

News & curiosities

by

Austerity is good for you

Experts were left scratching their heads by a recent study in the Journal of the American Medical Association which found that levels of heart disease and diabetes among the richest third of Americans aged 55-64 were commensurate with the poorest third of Britons of the same age. A letter in the Boston Globe attempted to explain the mystery. The middle-aged reader from Saarbrücken stated that Germans of his generation had long believed they were particularly healthy because of the spartan deprivations of their childhood. Brits and Germans in the late 1940s and early 1950s grew up on rationing and food shortages; Americans on ice cream and Oreos. Could a little early malnutrition be rather good for you?

Athenian democracy returns

James Fishkin's technique of "deliberative democracy"—described in these pages in May 2004—is an attempt to counter the disengagement found across the rich democracies and to reinstate public reasoning at the heart of politics. Gatherings of a few hundred people deliberate on an issue of importance with the assistance of briefing, debate and discussion; and then vote.

Until recently, all Fishkin's polls had been advisory or for television. But in early June in Athens (appropriately enough), he got a chance to try out the system for real. Under the patronage of George Papandreou, leader of the centre-left Pasok party, the citizens of Marousi, an Athens suburb, were asked to decide who should stand as Pasok's candidate for mayor in October. The result of the poll was binding. Papandreou had convinced the local party not just to do the poll, but to do it with 160 ordinary citizens rather than party members (David Cameron is similarly opening the selection of Tory London mayoral candidate to all Londoners). In the course of a weekend, the citizens thrashed through the issues—refuse, roads, parks, schools. They asked the six candidates why they should trust

them, how they would consult and what their priorities were. And they were so keen on the exercise that on Sunday evening, after they had chosen lawyer Panos Alexandris as the candidate, they wouldn't go home, but stuck around comparing notes.

David Cameron's boomerang

David Cameron's Tory leadership election pledge to pull the Conservative MEPs out of the EPP—their alliance with the mainstream conservative parties in the European parliament—has boomeranged. Now it turns out that an alternative alliance cannot be put together—and Tory Europhobes are accusing Cameron of betrayal. An interesting thing about this first real crisis of his leadership is the arrival in British politics of the new electronic tactics of the American right—a media storm of orchestrated editorialising backed up by a blogosphere insurrection from the "grassroots." What is not new is the insult directed against dissenters and waverers—now deemed to include not just the young David but William Hague, who as shadow foreign secretary had been charged with the job of finding suitable allies—who turned out not to exist.

The internet can be a trick with mirrors. How many people are really committed to this cause? At least one—MEP Daniel Hannan. It is he who writes some of the blogs, then composes the Telegraph leaders quoting the blogs, then writes the comment pieces referring to the leaders, and finally makes the speeches commenting on his own performances.

Starter for 10

Prospect readers keen to see the faces behind (some of) the words may find it diverting to tune into University Challenge: The Professionals on BBC2 at 8.30pm on Monday 17th July, when you will be able to watch editorial staff David Goodhart and Tom Nuttall join forces with science writer Philip Ball and former higher education minister Robert Jackson to take on four crime writers. The rules forbid us from revealing the result, but it was a real cliffhanger.

Failed quotes

The front cover of Failed States, Noam Chomsky's new bodice-ripper, comes emblazoned with a quote from David Goodhart, Prospect's editor. "Chomsky has an authority granted by brilliance," Goodhart is quoted as saying, but casual browsers tempted into making a snap purchase by this endorsement might like to know that in the original quote, the "brilliance" in question referred not to Chomsky's truth-to-power political analysis, but to his work in linguistics.

FCO gets priorities straight

There were red faces all around the foreign office when Margaret Beckett arrived after the cabinet reshuffle and announced that tackling climate change was her top priority. Jack Straw had just published an FCO strategy document, "Active Diplomacy for a Changing World: the UK's international priorities," that listed nine priorities—none of which was climate change. The FCO's four-page summary of the document has been reprinted to include the tenth priority.