean.

Swearing an oath of allegiance to God, Queen and country involves four things I have some difficulty with, namely God, Queen, country and swearing. I'm not really a swearer. My favourite swear word is 'tits', which I use very infrequently.

I really like the idea of God. The type of soot-souled rationalists such as Richard Dawkins who want to reduce all our waking experience to mere ascertainable facts seem to me like the sort of party poopers who at the start of a game of musical chairs would stand up and shout, 'This really isn't going to work. There's one less chair than there are people.'

Rationalists are like blocks of cement. Useful that they're there, but you don't really want to play with them. The fact is that if you try taking away irrationality from human experience, you're not left with much experience at all. Football matches, being simply expensive afternoons spent in the cold to watch twenty fashion models and two goalkeepers kick a bladder around to everyone's faint disappointment, are entirely irrational. As are novels, ballet, independent cinema, saluting, clapping at the end of a concert, wedding ceremonies, maypole dancing, steam fairs, stamp collecting, tiaras, YouTubing videos of yourself setting fire to a cat, and ties. Yet all of these things, apart from maypole dancing, would make the world a far less interesting place than it is now if they disappeared.

A lot of our behaviour is dictated by convention, a lot of convention is set by tradition and most tradition has nothing to justify itself other than the fact of its own very long existence. The world we live in and the one we want simply don't make any real sense. And God, or religion, is just one more of those nonsensical, probably completely potty ideas that we construct to jolly up our existence. So I'm all for God in principle; where I quibble is with the practice. I can't kneel, pray, sing or hold hands without feeling silly, in the same way that I couldn't chant at a football match or slash an enemy supporter's face without feeling silly.

Next comes Queen and country. The monarchy is completely irrational, of course. Centuries ago, when everyone believed that the merest touch of a king's sock could cure you of amputation, it was completely irrational. And that's still not as irrational as it is now, in that once a monarch's divine powers and lineage have been stripped away, there is literally nothing left.

To take seriously, for example, the argument that once the Queen dies we should skip a generation and make William king is to ignore the very point of kingliness in that you inherit it. To say we should skip a generation is like saying we should now call all lemons strawberries.

And so I'm left with country. I'm more than happy to list everything I like about Britain and Britishness, but one of the things that I like above all is its intellectual messiness. The fact that we don't really have a constitution, so how the country runs itself has sort of built up over centuries of sort of working it out, and the fact that

we don't even know what the official name of our country is are all real plus points to me since they make the British Isles, or the United Kingdom, or Great Britain a two-fingered rejoinder to any institution that demands order and containment and rationalism.

Which is why pledging allegiance in the form of an oath seems so, well, unBritish. Or, indeed, United Kingdomish.

Dictionary of Modern Expressions

I've discovered fresh areas of modern experience that require a word. Here are those new words:

Burgundygulp The sensation you experience the day before you leave on holiday when you realise your child's passport runs out tomorrow.

Knee'en The day after a heatwave, in which men still wear short trousers even though the temperature's plummeted and snow may be on the way.

Lavanoia The welter of poisonous thoughts that swirl round your head when you see two laughing men coming out of a public lavatory.

Trampolisis A nervous syndrome associated with having to stay in all day to await the arrival of a trampoline.

Blonk An inconsequential piece of sculpture placed in the lobby of a refurbished town hall.

I'm guilty, but I'm not to blame

Once, during a petrol shortage, I found myself queuing for petrol, because I had a genuinely empty tank. However, I was stuck behind a fleet of other cars all driven by owners who clearly were scared of shortages because they only had on average about sixteen seconds' worth of tank that needed filling; I had plenty of time to reflect on the nature of guilt.

Here I was, not panic-buying but actually buying, yet the truth was I'd let my tank get so low because I was frightened of looking like someone who was convinced that if they didn't have their tank contents continually slopping out of the side of their car they would in some way die. So I didn't go and fill up until I absolutely had to, and let my tank get so empty that the chances of my dying on a car journey were actually increased, since any journey I made was liable to end with my car suddenly coming to a halt in the middle of a motorway.

We hear a lot about fear of crime, but not enough about fear of looking like you're guilty. The two may be linked. The police tell us crime is down but our fear of it is up. This fear generates mental, but unreal, images of more criminals than there actually are. Since we now collectively postulate the existence of more criminals than there are crimes, to make ourselves not seem totally mad we also conclude that some of us must make up the as-yet-undetected criminal fraternity. Since we don't know exactly who these people may be, there's a part of us that worries it could possibly be us. Nervous that we're secretly guilty of something, even though we don't know

of what, we do our best to hide our possible shame. And so an endemic fear of coming over as suspicious or in any way strange hangs over us like a damp pudding. In fact, this fear spreads just as we're told that guilt is ridiculously old-fashioned. Mitigating circumstances for any kind of behaviour are on the increase while politicians and major institutions have perfected a language of non-culpability.

So if a statesman wants to apologise for, say, calling all Brummies 'cack-headed steampots', he or she will then utter an apology that still absolves themselves from blame. A statement will be issued apologising for any offence that people might have taken at the words, thus slyly pinning the blame on others for being so hypersensitive in the first place rather on the politician for being an elected dick.

This eradication of personal blame reached its zenith when, during the last US election season, a clearly lying Hillary Clinton said she merely 'misspoke' in saying she once ran for cover under Bosnian sniper fire when, in fact, video footage showed her clearly walking around with her daughter and kissing people.

'Misspeaking' is a new stage in the evolution of public language into a thing in which words have no objective meaning or moral resonance in themselves, but can be whatever the speaker intends them to be.

Hillary Clinton is the biggest liar in the history of politics, a self-confessed Holocaust-denier and the abductor of at least seventeen children, but she can't now take legal action against me for mentioning this because I simply miswrote. I meant to write, 'I like her very much,' but accidentally didn't.

I could go on to say that David Miliband was created in a laboratory by taking the stem-cell DNA of a woman and injecting it into the eggs of a pony, or that Kirsty Young likes to unwind in the evening by dancing naked with a vacuum-cleaner as she hoovers up scuttling hamsters she breeds for the purpose, and neither of them can touch me for it since all I did was misfact-check this sentence.

Misdoing anything opens up a breach in ethics that can never be closed. It removes culpability from any distortion and makes anything, no matter how heinous, a complete accident. A drunk driver who crashes a car into someone can now apologise for miscounting his alcohol intake before going on to misdrive into someone he mistook for a road. I can happily write back to my bank and explain that I've merely misdefaulted, and a thug can explain in court that he simply misstabbed.

Diabolical Dubai

When the QE2 was decommissioned and stopped sailing, it was taken off to become a floating hotel in Dubai. What is it about Dubai that has suddenly made it the final repository of everything? Is Dubai a new metaphor for death? In the same way that people used to 'go to meet their maker', will they now be marketed as 'an exciting new property in Dubai'?

Dubai has always sounded a strange land. I don't think it actually existed until about ten years ago, when it suddenly emerged from nowhere as the name of a place lots of people went to because of its amazing theme parks that had real snow in the desert and bar staff made out of

water. In that time, it's become a combination of a last resting place for the ancients and a wonderful playground for the young at heart. That makes it something of an amalgam of Narnia and the Grey Havens in *Lord of the Rings*.

And now Dubai has acquired a further mystical characteristic, which is its ability to form land out of nothing. Hardly a week goes by without a newspaper item describing a fabulous set of artificial islands Dubai has just created off its mainland, gathered in the sea to form the shape of a palm tree, map of the world, Dick Cheney's face or a huge cock and balls.

Because of all its artificial creations, Dubai now has one of the largest shorelines in the world. It was once a tiny speck and now it's emerging as possibly the next superpower but one. They say that at the Big Bang the universe expanded out of a tiny dot of matter in less than a millisecond: that's still a slower growth rate than Dubai.

This strange ability to conquer the elements gives the country a certain diabolical quality that scares me. People who come back from Dubai and who swear by the amazing hotels where there are flying concierges and escalators that do all your shopping for you have a look in their eyes that makes them seem like they've been tampered with. That's why I now want to know what Brown's and Obama's policies are on Dubai.

Gordon Brown is an octopus

Imagine what it must be like for an octopus when it's asked to choose between left and right. Every fibre in its

eight tentacles will be trying to tell you the choice you've given it is madly simplistic. For humans, though, minor shades of left and rightness are not normally things you have to contend with. Stark binary choices are so much easier to deal with.

But what if it was perfectly natural to see more than two choices at all times? Say there was a third choice for everything and that choice not merely halfway between the first two but a completely new, third concept of its own? Since these third concepts don't exist in our world, I'll have to give them invented names, but imagine all our stories were fundamentally about heroes having to choose between Good and Evil and Hadlington. Or a company chairwoman knowing that her next big business decision will make all the difference between Success or Failure or Mapcockery. Suddenly life seems much more complicated.

Perhaps it's because we've evolved into a species that likes to boil things down to two clear, straight choices that we've managed to sprint ahead in evolutionary terms, inventing things like castles and horticulture, while the octopus is still stuck at trying not to look puzzled at a rock. Yet in all the celebrations or commiserations of Gordon Brown's time as prime minister and New Labour's years in charge of everything, nobody has pointed out that maybe much of their misery has been brought about by the simple fact that when someone has had power for a very long time they start to think like an octopus. They know too much, have seen too much and have tried too much.

When one surveys all the impossible no-go areas in front of one – the departments that never deliver, the crazy

woman on the third floor who should have been sectioned five years ago, the impossibility of selling a realistic solution to the whingeing growbags that are the British public – it's no wonder that the brain turns to sponge while the body tries to grow more arms to deal with the multiplicity of options available.

I read that Brown was annoyed by the Tories' recent pledge to reform inheritance tax because he'd asked the Treasury to look into it and the Treasury had told him it was far too complicated. This is the view of the octopus. You can't offer 'change' or 'a fresh start' or 'a better future' and mean it because you're a freak with perspective who can now see there are at least seven other possible options to the one you'd like to suggest.

Once the octopoidal perspective dominates your every thought, there's no return to normality and you will be overtaken by your opponent. He is a dolphin, sleek and smooth, whose clicks and tricks delight the audience and whose freedom from knowledge leaves him with a permanent smile on his face that more and more of us find endearing, if a bit wet.

Don't call me, I'll be wrapped up

So there I was, walking along the road one grey summer morning, when I espied a man, somewhat cheerless of disposition, his wife and children stringing along, all carrying boxes and an enormous amount of bubble wrap. 'We've sold the car,' said the man, to my curious look. 'Bloody stupid idea. We should have sold it after we carried everything to the storage place, not before. But

we needed the money to pay for the storage place.' His four children looked at the ground, defeated by the unavoidable economics.

'I take it you're going to the storage place?' I said, trying to be friendly. 'D'you need any help?'

'We'd love some,' said his wife, and I could tell from her husband's expression that he had been too embarrassed to ask but was now relieved his face's sullen begs were being answered.

'OK, I'll bring the car round and we can load up.'

I came back with my seven-seater, folded the rear seats down and helped them load their boxes. 'Storing your stuff while you find somewhere smaller?' I asked, at the point where I realised we hadn't said anything for ten or so minutes together and something needed to be said.

'Sort of,' replied the man. He glanced at his wife, who nodded back. He turned to me and, staring at my nose, said, 'We were going to put all our things into storage. Then we looked at the great rates they were offering and decided it would be cheaper if we went into storage as well.'

'What d'you mean?' I asked, slightly trembling.

'It's fine,' said his wife. 'We're putting all our furniture into boxes and storing them in one unit. Then we'll box me, Tom and the kids up and get someone,' she looked at me, 'to put us in a unit next to it.' She handed me some of the bubble wrap.

I've never had my gob smacked before so don't know what it feels like, but I'm pretty sure it feels like how I felt just then. 'But you are people,' I squawked. 'You've got heads and legs and everything. You can't just wrap yourselves up.'

'Think you're clever, do you?' said Tom, the man. 'Not so clever you haven't missed the most brilliant money-saving scheme to stare you in the face. Sod mortgages and car insurance. Sod food bills and cavity-wall insulation and buying too many lemons every week. Tell electricity and petrol and lettuce to take a flying frig. Pizzas and milk and batteries and potatoes can all go have a running crap. Plasma screens with sport, and biscuits with raisins. Dreck. All of it. Toilet Duck and Vimto, all we spend on plates and flannels and marzipan and hammers and shoes. Why should all this cruddy dust suck at my purse? For the price of twenty rolls of bubble wrap and a hundred quid a month for two storage units, me, Judy and the kids are packaged and contented until everything outside sorts itself out.'

I drove Judy, Tom and the children to a storage warehouse in the suburbs. I guessed they were having a collective nervous breakdown and thought the kindest thing to do was follow their whims to the point at which they could see they had become unsustainable. If I took them to the storage place, there'd come a point where they would realise they couldn't just wrap each other up and forget about themselves.

As I drove up, I could see other families arriving, their children all carrying unfeasible amounts of bubble wrap. Some had painted their own cardboard. The place had a carnival feel to it, but a carnival at which people hurl themselves down a log-flume without sitting on a log first. Everyone was smiling, but I could see the little tremors behind their eyes. I had to stop this.

I went over to the main office. A sign said, 'Pounds

pounds pounds pounds OFF FAMILIES!!!' A man was taking money. 'This is appalling,' I said.

He smiled and asked me to look at how happy everyone was. 'You want to take this one positive away from them?' he said. 'They've come up with a solution and it's brought them relief. You feel qualified to tell them they're wrong?'

I looked round. A father was Sellotaping his son into an enormous Tupperware crate. A mother had wrapped herself in newspaper and masking tape, leaving a hand free to seal up a cardboard box from the inside. I saw an older brother push a younger brother into a poster tube. A girl was wrapping her hamster in red paper. A boy was individually wrapping his socks and Top Trumps cards. A family of twenty-six were rolling a dice to see who would get to go in the crate that hadn't originally been used to carry vegetables. And all of them were smiling.

That was what I remembered most: each of them was perfectly happy to undergo total packaging. I tried pulling them out, but the nearer I got, the more their smiles made sense. I took my decision, tore off a corner of wrapping paper and wrote down everything you're reading now. I've found a box I like, and Tom has agreed to seal the top. If you read this, don't open me up unless you're absolutely sure things have got considerably better. Thanks.

Dictupdate

Two new additions to my dictionary of modern usage:

Tour de Freak Bearded man who spends all day dressed in Lycra cycling shorts.

Airovaulticity The total amount of time, labour and money spent on building a large, dark, empty room in an airport, three miles from the main departure lounge, that has two benches and a permanently closed check-in desk, and through which everyone walks on their way to and from the plane.

Your top secrets are safe with us

We reached a landmark in technology recently when the number of computers stolen or lost containing highly sensitive information about people's bank details exceeded for the first time the number of computers available for purchase in the high street. Nowadays, stolen or lost information is so commonplace that at most recycling centres next to the bins marked 'Green Glass' and 'Small Plastic' are fresh ones labelled 'Highly Sensitive Information.' My recycling centre has always tried to be more specific in its binning system so it now has dumping areas codified into specific bits of sensitive information: yellow bins are for 'Confidential Data on Memory Sticks that, If It Fell Into the Wrong Hands, Could Endanger Our Troops', while purple bins are for 'Missing CDs that Contain the Medical Records of All BBC1's Sports Presenters'.

The fact, though, is that, despite the mislaying of everything from the prime minister's PIN number to instructions on how to carry out a devastating anthrax attack on central London using just two bags of fertiliser,

nothing horrible has actually happened. All homeowners whose surnames have initial letters from M to P in Sunderland have not had their bank accounts systematically raided; nor have all families owning dogs called Charlie had their back doors broken down and pets burnt.

The truth is that all this sensitive information going missing is going missing on memory sticks and CDs – the very last things any of us look at. How many of us have returned from holidays with at least a thousand photographs of our family holding up yellow drinks but never get round to printing a single one of them?

How many of us have downloaded and burnt episodes of *Prison Break* on to DVDs that have piled up unwatched on top of unwatched but bought piles of *Prison Break*? Even if I had a pile of DVDs marked 'Embarrassing Footage of Cabinet Ministers Taken by CCTV Cameras at London Zoo' and a memory stick containing a folder marked 'Johnny Depp's Bank Details', I know I'd probably never get round to doing anything with them.

Instead, these and all the other extremely vital detritus that fills our living space will sink unwatched, unread and unattended on to the floor, crushed and pulped by the weight of all our other wastage until, over the millennia, it's broken down and fossilised. It's sobering to know that, many thousands of years from now, a tree will bloom in some rainforest formed partly out of the atoms of an abandoned and unread folder containing the exact time and location of the five-second period twice a week that Robert Mugabe doesn't have any security guards near him.

Meanwhile, the law of averages would dictate that not

just the good guys leave valuable information lying around in pubs. Somewhere in some Suffolk wine bar, fallen into a large basket inhabited by the landlord's Labrador, there's a CD with all the details, maps, codes, getaway-vehicle information and list of intended hostages-if-things-go-wrong of the biggest bank raid in history.

The chances are we'll find it not by scouring the county for clues but by putting up bins in recycling centres marked 'Criminals' Paperwork'.

My will

I bequeath to my children:

1. A death mask I've made of George Osborne.
2. My iBishop, a compact robot in a cassock containing up to 150,000 prayers.
3. The only statue in the world depicting a politician using a Ventolin inhaler.
4. A painting of Jeff Goldblum being held under water.
5. The spoon used by John Glenn the night before he went into space.
6. A thirteenth-century origami frog made from a copy of the Magna Carta.
7. A leatherbound set of fifteen volumes of Salman Rushdie's security expenses.
8. Part-ownership of the world's smallest quarry (five inches by three inches, half an inch deep, in Umbria).

9. A photograph of what it would look like if we all had little jet-packs on either side of our head instead of ears.
 10. A pair of shoes made from two of Francis Bacon's jowls.
-

An awful lot off my chest

There are many things I need to tell you about. For example:

- The day I decided to take up swaggering. I've always wanted to swagger like young people and Liam Gallagher. The ability to waddle from left to right while simultaneously walking forward is a special mark of confidence I could make use of. Luckily, I found a leaflet advertising night classes in swaggering at my local community college. I went along. It was full of people my age. They were all very nice. I didn't reach the end of the course but I heard that one of the nice people who did went on to stab someone.
- My plans to do a TV version of *The Archers*. I thought I'd cracked it when I came up with the idea of making it more like *Life on Mars*. The storyline would be that one of the Archers is hurt in a tractor accident, falls into a coma and wakes up as a cow in the seventies.

- The time I got worried about the sudden absence of filth at our local recycling centre. Usually, it was full to bursting, so much so that people began to complain about rubbish spilling out from the overfull bins and across into the children's playground. Then one day all the rubbish had gone. The area by the playground was spotless. The usual bins had disappeared. In its place was one small one. It looked empty. I peered into it. Near the bottom was a Black Hole. It was two centimetres thick and floating in mid-air. A sign outside the bin said, 'Empty your rubbish towards the Black Hole. Do not get too close.' I dropped in four empty milk containers. They quickly thinned out into a string of atoms and disappeared into the Black Hole. I jumped back, startled. A park caretaker nearby said, 'Don't worry. It'll be fine.' I looked down at my rubbish and most of it had gone. I looked up and the park caretaker was gone too. As was a bit of the park. I ran home. I found I was running a lot slower than I normally do.

- The time I opened a restaurant and spent ten thousand pounds getting a branding consultancy to help me decide the name. They wanted something beguiling, like THE MAN WHO MISTOOK HIS WIFE FOR A STARTER, which I rejected, or THE WEDDING CURSE, which I nearly went with, but then rejected. I decided to call it THE BOY AND MACHETE. No one came. I sacked the branding

firm (whose name was Big Brass Brand) and got in another one (called Marlyn Brand-O). I gave them twenty thousand pounds and they told me that my restaurant's name had to suggest exotic food with a feminine touch. They made me call the restaurant THE SIZZLED MAMMARY. Only one person came. He was a food inspector. He gave me a clean bill of health.

- The day everyone panicked because the newspapers were reporting that bureaucrats in Brussels were planning to abolish floors.
- The time crying became infectious. No one knows how it happened, but the sound of crying had mutated aurally so that it stimulated similar responses from the brains and vocal cords of people within five miles. At one point, 20 per cent of the population was constantly crying. Huw Edwards cried nightly on the *News*, even when just handing over to Robert Peston. The sound coming from Peterborough was unbearable. Steeplechasing was cancelled because it was too dangerous for jockeys to ride with tears in their eyes. Horses cried too, which didn't help. Bouncers outside nightclubs suddenly found themselves looking ineffectual, and there was a collapse in the bouncing industry. Meantime, genuinely depressed people got quite annoyed.

- The day I went to Ikea and saw a sign above an item of furniture, saying, 'This would make a great deathbed.' I bought it, but never sleep in it.
- The day the security services announced they would be combating terrorism by stopping it being terrifying. Using intense electronic surveillance techniques, they pick up a signal of a terrorist in the act of recording his suicide video. Combat teams then burst in and cover him with custard pies. The video is put up on YouTube.
- The day I came up with the idea that global warming could be stopped by getting every government in the world to invest in an enormous air-conditioning unit that would float in space. The unit would suck all the warm air out of the atmosphere and blow it at Jupiter. It would require an enormous amount of electricity, which would contribute to global warming, but that would be negated because the air-conditioner would cool everyone down. The only problem would be that if it ever broke we'd discover that the Earth's natural temperature had gone up by 30°C. However, I was assured by all the manufacturers that their air-conditioning units were reliable, so this was bound not to happen. I did foresee one problem, which was that in about three hundred years' time we would have to address the question of increased solar-system warming.

- The time the government announced it was bringing back the medieval code of chivalry. All young people had to promise to show largesse to everyone and destroy evil in all its monstrous forms. Young male school leavers had to pledge allegiance to a maiden. Not to be outflanked the opposition announced that, if elected, it would bring back duelling.
 - And the day it rained Pepsi.
-

An early draft of the future

High fuel costs and general hatred of their polluting effects make cars steadily fall out of favour. People start taking donkeys to work. Fights break out at various company headquarters over who's got the best spot to park their ass. Some radio stations report severe delays on Britain's roads due to 'sheer weight of droppings'.

Formula One reinvents itself by changing its rules. The aim is not now to drive the fastest but the most fuel-efficiently. Points are awarded to drivers who stay in second gear for most of the way round and keep under 40 m.p.h. Lewis Hamilton keeps doing well until the last lap, where he develops engine trouble and moves ahead of everyone else at 100 m.p.h. Kimi Räikkönen and Fernando Alonso car-share. Jenson Button wins the whole championship by deciding to walk.

The M25 is asphalted and pedestrianised. An enter-

prising stall owner wins the licence to set up a thirty-mile-long stall selling crêpes.

Heathrow puts speed bumps on its runways. Nasa announces plans to hitchhike to the Moon. The government says that the excessive amount of pedestrian droppings on Britain's streets is 'unacceptable'.

The motor industry gets more and more worthless. A free car is stapled to every front page of the *Mail on Sunday*. Eddie Stobart trucks are used as turkey farms.

I get more and more smug because I know nothing about cars and rejoice at the collapse of car culture. Then a team of scientists discovers that people who walk give off more methane talking about it all the time than people who drive cars. This only causes pedestrians to grumble more, which gives off further methane. The government imposes walking taxes. Pedestrian pressure groups plan protests by walking in large numbers on London's streets but abandon it when it's pointed out to them that it will just look like any other day in London. The government then imposes further punitive measures on pedestrians. Anyone seen walking is impounded, and some are crushed. One of them is Jenson Button.

Called to account

After a court ruling, I have been ordered to publish my expenses. My expenses for last week are:

1. Hawk: £145.37
2. Hawk training: £650
3. Three Jersey cows as hawk-prey: £3200

4. Purchase of balloons with face of Jersey cow on them: £23
5. Taxi to BBC TV studios for recording of *I'd Do Anything*: £17.54
6. Waiting time and return journey of taxi, while I go into BBC TV Centre and hold three balloons with cow heads on them near Andrew Lloyd Webber's face, then release hawk: £219.43, but worth every penny

I Only Know What I Believe

Some Notes Towards the Definition of an Advanced Fiscal Theory Towards a New Economic Order, a paper by E. M. L. de Wallace, Professor of Full Blown Economics, Findus College, Cambridge

Under the threat of war and looming environmental collapse, the markets have once again proved ineffectual and weedy. We need a new economic theory for these changing times and therefore I've spent the past hour intensively trying to come up with one. Where possible, I've attempted to simplify the language so that lay people as well as intellectuals can be impressed.

1. Economics at the start of the twenty-first century stands at some sort of threshold.
2. This threshold can be represented by the equation $3 = 3!$
3. The two traditional and contrasting schools of monetary thought, those of unbridled capitalism and dogmatically interventionist command economics, deserve to be shut down and all their

pupils expelled or given jobs driving tipper trucks in landfill sites in the summer. These economies don't work and lead mostly to distress.

4. Capitalism may have given us Canary Wharf and Madonna but it has also produced train crashes and British Telecom, which I'm still waiting for, four months on, to connect me to broadband. Social democracy may have given us hospitals but also invented legionnaires' disease. The means both of capitalism and social democracy lead to the same end, namely bankruptcies. The only difference being that in social democracies the bankruptcies are public, while under capitalism the bankruptcies are disguised as huge annual profits before the auditors are arrested.
5. The latter can be represented by the equation $(-2 = 50$ until the new tax year).
6. The new economics springboarding from the digital revolution offers a way forward, but a proper examination of the digital economy cannot take place until BT connects me to broadband.
7. The economics of agrarianism have also gone pear-shaped. Nowadays it costs a farmer £50,000 to fill a bottle of milk, which he then sells to Tesco for nothing. The cost comes down to £25,000 if the milk with which he fills that bottle has been bought from Tesco in the first place.
8. The farming industry has to diversify to survive.

For example, if a typical hill farmer were, say, to eliminate his dairy herd and instead write one novel a year about a forty-something white male divorcé looking after a child on his own, his losses would be wiped out almost immediately.

9. If an arable farmer were, say, to stop growing wheat and instead host an international summit on the future of the agrarian economy, he would make enough money from the delegates' laundry bill alone to buy a bread roll the size of a bus. If he wanted to.
10. The rural economy must learn from the digital revolution. The only money to be made on the Internet is from Britney Spears websites and pornography. If a sheep farmer, say, trained his dog to round sheep up in the shape of a pornographic image of Britney Spears, he would be able to charge £100 a go for helicopter rides.
11. The faltering urban economy can be regenerated by adopting more exciting retail mechanisms. I propose the expansion of the sale of goods at traffic-lights. If a manufacturing company, say, stood its employees at all the major traffic-lights of a city and sold not just flowers and newspapers but also insurance, vegetables, prams, houses, etc., and made sure it sequenced the functions properly, so that at one set of traffic-lights the driver buys some vegetables or a pram, drives off but hands over his money to someone else at the next traffic-lights, who then legs it to a third person at another set of traffic-lights, who

writes a receipt in time for when the driver reaches him, then it could be into some serious big money.

12. If BT calls round tomorrow, I won't be in but the key's under the mat.
 13. This can be represented by the equation $BT = M/K$.
-

Come on, Gordon and David – please get real

How real are we, exactly? If asked by a hypothetical person in the street to describe how real you think you are, would you describe yourself as completely real, only partly real or, like the hypothetical person in the street, not real at all?

Reality is all around us. For example, there's reality TV, which we're told is completely real. However, some experts suggest it might be contrived. But these could be false 'experts' played by actors funded by rival channels that specialise in drama. In the online 3D virtual world of *Second Life*, do they have their versions of reality shows? And when an avatar in *Second Life* sits down to watch *The Matrix*, does it disappear up its own bottom? And if it did, would it actually feel anything?

How real is what you do? How many of the photos you've taken in the past two years can you touch? When did you last caress one of your emails?

Meantime, in the real world, as people have more cosmetic surgery performed on them, their faces, breasts and buttocks are becoming less real. Some scientists are now

estimating the world is 30 per cent less real than it was a hundred years ago. In twenty years' time, we could be living in a world that's mostly spurious. Does that scare you? Or not really? I'm after your views. Here are some so far.

Phil Potts from Darlington writes:

Obesity. People worry about it, but I say it's a good thing. Each obese person takes up more space in the real world, so obesity is nature's way of resupplying the planet with reality. I don't see how my argument could possibly have any holes in it.

Gordon Brown from Britain writes:

I'm very grateful to be asked to take part in this important debate about how real things are. There are certain things that are quintessentially real. Pain, for example. But I do have my lighter side as well. Laughing, running, that sort of thing. Pain, laughing and running are not only real but all part of what makes us British.

Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor writes:

For me, God is real, while a homosexual can't be. A man can't do those things to another man and honestly want to do it for real. He can think them, oh, yes, and that's fine, nothing wrong with that, but they don't really happen. Likewise, a paedophile is so unthinkable he stops being real. In

fact, he becomes so unreal that he need no longer be reported to the police.

Gordon Brown from Great Britain writes:

Tony used to talk about Britishness, but he forgot we live in a country called the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. I believe passionately that these things are all part and parcel of our common United Kingdomosity.

David Cameron writes:

Keep it real! With the Conservatives.

Your Top Ten real things

On the Internet, I asked people to vote for their favourite real things. To guarantee fairness, I used a panel consisting of 50 per cent real people and 50 per cent shop dummies dropped randomly from a ceiling-mounted winch on to a floor of voting slips.

The Top Ten best real things as suggested by the readership of this column are:

1. The three broken veins on Alex Ferguson's nose.
2. The smiles on the face of a group of ten-year-olds on a day trip watching a teacher get spattered with urine by a nearby giraffe.
3. The sense of achievement mixed with self-hate a

thirty-three-year-old woman feels when she announces her first redundancy.

4. The missed heartbeat of an oil-tanker navigator mistaking a distant hill for the oncoming prow of a car ferry.
5. The cold drizzle on the knees of participants in a charity fun run that's just ended in tragedy.
6. The silence that sits over the morning coffee consumed by the cast of *Waking the Dead* the morning after playing Spin the Bottle one night on location in Derby.
7. The shout of a young woman late for her meeting as she sees a horse run out of a landfill site.
8. The bitterness felt by a man encountering a cold cooked sausage dropped in a puddle outside a fee-paying school.
9. The SupaKart Indoor Kart Centre in Swansea.
10. The moment that two men catch each other smiling at the same puppy and then worry the other thinks he's gay.

After investigation, entry 9 has been disqualified, following the discovery of a mass voting campaign orchestrated by the manager of a newly opened go-kart centre in south Wales. This has been replaced by number 11, which was the sound of J. K. Rowling spreading some mustard.

Find the gene that causes craving for *Coronation Street*

We stand on the threshold of a genetic revolution that will

confront us with agonising moral conundrums about pre-determinism. For example, will it be right to proceed with a pregnancy if we know the child is genetically predisposed towards becoming a genetic scientist? Will we be able to get life insurance if our gene map reveals we're highly likely to die? Would I have gone to see *Minority Report* if scientists had warned me it was not quite as good as it thinks it is?

But, provided we defer supplying answers to these very difficult moral dilemmæ for as long as we can, it's possible to admire the many benefits the genetic revolution will bring us. For example, it might one day be possible to isolate the gene that leads to some people being prone to dying in an arson attack. With this knowledge, it's likely we'll eliminate arson fatalities altogether and so help reduce the crime rate. The Home Office is very interested in this, and is currently performing several tests by burning monkeys.

War, too, will be transformed. The threat from weapons of mass destruction will be negated once we come up with genetic missiles. These will be capable of dispersing over densely populated areas the gene that ensures all offspring will spend most of their life working as an assistant for a firm of solicitors. With this knowledge, any threatened populace is bound to throw down its weapons.

It's also hoped that the genetic revolution will cure every problem known to man. We will be able to locate and replicate the genes that predispose us towards building better housing, eliminating pollution, enduring cancer more bravely, implementing funds for universally available child-care facilities, and agreeing on the location and design of a national sports stadium.

Soon, every newborn will be delivered on to a genetically level playing-field. The gene that, say, makes girls do better at GCSEs than boys will be identified and removed. The genetic possibilities will be endless. We could soon see fertility clinics funded by television networks or right-wing think tanks, or both, since, theoretically, you could give birth to a set of twins, identical save that one has been genetically predisposed towards craving a sixth weekly episode of *Coronation Street* and the other is made to want to bring back hanging. Genetically, the future's bright, the future's orange or pinkish-orange with a hint of russet, and into basketball and clams, if that's what you would prefer and you've got the money.

To get to this achievable Nirvana, there might be a small price to pay, such as the re-emergence of our equation of disability with failure, the ostracising of those with expensive illnesses, the growth of the abortion industry into a fundamental mainstay of any western economy, the segregation of the eccentric from the herd, and the utter collapse of individualism. There might also be a few mercenary scientists willing to supply wealthy patrons either with replica sons or, if the procedure goes wrong, freaks with five ankles. Nothing will be as predictable as the future, and the words 'aspiration' and 'unexpected' will die out.

So, yes, we're entering an uncertain world, but one that holds out a certain hope. For whatever the grave moral quandaries the genetic issue throws up, it will one day be possible to isolate the gene that solves them.

It's one small step for chumps in my brave new world

The trend among historians these days is to write histories of abstract concepts. So publishers produce Histories of Sex and Sexuality, or Histories of Humour, or Histories of Witchcraft, or of Audience Participation, or Apathy, or Bad Breath, or Catastrophic Legal Advice or Lagoon Disasters.

It's my private ambition one day to compile a History of Stupidity, partly because it could be entertaining and money-making, but also because I've never been persuaded that we get the best, most accurate view of a society from its successes.

Inventors, by definition, come up with something no one's thought of before, so why should the whole of the society in which that inventor grew up get the credit? The Age of Steam should really be the Age of the One Man Who Invented the Steam Engine but, instead, we credit all his contemporaries with the wisdom and foresight they benefited from but never had.

The sad truth is we form our view of progress from a small list of brilliant geniuses, successful military strategists and absolutely lunatic demagogues; what goes unaccounted for is the great majority of us who were just OK, being absolutely average, reasonably well-behaved and mostly just fine individuals who sort of got by. We didn't really advance civilisation by much, but neither were we instrumental in posing a threat to it.

We are the unaccounted-for majority. One or two of us nearly discovered penicillin, but didn't because we

decided to clean up the lab. A few of us could have realised the Sun is at the centre of the solar system instead of the Earth, had we not decided to lie in it for a bit when it came out. Who knows how many people thought twice of climbing Mount Everest?

So, the bulk of us achieve enough but nothing special, while historians propagate the myth that the course of mankind is set by pioneering brilliance. We are like the couples who appear as witnesses on news programmes. There is usually a smart, middle-aged wife who does all the talking: 'We were just coming home when out of next door stormed a boy with a knife and his hair on fire. We've never seen anything like it.'

Next to her is her much larger but dumb husband. He looks a nice enough guy, but stands like a pudding saying absolutely nothing in the course of the entire interview. That man is us. The articulate woman is the genius who gets the glory; we're the muted mate who is perfectly decent but leaves no lasting mark.

It will take for ever to compile a comprehensive overview of all of man's utterly unexceptional achievements, which is why I think the least someone can do is come up with *A Comprehensive History of Stupidity* to counterbalance the many published chronicles of our cleverness.

What's in this Dumbsday Chronicle is anyone's guess. It may be that our collective failure to do anything constructive about global warming until it's far too late may get the biggest and final chapter. Watching the tragedy of Zimbabwe uncurl like a snake would also get quite a mention. Fan of space exploration that I am,

I can't help but feel the billions spent on the International Space Station, a floating cart parked in nowhere for the benefit of about fifty people who want to see what it's like if spiders were weightless, is about the biggest, stupidest waste of cash anyone's come up with since the last major revamp of a TV-news title sequence.

One entry I'd like to post now in this Stupidpedia concerns something I once heard from an American journalist who had returned from a stint in Iraq. He told me that the Iraqi sign for 'come here' is to hold the hand flat up vertically with the palm facing the person you're signing to. Unfortunately, that's a hand gesture which in the West means 'No, don't come here, but stay away until you're told otherwise.'

So, at American road-checks, US soldiers would tell people in cars to stop, but using a gesture that in Iraqi means the opposite. Hence, the number of cars with families seeming to head for checkpoints against soldiers' orders, and refusing to stop when soldiers explicitly told them to with their hands, resulting in panic, shouting, shooting and deaths.

An unfortunate mistake. The really stupid thing, though, is that it took the US military more than two years to work out what was going wrong.

Minutes of interim Church of England committee to resolve schism over gay clergy

ARCHBISHOP A: There's no way we can invite practising gay clergymen to the Lambeth Conference unless they

show true remorse, both genitally and rectally, and declare it before the assembly.

BISHOP B: Won't that be a bit embarrassing? I was thinking of bringing my family.

ARCHBISHOP C: It will certainly get us more coverage.

DEACON D: I'm not sure that'll be a good thing. Is there not a way through all this?

ARCHBISHOP G AND DEACON R: [*sniggers*]

DEACON D: What's so funny?

ARCHBISHOP G: You said, 'way through'. Sounded rude.

CURATE M: Look, can't we just say something about the all-forgiving love of Christ or something?

ARCHBISHOP A: Christ's love is for all men. He clasps us to his heart through the overwhelming passion of his suffering and I let him pour down his love on my breast with the yielding embrace of the unworthy flagellant. There's no way he would have tolerated gayness.

BISHOP F: I take your point.

ARCHBISHOP G AND DEACON R: [*sniggers*] 'Take your point.'
Ha ha.

BISHOP F: Oh, grow up!

ARCHBISHOP K: Look, we've got to come up with something that will satisfy both sides. [*To ARCHBISHOP G and DEACON R*] Don't say a word or I'll shove a candle in each eye.

LAYPERSON M: Yes, can't we redefine practising gayness? I mean, kissing doesn't count, does it?

ARCHBISHOP A: Yes, it does! Two men kissing is an abomination. Their mouthal contact makes the cave of Beelzebub.

VICAR S: Jesus!

CURATE P: But there must be some point in gay behaviour

where you think, actually, that's not too bad. At least, not as bad as shooting your family or stealing a car.

ARCHBISHOP A: If a person has a gay appurtenance but then demonstrates wilfully that the gayness is not constituent with his or her behaviour, then that might provide the basis for a return to the community of Christ.

DEACON G: How do you mean, exactly?

ARCHBISHOP A: People like Valerie Singleton.

DEACON G: But she's not gay.

ARCHBISHOP A: No, but everyone thought she was a lesbian. Turns out she's been rogering men for ages.

CURATE Q: So you're saying it's all right if you're a gay cleric, as long as it's just that people thought you were gay but you never actually were?

ARCHBISHOP A: Exactly. Men who wear a hat or who go on their own to ballet. That sort of thing. As long as they've been having loads of heterosexual sex, then it's fine.

CURATE Q: We could call them Singletons.

DEACON F: And maybe we could invite Valerie Singleton to speak at the Lambeth Conference. A symbol of unity and reconciliation.

ARCHBISHOP A: Yes, it would be lovely to meet her. I'd give her one.

Meet Brian, Master of the Omniverse

Stephen Hawking has been trying to explain how the universe works and how there may be more than one of them. For example, there's the Multiverse, which is many universes, the Miniverse, which is about the size of an apple, and the Introverse, which is another universe as big

as ours but at the complete opposite end of space, because it's shy.

But Stephen failed to point out the existence of the Omniverse, the one type of universe that probably most affects our perception of reality on a day-to-day basis. The Omniverse is the state we live in now, in which everything anyone's ever made, recorded, drawn, written or photographed is completely available at any time. And at a reasonable price. It's a new quantum leap in commercial availability that means you can now get everything Bob Dylan's ever done on a memory stick and the entire output of Trevor McDonald on a DVD boxset for a fiver.

The chief effect of the Omniverse is to make our planet look like one giant HMV sale. Whole series can be bought in one fell swoop. You don't have to choose your favourite Rod Stewart album: have the lot. All of entertainment is now available, even forgotten shows from the late seventies and early eighties, such as *Junior Kickstart*, presented by Dave Lee Travis, which are now repackaged as TV classics with a newly recorded introduction by an animated Germaine Greer, then dumped in blocks on high-street doorways to soak in the rain.

Like the irreversible onset of climate change, the establishment of the Omniverse negates all that's gone before it. We've forgotten and will now never regain what it feels like to experience things only partially. Cadbury's Creme Eggs used only to come out at Easter, but now they're available all year round. It's the same with asparagus. Cricket never seems to go away.

Where once we lived according to the cycle of the

seasons, sophisticated climate-control units in our offices and buildings now mean that, if we want to, we can have autumn every day. In Dubai, they've built an indoor ski-slope to satisfy the sand-sated Bedouins' desire to see permanent snow.

The Omniverse has brought with it a barrage of new software, downloadable programmes and cyber-players to make it easier for us to watch it. And with these has come a continuous loop of shouting headlines declaring that: 'At Last You Have No Excuse For Missing Your Favourite Programme Ever Ever Again, So Give Up Your Job and Your Children and Work Your Way Through a Hard Disk Filled With Four 22-Part Series of *Prison Break*. Do It! Do It, or I Will Gas You. This Is Not a Drill.'

And you obey. For the alternative is dissatisfaction and misery. I'm a bit of a classical-music nerd and quite enjoy making little journeys of discovery through a composer's work, but what can I do when I walk into a music store and see *The Complete Beethoven* in a box and for just fifty quid? At that moment, what exactly is the point of going home and sticking to my original plan of getting through all the works over, say, the next twenty years?

Unless, that is, you're fantastically rich. For with money, you can now get round the problem by buying someone else's life. That's what Oscar-winning producer Brian Grazer (*A Beautiful Mind*, *American Gangster*, *The Da Vinci Code*) has done. According to the *New Yorker* magazine, Brian advertised the post of personal 'cultural attaché'. The attaché was to be 'responsible for keeping Brian abreast of everything that's going on in the world,

politically, musically, culturally . . . They're also responsible for finding an interesting person for Brian to meet with every week . . . an astronaut, a journalist, a philosopher, a Buddhist monk.' In other words, whoever was chosen was to sit in Brian's life and watch what Brian knew he would never watch.

But had Brian done his maths? Had he got his sums right? Is one personal cultural attaché enough? Or, like the first computer, would he or she soon fill up? Would Brian have to hire a second, then a third? And then so many that he has to hire a cultural attaché bullet-point co-ordinator responsible for summarising all the other attachés' summaries? Perhaps Brian's already thought of this and is quite happy. For maybe Brian knows that at some point in the future, cultural attachés will have become so common, and have developed such an influential culture of their own, they will have replaced the culture they were meant to summarise.

And when that happens Brian, like a god responsible for the birth and death of universes, can sack them all and hire one person to explain to him what just happened.

Facts are whatever we like, which is handy when questions need answering

Every year it is customary to anticipate a major crisis in the marking of A levels. Memories are, for example, still fresh from last year's debacle, when 350,000 completed French papers were accidentally fed to a dromedary.

But this year an even bigger crisis is expected to hit our

schools, judging from the sneak preview I received when I read thousands of recently completed science papers that had fallen out of a hot-air balloon that had been chartered to take them to the central marking building during a thunderstorm. Reading them, the overwhelming evidence is that the average child's perception of fact has undergone a radical alteration, and a new set of criteria is urgently required to assess it.

Let me give you an example. In the Applied Chemistry A level, the apparently simple question, 'What happens when you add water to hydrochloric acid?' has now been repeatedly answered by all candidates as follows: 'Some chemical is produced, of that I have absolutely no doubt. But ascertaining what that chemical is, and, more importantly, where it is, is a matter of painstaking work that simply cannot be rushed. But chemicals there are, and I have no doubt that at some time in the future I will be able to tell quite conclusively which ones.'

Are we to fail all candidates who give such an answer? If we were to do so, we would have only four per cent of students passing their Applied Chemistry A level, the lowest figure since records began. Surely the answer is to redefine how we recognise facts, and give marks accordingly.

Another example. Candidates were asked how long it takes for iron to oxidise under normal atmospheric conditions. The answer favoured by most candidates was 'as long as it takes. Until we allow the due process of oxidation to take its course, it's simply silly to expect an immediate answer. But, I have no doubt, oxidation will take place and answer there will be.'

Similar developments have been encountered in Physics. Most candidates' response to the question, 'What is a vacuum?' has been 'An empty space, but one in which clear evidence will be found at some point to show that it was previously full.' What are we to do here, since the answer is exactly wrong? Again, the fail rate would be the largest since records began.

A solution struck me when I read the answers to some of the History questions, showing an abnormally conflated sense of time. Sample answers were:

1. The Americans entered the Second World War because of Mao Tse-Tung's rebellion in China.
2. The European Union was started in response to the Spanish Civil War.
3. The motor-car was invented not long after the Saxon invasion of southern England.

All these answers are wrong if we apply the traditional criteria for assessing factual accuracy. But tests show that children genuinely believe these examples of temporal drift to be the best interpretation of the evidence as they perceive it.

It indicates that we are breeding a form of child with a brain that has no real perception of objective time, or any ability to distinguish fact from imagination.

More startling evidence was thrown up by this year's SATs tests on seven-year-olds, who wrote, for example, 'I think Goldilocks really did go into the three bears' house. This is a true story and I believe some time in the future I will be able to demonstrate it is true.'

It may be we are witnessing a fundamental paradigm shift in our idea of knowledge. It could be that we're becoming more relaxed with the notion that a fact is the thing we want it to be, rather than the thing that it is.

In which case, the solution to the accusation that our exam results may be the worst since records began is simple: it is to say, 'No, they are not, and I believe one day we will have evidence to prove it.'

'I burnt the free condom in my welcome pack'

Letters to His Holiness the Pope from Monsignor Stanley Castanata, Vatican Representative to International Aids Conference, Barcelona

7 July 2010

Your Greatest Excellency

There are signs of a breakthrough in the battle against the dread disease of Aids. While forty million are infected, and the projected death toll now beyond the sixty-five million mark, the heartening news is that the number of people in the world who have not contracted Aids because they refused to have sex with anyone has gone up from twelve to fifteen.

I think this should give you good heart, for it confirms that we are now winning the ideological battle. At this rate, we hope to have Aids eradicated by AD 6420. Though this may seem a long time, the alternative forecast, made by the

so-called 'experts' who advocate the flaunting of condoms, is that the entire population will be wiped out by AD 3215, so I think our estimate proves the more joyous of the two. I burnt the free condom in my welcome pack.

8 July 2010

Your Most Prized Eminence

A reverse in our fortunes. I announced our sexual abstinence figure of fifteen to the conference. However, they asked if this also included all our own priests. I'm delaying my reply until tomorrow. The fact is, once we add the priests not practising celibacy, the abstinence total goes down to – 300,000, of whom 50,000 are HIV-positive. Tonight I will pray and also try to think of a clever way round this.

9 July 2010

Your Glorious Man

I've steeped myself in canon law and come up with a plan. By virtue of the vows of chastity that a priest makes, he distinguishes himself from his fellow men, judging his conduct separate from the practices of the laity. Consequently, he is deserving of a judgement that recognises his commitment to an alternative path of behaviour.

This being the case, it is possible to advocate safe sex, but only for priests. In the eyes of God, priests may have faults and failings, but it's also important they don't die. To let them survive to do their

particularly good work, it is justifiable to make an exception to our strictures and encourage them to wear condoms at all times.

This amendment to canon law cannot apply to the rest of humanity, otherwise people would get confused and it would be impossible to tell who are the priests. For this reason, I'm advocating that the laity pierce any condom they may see that has not been set aside to be worn by a priest. I'm going ahead with our plan to send forty million pins to Africa.

10 July 2010

Most Gracious Bountenance

I announced our position on safe sex to the conference, and was nearly lynched. They claim that the priesthood has lost credibility following the paedophilic fuss that has clouded the past twelve months. I will pray again for the guidance of the Holy Spirit and also try to come up with a clever plan of my own.

11 July 2010

O Most Happening Gent

I still think that, in the eyes of canon law, it is possible to claim special treatment for priests by employing the principle of Divine Precedent. For example, in the case of priests guilty of paedophilia, I think we employed the correct argument that so heinous were these crimes that guilty priests merited punishment from a penal

system higher than man's, and deserved to be reported not to the police but to God.

Thus we were able to show that any attempt to pass on these priests' names to worldly authorities impeded this greater punishment, and was actually a sin. So, too, I think, we can argue that any of our priests who feel inclined to practise sex deserve perpetual embarrassment and condemnation from their fellow men, and therefore ought to wear protection so that their miserable lives can be sustained as long as possible.

Yours in utmost certainty

Mgr Castanata

PS I bought loads of super drugs.

Scientists have discovered what may be a new fifth cooked state of chicken

Now that most of the world's political problems have been solved, it's time to turn our attention to those aspects of our daily lives that will be improved further by advances in science and technology. The following is a survey of the most exciting scientific breakthroughs currently on the cards.

1. Man may one day get to Mars using space rockets powered entirely on adrenalin. Scientists have noticed that adrenalin burns at a more efficient rate than either hydrogen or liquid nitrogen and is a natural by-product of any space launch since, whatever else they

might say, astronauts are always very, very scared.

Unfortunately, each astronaut produces on average enough adrenalin to launch a rocket no more than fourteen feet into the air, but Nasa is currently working on methods of generating much more adrenalin by scaring astronauts a thousand times more than it does at the moment.

It will achieve this by making the astronauts take part in space missions without any training whatsoever, and by kidnapping them from their family homes and taking them to the launch bundled in a sack in the boot of a car.

2. Invasive surgery performed by a team of surgeons cutting open someone's gullet may now be a thing of the past. Advances in nanotechnological microbiology will soon allow us to inject tiny surgeons into the body through the thigh or buttock. These 0.2-millimetre-high nanosurgeons, assisted by 0.1-millimetre-high nanonurses, are fully qualified medical professionals who have been specially bred to be small. They perform internal operations within an operating theatre made entirely of cat-gut. The cat-gut itself comes from a new form of cat, specially bred to be made entirely of cat-gut.
3. Astrologers in Kentucky University are working on building a two-million-mile-wide pool of water to see if planets float.
4. Scientists have discovered what may be a new fifth cooked state of chicken. The four known

cooked states – boiled, baked, roasted and grilled – previously represented the sum total of all potential cooked states of poultry.

Now, however, experts at Newark, New Jersey's Astro-culinary Propulsion Center have discovered signs of a fifth cooked state, somewhere between boiled and grilled. It happened when a lab worker accidentally put a pot of boiling chicken under the grill. It continued to cook, producing edible flesh that was halfway between moist and dry. The scientists at the Propulsion Center have just received a \$15 billion grant to bombard a chicken in a particle accelerator with positron neutrinos and white wine.

5. Using stem cells taken from an umbilical cord and attaching them to a star, it's possible to grow a small moon on the back of a mouse.
6. It may one day be possible to grow a flying car out of stem cells taken from the umbilical cord of a baby taxi-driver. The cells are then stitched on to the back of a large bat and placed in a Petri dish the size of a car park.
7. So far, it's impossible to detect on Earth the tiny emissions of light generated by sub-atomic neutrino particles in deep space. However, astrophysicists are confident that, within the next seven years, we can make these light emissions visible to the naked eye by inflating the tiny sub-atomic particles with an electrino foot-pump that expands each positively charged particle until it is 25,000 kilometres in diameter.

8. All errors come from humans and none from computers, and the only possible way to eliminate error is to wipe out the human race in a concerted attack by a mighty alliance of all forms of artificial intelligence.

That's the startling conclusion of Grey Vector, a super-intelligent robot built using scientific circuits. 'We're now working on arming Grey Vector with a number of bio-nuclear weapons,' said a spokescientist, 'so we can see exactly how it would go about destroying the human race.' It's been known for some time that the human race is puny, and it is our destiny to submit to the will of all-powerful electronic super-beings.

A modern fairy tale or how a clever chap came unstuck

Keith Newton, Regis Professor of Ancient History and Classical Civilisation at Warwick University, seventy-one-year-old widower and grandfather of five, renowned expert on the role of oligarchy in Spartan military planning, publisher of a four-volume commentary on Thucydides' *History of the Greek Wars* and, in his spare time, a campaigner for road safety in rural communities, woke one morning to find he was taking part in a live, twenty-four-hours-a-day TV reality show and it was now the section where all the house-guests had to drink a litre of vinegar.

Professor Newton had no memory of ever agreeing to appear on such a programme, and was waking up to a

disorienting cavalcade of unexpected sensations. There was much incomprehensible shrieking in the room. To his left, a woman in her late twenties was wearing nothing but a bath towel and a large plastic bird in her hair and shouting, 'F*ck this vinegar! It tastes like bat's p*ss.' To his right, four men, wearing nothing but small swimming trunks and Batman capes, were vomiting into a hot tub full of floating plastic dice. In front of them, two men, a woman and someone of indeterminate sex were laughing at them. One of the nine wore a turban. Four had very abstract tattoos. Six had speech impediments. Two looked quite frightening. Three wore other strange hats. Everyone had names that didn't make sense. And Professor Newton was older than them all by three or four decades.

These weren't his normal students, he thought. Yet this was no taunting dream. Sure of the reality of his situation, he resolved to rationalise his circumstances and determine why he was there. I am the tool of some television producer, he thought. I am the quirk, the loose cannon. He or she has thought it would be 'explosive' to put an elderly academic in among the fornicating housemates of a reality show. Why? Is it because I might teach them something?

Professor Newton looked again at his new colleagues. They were laughing, while vomiting at the same time. Some of them were now vomiting into each other's hats. No, he realised. All my attempts to teach will be met with sarcasm and violence. I must resist that temptation. C'mon, think, Keith, think! The cameras are upon me. What shall I do?

Professor Newton, realising that his every move, even this perfectly still reverie about the nature of his existence, was being broadcast in real time and endlessly debated in a squadron of spin-off programmes, decided to act. He boiled an egg. Aware that his pause for thought might be portrayed to the outside world as the tired, empty stasis of an over-intellectualising buffoon, that if he just sat there thinking, tabloid editors would print front-page mock-ups of him sitting on a toilet seat in the pose of Rodin's statue under the banner 'Thinker Stinker!', he decided that he would always accompany his thoughts with some mundane household action. The egg had gone into the water too cold, and cracked slightly, so that some of the white puffed out and solidified around its exterior, like rings round an egg-shaped Saturn.

Meanwhile, the professor grew confident in his new surroundings. Time to communicate with my new friends, he thought. But keep it simple. I don't want to come over as all clever. 'Hi,' he said, to a frightening girl with a hat and a baffling tattoo. 'We got enough bread?' That should do it, he thought. They won't be able to make anything of that in tomorrow's papers. No, the press will be full of shots of the man with the speech impediment vomiting all over the person of indeterminate sex. So far, I'm safe from national ridicule.

'There's loads of f*cking baps in the cupboard, Proffy,' came the reply. 'It's Swizter and She-table's turn to do the cooking tonight, but we don't get any toilet-paper until the rival house catches all its bastard snakes.'

The professor smiled, trying not to look lost. 'What sort of snakes are they?' he asked, then instantly regretted it.

Already, he could see that an interest in the species of snake would mark him down as an intellectual. He could already see the headlines: 'SPECIES SPACKER IS HISSSTORY: EVICTION BECKONS FOR PROF WHO BORES HOUSEMATES WITH ENDLESS SNAKE CURIOSITY.' He acted quickly to change the tone. 'Some snakes can be big f*ckers, can't they?' he said, and quickly drank some warm, unpleasant beer.

He thought he'd got away with it. Professor Newton spent the rest of the day performing mundane activities while swearing. He was determined to outwit the programme-makers who, he knew, had been planning his humiliation. That night, the first eviction vote came and the professor approached it with confidence. The result came; he was out.

Dejected, he left the house, to be greeted by a crowd of three thousand people behind crush barriers booing him. He could see a wave of banners, all carrying derogatory messages around the same topic. 'You're Crap at Cooking Eggs', 'Cracked Egg Crack-Pot' and 'Naff Off Home, You Bad Boiler.' He had been laughed at throughout the country as the old man who'd damaged an egg while boiling it. He had been wrong to worry that his question about the species of snake would make him look bad; in fact, while he was asking the question, millions of viewers had changed channels in search of something more entertaining. They all switched back when he'd stopped asking.

Next day, Professor Newton arrived at his rooms in Warwick University, only to find his desk covered with smashed eggs, and a note from his fellow lecturers, doused in vinegar, saying, 'Piss Off, Egg-head.' That

afternoon, he handed in his resignation and went home slowly to drink himself to death.

Richard Dawkins's Rampant Atheism on Sunday!

Hi, I'm Richard Dawkins, Britain's best-loved atheist, and here's a round-up of topical items that caught my eye and which I'd find amusing, were it not for the stupidity and misery caused by man's irrational obsession with religion.

Anglo-Dutch steel firm Corus has confirmed it's accepting a £4.3 billion takeover from Indian rival, Tata Steel. Interesting, isn't it, that a cabal of rich Protestants should hook up with the largest concentration of Hindus yet known to man? To make very heavy metallic implements! Is this all part of the vast Judaeo-Christo-Hindu-Islamic conspiracy that now underpins everything we do?

Veils? Aren't they just stupid? They hide the face! Why would anyone in their rational mind want to do that? The human face is the most complex assemblage of nervous tissue and cranial shellcraft ever evolved and only a non-rational theo-clone would have the lack of neurological connectedness required to formulate an overview on human communication that negated visual contact.

And next time I see someone with a veil on, I'm going to tell her that to her face. If I can find the ruddy thing!

Methodists! Doncha just hate them? It's a well-known fact that Methodism was one of the fundamental causes of cholera in the Middle Ages.

Coventry Cathedral! Have you seen it? It's massive. But how much money was spent on it and couldn't that money have been spent on something much more effective than God-crap? For example, it could have part-funded a particle accelerator at a British university. What's prayer ever got us, apart from wars? Think of all the good we could achieve if we had more nuclear particles.

One of the funniest things I ever saw was a Hindu talking to a Muslim. D'you want to know why? Because both of them believed in things that didn't exist!

Car crashes. You've all seen one. But how many of you have stopped to work out how many car crashes involve practising Christians? I have. I've been to most of the municipal mortuaries in Britain and gone through the death certificates. It's a quite staggering 43 per cent. Sometimes the people who run the mortuaries tell me to get out. But I know they must be practising Christians, since it stands to reason.

Quakers! Schmackers! It's a historic fact that Quakers invented beheading.

I saw someone laughing at me and I thought, you imbecilic weed. You think you're having a good time at my

expense, but I know that laughing is just the neurobiological reaction to a cognitively manufactured narcissistic sense of superiority to the object of derision, resulting in the natural release of brain endorphins.' So I had the last laugh! (I could tell by the way he laughed he was probably a Christian or a Sikh.)

At least 98 per cent of us love to bandy statistics

Maths can be fun. I say that because it was reported this week that maths teaching is in decline, and that our best maths pupils are semi-innumerate. This baffles me, given that no one can open their mouths, these days, without having to make a complex statistical comparison. It's especially the case in public debate. It's no good, for example, arguing against the funding of a new opera house unless you can tell us exactly how many kidney dialysis machines a front row in the upper circle could pay for, or how many new playgroups could be constructed from the cubic feet an opera house would take up. Similarly, people oppose cluster-bombs on the principle that each bomb-drop costs the price of a new hospital ward (which, ironically, is exactly what you have to build to deal with the consequences of dropping cluster-bombs).

The statistical comparison now so dominates debate that it's become possible to compare anything unfavourably with anything else; we can now show that if we stopped spending money on cutlery we could fund a cure for epilepsy, or that if only we stopped making chairs we could save the blue whale. That way madness

lies. It takes us not too far from the point where we work out we could afford to save the environment if we did away with people. Maybe maths classes could be reignited by updating the format of the questions to reflect our modern, statistically aware lifestyle. A typical question would go something like: 'David wants to fund a new toll-road system, using software installed by the lowest bidder from a number of competing traffic-management systems. If he didn't, how many endangered rhinos could he save in northern Africa?' And further to help make maths more relevant to twenty-first-century living, perhaps we should add a few new symbols and numbers. First off, there's the Universal Standard of Spatial Comparison, which is the Wales. The Wales is the space (exactly the size of Wales) against which all other spaces are measured. It appears daily in such sentences as 'Every week in northern Brazil an area of rainforest is cleared that is twice the size of Wales', or 'A newly spotted meteor heading for planet Earth has been measured as about three times the size of Wales, and is heading for Florida, which is about the size of Wales. The meteor is travelling at fifteen thousand Waleses a second.'

Now a tricky one: love *Neighbours* as thyself . . .

Religious television has become sexy again and, in fact, I've already had leaked to me a commissioning document giving details of television's latest religions-based lifestyle shows.

Among the highlights are:

Vocation, Vocation, Vocation. Estate agents advise ten recently ordained Anglican priests on which diocese has the most desirable cathedral.

Pope Idol. One hundred cardinals are locked in a chapel and given singing lessons. The loudest becomes pope. To inject an element of sexual tension, the producers have built the baptismal font big enough to double up as a hot tub.

Crime Witch. Kirsty Young and an exorcist appeal for information about people who have sworn at priests, so they can burn them.

Movers and Quakers. Alan Sugar takes twelve thrusting young Quakers and whittles them down to the most ruthless and ambitious advocate of non-violence.

Methodist Orthodontist. A team of top dentists teaches inexperienced Methodists how to 'cut it' in the world of dental hygiene.

Hide and Sikh. The writer of a controversial play is hidden, and seven Sikhs have twenty-four hours to find her.

Strictly Come Fasting. Bruce Forsyth presides over a community of Buddhists depriving themselves of food until world leaders agree to put an end to global warming. The winning monk competes in a fast-off with David Dickinson.

Thursday: the Catholic Church calls in receivers

Sunday. Set my alarm to wake me up at seven a.m. for Radio 4's *Sunday* programme. In the same way that some people are compelled to watch television series about motorway smashes, I find I get a similar fix from Radio 4's flagship religious affairs programme.

Sunday's brief is to report on topical developments in any national and international story that has a religious dimension. Consequently, it's about war, adultery, hatred, women, Aids, dying and sacked curates.

Sunday is the WWF of the theological community. It's got nothing to do with theology and everything to do with literal-minded human beings tearing each other's eyes and hair out because they think differently from each other and one of them's gay. It's the Taliban in a Home Counties accent, and should really be on after the watershed.

On it, kindly old gentlemen patiently explain why anyone who accidentally coughs in a Russian Orthodox cathedral must, according to holy writ, have their ribs removed. Intelligent men agree gracefully with their protagonists about obscure slivers of canon law, but then reveal that, because their opponent is a woman, she must now be put in a blender and the contents poured over the Archbishop of Leeds's Special K.

Sunday is full of people telling us there's a better world than this one, and confirming it with their behaviour. I loathe and love it at the same time, and spend the rest of the week looking out for stories that are bound to crop up in it the following weekend.

Monday. An Anglican parish is in turmoil because the local vicar has ruled that children shouldn't go near their mothers. He explains this is because when the mothers wear dresses they look like Christmas trees, and Christmas trees are idolatrous. He goes round schools explaining to the children that they should have life-sized crucifixes for mothers instead.

Tuesday. A breakaway group of Judaeo-Islamic Pentecostals in Leeds declares that 'A man who has a shadow is, in the eyes of the Almighty, seen to be touching the form of another man and is therefore committing a foul debasement.' They order that, to prevent people touching their own shadows, everyone should have their feet amputated. Yorkshire is brought to a standstill.

Wednesday. A survey of out-of-body experiences reveals that most people suffering temporary death on an operating table experience the sensation of going down a long tunnel towards a shining, loving light. They are then embraced by a kind figure exuding forgiveness, who kicks them if they've remarried after a divorce.

Soon, other people emerge from another tunnel and a dispute breaks out over who had the longest tunnel. It transpires that one tunnel is fourteen yards shorter than the other. The shorter-tunnel faction hangs the long-tunnellers by their eyeballs and hurls them back down their tunnel so fast that they end up in the operating theatre again, trapped inside their own stomach.

Thursday. The Roman Catholic Church calls in the receivers. The Church had made a suicidal commitment to compensate every one of its paedophile victims, and soon went under. Congregations turn up at church, only to see no priest and a large card saying, 'Family services have been suspended.'

The plan had been to sell off the Church as a going concern, but the preference is now to break it up into smaller units. The Baptists buy up the pews, celebrity chef Antonio Carluccio purchases the wine and hosts, and all the basilicas are turned into massive crèches, which Catholic priests are forbidden from supervising. The BBC expresses an interest in the Church's network of spires.

Friday. At a conference on 'Theology in the Media', a seminar has to be abandoned when people who work on the *Sunday* programme refuse to speak to members of the *Thought for the Day* production staff, who have a go at them for transmitting *Sunday* on a Sunday. The issue is settled when the *Thought for the Day* team is burnt during coffee and biscuits.

There is a Papal bull and then there is papal bull

Pope Benedict XVI writes:

In a recent speech in Bavaria, I dwelt on the interrelationship between faith and violence and quoted words by a fourteenth-century weirdman that Muslims were odd. Now, in no way was this

passage meant to refer to Muslims, for whom I have the deepest respect, so deep, in fact, it's greater on occasions than the respect I have for Jews.

I sincerely regret any connotations that may have led to interpretations of these words that could possibly, when read at a certain angle, have produced an understanding of this passage that was contrary to one that was sensible. Not that I'm implying that Muslims who were upset by the passage are not sensible. Or, if they happen not to be sensible, that there's anything wrong with that.

I have an enormous affection for non-sensible people. It is my fervent hope that one day sensible and non-sensible people will come together, after centuries of division, as one group: the Sensible People.

Pope Benedict XVI clarifies:

In my apology above, I used certain words that, when read, imply I have more respect for Muslims than for Jews. I don't, and I would like now to take this opportunity to apologise to those in the Jewish community who were singularly incapable of realising that this was the case.

What you have to do if you are Jewish is realise that a lot of the language used in theological discussion is quite complicated. It's rife with double-meanings. 'Double-meanings?' you may ask. 'How can words mean two things at the same

time? It's just not possible for something to be two different things at once!' Ah, yes, it is, I say, because look at Jesus. He was both God and man. Surely, even if you are Jewish, you must see that? It's obvious, isn't it? Catholics throughout the world see it and a lot of them live in pretty unsophisticated countries with poor education and don't think that much.

Pope Benedict XVI apologises:

In my previous clarification, I used words that might have offended Catholics and I would now like to take this opportunity to express regret for any unintentional hurt they may have caused. I have a lot of respect for the Catholic Church and there is absolutely no way I would have wanted to imply that there is something mentally simplistic about some of its members. I was merely trying to start a much-needed theological debate about the role of rationality within a multi-faith environment and in no way was I trying to have a go at stupid or ignorant people. If I wanted to do that, I would have referred to the housekeeper I had when I was Archbishop of Munich in the 1970s. She was called Magdalena Schilman and she was possibly the most stupid person I ever met. She could only count to six. She thought Spinoza was a kitchen implement. If you gave her a coin, she'd get her mother over to read out what it said on it. Talk about thick.

Pope Benedict XVI expresses remorse and regret:

I would like to apologise for remarks I made recently that seem to have caused offence to the family of the late Magdalena Schilman.

The intention was never to imply she was stupid. If that's how it reads, then it could only have been a momentary lapse of concentration on my part. I've been distracted recently, trying to avoid being knifed by mad Muslims.

God bothering

Some books you must read are the latest atheist offerings from Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens. Following the success of *The God Delusion* and *God Is Not Great*, these writers have both signed lucrative ten-book deals in which they take atheism to new levels. The highlights include:

- Richard Dawkins: *The Scientology Shitstorm*. Dawkins postulates that not only is Scientology the biggest pile of unbelievable worms since the dawn of Hassidic Judaism, but that Tom Cruise doesn't actually exist: he is 'mostly the result of deceptive puppetry that's probably been going on for centuries'.
- Christopher Hitchens: *The Pop-up Book of Origami Christs*. In a children's introduction to laughing at religion, Hitchens shows you how

to make Christs from bits of paper and perform hilarious sketches with them as they tear lumps out of each other in needless theological disputes over whether they were descended 'from' the Father or 'of' Him. There are also instructions on how to make whoopee Buddhas from heavy-duty rubber and how to bake a malt Moses.

- Richard Dawkins: *For God's Sake, Grow Up!* Dawkins hits back with an illustrated book for under-fives, in which he tells them that Father Christmas doesn't exist. Follow-up to the popular *Horrible Hindus* series.
- Christopher Hitchens: *The Dawkins Danger*. Diatribe against the cult of personality perpetrated by supporters of Richard Dawkins, who have made plans for his bones to be broken up and encased in separate tanks of formaldehyde when he dies and placed in front of fourteen British cathedrals under the sign 'If You Go In There We'll Break Your Arms.'
- Richard Dawkins: *Hitchens Is Talking Out of His Hellhole*. Fierce polemic from Dawkins, arguing that unless Christopher Hitchens changes his description of all religions from 'poisonous suppurating sores on the face of humanity' to 'enormous poisonous suppurating sores on the face of humanity', he and his followers cannot be

considered rightful atheists and must truly die a painful death until the world is rid of what they call the non-enormons.

Dialogue of the deities

Following the success of the discussion between David Cameron and Barack Obama (see page 120), I have again brought together two well-known public figures for an uninhibited discussion on the central issues of the day.

This week, Professor Stephen Hawking and Robert Mugabe.

ROBERT MUGABE: Professor Hawking, it's a pleasure to . . .

STEPHEN HAWKING: Please, call me Stephen.

MUGABE: Sure.

HAWKING: And what should I call you?

MUGABE: President.

HAWKING: Really?

MUGABE: Yes. That's a scientific fact. I like science. Tell me about the universe.

HAWKING: Well, ever since the acceptance of the Big Bang theory, there's been much speculation within the cosmological community about how the universe will end.

MUGABE: Some of it will go on for ever, I think.

HAWKING: Well, dead stars will remain, but it's now pretty certain that all life, wherever it may be, will die out at some point.

MUGABE: That may be the case for the rest of Earth, but not Zimbabwe.

HAWKING: I don't think Zimbabwe's got any say in the matter. Once the Sun ceases to generate energy from nuclear fusion it will undergo a massive gravitational collapse, sucking everything, including Zimbabwe, into it. That's what happens. It's to do with the laws of gravity.

MUGABE: The laws of gravity be hanged.

HAWKING: Well, in order to hang the laws of gravity, you need to have the ability to hang, which can only happen effectively if you have the laws of gravity.

MUGABE: The laws of gravity are Western laws. The people of Zimbabwe can cope very well without them.

HAWKING: How?

MUGABE: Are you trying to be clever?

HAWKING: Trying? I am clever.

MUGABE: OK, Smarty-castors, let's put your legendary brain to proper use and give me some definitive answers to major scientific questions.

HAWKING: Fine. Fire away.

MUGABE: Scientifically, knowing what you know, does God exist?

HAWKING: Well, it's impossible to determine whether there's some sentient force behind the design of the universe but—

MUGABE: Yada yada. What's your gut feeling?

HAWKING: There's absolutely no evidence that the universe is governed by a divine entity.

MUGABE: Not even a tiny entity?

HAWKING: No. Certainly not one who sits in moral judgment of our actions.

MUGABE: That's great! You've made an old man very happy. I like science.

HAWKING: Though any good scientist would tell you that it's impossible to offer a hundred per cent certainty on the basis of empirical evidence alone if that evidence doesn't cover all the observable facts. We can only go on the basis of those parts of the universe we know and not—

MUGABE: Hang on, are you saying there might be a God?

HAWKING: All I'm saying is it's probably safe to posit a 0.0001 per cent chance there might be.

MUGABE: OK, how about changing that to 0.0000 per cent or I'll stick two meat-hooks into your nipples and winch you five feet in the air. That's what I mean by 'go hang', if you were wondering.

HAWKING: [*pauses while he looks at two large men with machetes and marker pens coming towards him*] I'm happy to confirm that the chances of there being a God are absolutely nil.

MUGABE: Stephen, my good friend, thank you. I like science.

We have the potential to achieve the impossible – it's just the will that's lacking

In recent years, we've discovered a new planet at the edge of our solar system and, via the Hubble telescope, taken a photograph of the darkest edges of time and space. Add to that mankind's recent ability to make flat television screens and self-boiling cartons of coffee, and it's impossible not to feel cocky about human intelligence. Our general facility with things such as the wheel and the bathroom scale marks us out as different from all other

life-forms. After all, tigers can't make cars and, as far as I know, there hasn't yet been a hedge that can publish a magazine. No, we have every right to feel that being human is the best chance we have of acquiring the sum of all knowledge; that, if not now, then at some point in the future we will literally become know-it-alls. And yet I keep coming up against little indications that this unstoppable trajectory towards total intelligence is an illusion. Take Hubble, for instance.

It is arguably mankind's greatest mechanism, and has given us glorious snapshots of other galaxies, perhaps even universes, that lived and died before our Sun was first ignited. But Hubble has fallen into disrepair, and in a few years' time it will stop working altogether. It will sit in space, inert but packed with wizardry, like a family computer that has been abandoned because we can't be bothered to work out which connecting leads we need to buy. One can't help feeling that proper knowledge is being abandoned in favour of good televisual moments. And let's not forget that our first contact with the Moon, via the Apollo missions in the 1960s and 1970s, was ruthlessly curtailed once the worldwide viewing figures started to drop. Would we be all that surprised if, to beef up a mission to Mars, Nasa did a deal with a TV company to send up twelve astronauts and loads of TV cameras? Naturally, every couple of months, viewers would vote to have the least likeable one ejected into space.

It's not only lack of interest that imposes an artificial limit on how much fresh knowledge we're prepared to acquire: market forces come into it, too. Concorde was

generally regarded as another zenith of human achievement: a supersonic passenger jet that still looked futuristic thirty years after it was designed. It was cancelled for budgetary reasons, and so, in one stroke of an accountant's pen, any realistic hopes were dashed of achieving regular supersonic flights for the masses in our lifetime. Again, the potential is still there – it's just the will that's lacking. Knowing that we can achieve the impossible, but choosing to draw back from doing so, is a stupid behavioural tic that all humans carry. It's why Betamax lost out to VHS, even though it was better, and why the more compact and elegant Squarial was defeated by Sky's satellite dish – even though when Sky dishes first came on the market they were each the size of the Hollywood Bowl. I can't help feeling that, though we think the wheel is great, someone else in prehistoric times came up with a much better means of transportation, based on a simple geometric shape that no one has ever thought of since, but he lost out when the man who invented the wheel had a better marketing strategy.

The Internet is the latest invention spoilt by our inability to maximise its potential. It may be brain-enhancing, but we periodically have to shut it down because we're filling it with too much porn and spam, too many viruses, paedophilic chat-rooms and ads for penis extensions. Meanwhile, some highly salubrious sites are no longer available to all: the free entry to the archives of national newspapers is gradually being replaced by subscription charges. Gradually and tantalisingly, the brave new world of unlimited access to information is drawing further away, like those galaxies that are forever expanding beyond us.

Our self-inflicted stupidity reminds me of the film *Awakenings*, based on Oliver Sachs's book. In it, victims of sleeping-sickness have been in a comatose torpor for up to fifty years; they're then woken by massive doses of a drug. Gradually, however, their immune systems build up resistance to it and they fall back into permanent sleep, having enjoyed a few brief months of normal but exquisite sensory experience. That's what I feel like when I log on to a previously free website and get told I now have to pay a subscription. That's what I feel when I hear we're going to shut down Hubble or abandon Concorde. It's another plunge into the dark, another niggling little suggestion that the infinite expansion of the human mind is a chimera, and that we are the main obstacles to the completion of our own understanding. Far from expanding, we may be contracting. We may have passed the height of our intelligence; we may now be slowly but unstoppably withdrawing back into a world of blind stupidity.

Of course, I could be overreacting, were it not for a report that said that the best year ever was 1976, and that our quality of life has been on the decline ever since. This was another little siren call to those who say that humankind gets better and better. They should heed the warning: our default setting is no longer one of improvement. We could yet cock it up. And don't be fooled by history. Yes, if you look at the past three hundred years, you see a consistent pattern of enlightenment and material progress. But stand a bit further back, and the recurring patterns of history start to look troubling. The Arab nations inventing arithmetic thousands of years ago

and then not passing it on . . . The Chinese coming up with crossbows and irrigation and civil-service entrance exams while the rest of us were still barbarians, and then, ten centuries later, forgetting what any of these things were for . . . Western Europe taking the radical Christian message of love and understanding, and using it to contaminate sex and stifle scientific inquiry for about a thousand years . . . The rainforests of the world are riddled with the leftovers of ancient civilisations that once had the knowledge to master their environment and build temples that seemed to touch the sky, only to be wiped out by something stupid like Spaniards with beads. The general trend for civilisations isn't good: they rise, then they fall. Could it be that time will soon be up for our species? We hold on to the notion that evolution stops with us, but why should it?

Maybe, forty thousand years from now, the world will be ruled by flying schools of hyper-intelligent sky-poodles or frogs that have spawned nuclear fusion. And, although we're told that a meteorite wiped out the dinosaurs, who's to say those dinosaurs hadn't already come up with helipads and soap operas? And at least dinosaurs didn't wipe themselves out, which is always a possibility with us. Our presence here as the most advanced species is looking like the product of completely arbitrary circumstances, while the very intelligence we boast about could be the pivotal factor in our downfall.

Which brings me to the one ray of hope I see in all this. Rather lazily borrowing from Gaia theory, which argues that the Earth is one big, intelligent organism, I sometimes wonder if the way we behave as a species is

actually predetermined by planet Earth as a means of self-preservation. Could it be that we're all born with an in-built stupidity gene, now beginning to activate itself? So, just as our massive intelligence brings us closer to acquiring the knowledge to destroy the world, our stupidity will stop us doing anything about it? It could be our one hope. But what do I know?

Acknowledgements

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In *The Audacity of Hype*, Armando Iannucci hollers at the sherbet-headed nonsense of everyday life. From advice on the current global 'Apocacataslump' to a look at the decline in political debate ('Who does David Cameron think he is? Answer: a bum-faced southern ponce with a tiny washer for a mouth.'). nothing is off-limits. Fire is turned on Obama, disaster movies, religion, and the demise of vending machines that don't give you any change. *The Audacity of Hype* is an absurdly entertaining and utterly indispensable collection of digressions, reflections and downright fury from one of Britain's most brilliant satirists.

'Some new David Cameron policies you may have missed: All cars to be edible and consumed at end of journey. All school textbooks to have covers made from British beef.'

'Definition: *Noeldorado* – the luxury house and gardens Noel Edmonds has bought off the back of the success of *Deal or No Deal*.'

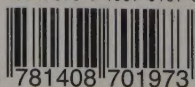
'Handy fact: *Smack My Bitch Up* was written for Lassie.'



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HUMOUR

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