

# Letters+emails

## THE BIG ISSUE LANGUAGE AND POLITICS

# If truth's lacking in public life, it's not down to postmodernism

The political rise of Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage, the disregard for evidence and expert testimony evinced in the Brexit campaign, climate change denial, education policy and the rise of radical movements framing their worldview on religious dogma... each in its own way is indicative of a worrying rise of irrationalism and the fragility of enlightenment values. Will Hutton ("The way we use language in politics", Comment, last week) is right to express serious concerns about this situation but is in danger of aping Johnson's rhetoric by placing the blame on a straw-man surrogate of postmodernism.

For any postmodern thinker influenced by Rorty, Derrida and Wittgenstein, a close attention to truth and the contexts – the language games, the texts, the pragmatic imperatives – in which the concept of truth is situated is paramount. No postmodernist would countenance the semantic solipsism that is a consequence of the belief that any "truth" has the same value as any other. The social politicisation of truth that postmodernism posits provides both a tool for analysing the rise of irrationalism and a weapon for deconstructing it and placing its workings on public display.

Postmodernism is not an enemy of enlightenment values. Rather, it demonstrates, using the enlightenment's own rhetoric, that its foundations are based not in a commonsense notion of truth but on social agreement that these are the standards we have and it is on these that we build our world. Postmodernism testifies to the fragility of these standards and the consequent necessity for



Will Hutton's column last week.

us to defend them against the irrational, fairytale alternatives from wherever they come and whatever the cost. "The way we use language in politics matters." No postmodernist would disagree.

**Dr Stuart Parker**  
Brampton Bierlow, S Yorkshire

Thank you, Will Hutton, for reminding us that truth and integrity should be the core values underpinning political discourse. Leaders must lead us through their arguments and not undermine the quality of the debate through the deliberate use of prejudice and falsehood.

**Charlie Beaumont**  
Maidstone, Kent

Will Hutton rightly excoriates politicians for the chasm between robust evidence and the language they use. That chasm is also wide and deep between evidence and policy.

Since 1972 the Institute of Brain Chemistry and Human Nutrition has presented governments with powerful evidence that poor maternal nutrition adds to the risk of low birth-weight and lifetime permanent developmental brain disorder in children. In 1999

the Family Budget Unit published the weekly cost of minimum income needed for a healthy diet researched by nutritionists at the University of York.

In 2008 the Government Office for Science, building on the work of the Royal College of Psychiatrists, reported on the link between low income, debt and mental health problems.

In 2008, to save the banks, billions of pounds were taken from the pockets of the poorest citizens. Their incomes were already at a basic level, and the effect of that policy has been to reduce them below that and create personal debt. By ignoring the evidence, politicians have exacerbated real hardship, mental and physical illness while sparing the more prosperous citizens from making a fair contribution to the shortfall in government funding.

**The Rev Paul Nicolson**  
Taxpayers Against Poverty, London N17

Although I agree wholeheartedly with Will Hutton as he argues the need for objectivity in the EU debate, I wonder if he is entirely right to caricature postmodernism as "transient nonsense". Some of its more extreme proponents might fit that interpretation. More moderate subscribers held truth itself in the highest regard but remained sceptical of those who disseminated it, asking whose interests it served, and whether it was simply opinion masquerading as fact. I wonder if in the midst of a highly spun EU campaign, a postmodernism-inspired scepticism of what is paraded as truth isn't more important than ever!

**Lucian Clinch**  
London SE24

### FOR THE RECORD

An article on an initiative to save Palestine's agricultural plant heritage reported on "the first seed bank dedicated to preserving traditional varieties" being launched this June. However, the Union of Agricultural Work Committees established just such a seed bank in Palestine in 2008 ("In the Holy Land's rocky hills, Palestinians create a seed bank to save farming heritage", News, last week, page 22).

In the final paragraph of our review of *The Crow Girl* by Erik Axl Sund ("And you thought Stieg Larsson was sinister...", Books, last week, page 43), we inadvertently referred to the book as *The Crow Road*, a 1992 novel by Iain Banks.

Our Wheels column (Magazine, 10 April, page 59) appraised the Suzuki Vitara, a compact SUV, but was illustrated with a picture of an S Cross, an earlier model, launched in 2013.

Ahmet Davutoğlu is, as the text of a piece on the refugee crisis correctly stated, Turkey's prime minister, and not, as a caption proclaimed, its president ("Merkel accused of turning a blind eye to plight of Syrian refugees in Turkish camps", News, last week, page 21).

Write to Stephen Pritchard, Readers' Editor, the Observer, Kings Place, 90 York Way, London N1 9GU, email [observer.readers@observer.co.uk](mailto:observer.readers@observer.co.uk) tel 020 3353 4656

### TOP 10 ONLINE LAST WEEK

Read them at [observer.co.uk](http://observer.co.uk)

1. You can buy a cheap chicken today, but we all pay for it in the long run
2. Cold sexual contempt drives too many men Barbara Ellen
3. Why are we so bored?
4. London cat killer mystery deepens as charities investigate 100 animal deaths
5. Hillary Clinton urges Britain to remain in the European Union
6. The splinter is coming: the Republican race is a real-life Game of Thrones plot
7. Why Real Madrid's Gareth Bale is more settled in Spain than ever
8. Five cabinet ministers' constituencies 'least hit by council budget cuts'
9. Sakho sidelined by Liverpool
10. Anthony Martial takes Manchester United past Everton to final at the last

### WRITE TO US

Letters, which may be edited, should include a full name and postal address and be sent to: Letters to the Editor, The Observer, Kings Place, 90 York Way, London N19GU (to be received by noon Thursday). Fax: 020 3353 3189. Email: [observer.letters@observer.co.uk](mailto:observer.letters@observer.co.uk) (please insert Letters to the Editor in subject field). For conditions go to <http://gu.com/letters-terms>

### We ban tobacco sponsorship of sport. Let's stub it out in the arts

Smoking is a leading preventable cause of ill health and premature death, and a major contributor to health inequality. Current estimates are that the tobacco industry will kill one billion people in the 21st century.

Tobacco advertising has now been banned, along with sponsorship of sport. However, tobacco companies continue to use sponsorship of high-profile arts organisations to promote the spurious idea that they are responsible corporate citizens. We suspect that most members of the Royal Academy in London will be appalled to learn that Japan Tobacco International (JTI) has been a premier sponsor for its exhibitions. British American Tobacco is also a sponsor, a position it shares with, among others, the Marie Curie cancer charity and Bloomberg. The latter is of note given Michael Bloomberg's passionate tobacco control stance while mayor of New York.

These sponsorship arrangements are morally unacceptable and must be brought to an end. As healthcare professionals who deal daily with the harm caused by the tobacco industry, we call on arts, cultural and heritage organisations to sign the smoke-free arts declaration ([smokefreearts.org.uk](http://smokefreearts.org.uk)) to affirm that tobacco sponsorship is unacceptable. We also call on sponsors of the arts to undertake that they will no longer support organisations that accept tobacco sponsorship.

**Dr Nicholas Hopkinson**  
Imperial College, London  
on behalf of 1,104 other healthcare professionals

### eBay should look after its sellers

Your article "It's seller beware on eBay as auction site's buyer guarantee is exploited by scammers" (Cash, last week) was excellent and revealed eBay as a company with policies created to protect its own sales rather than the integrity of a buyer/seller transaction. One has to ask why the Office of Fair Trading has not acted. In the UK we are so reluctant to act against companies, and yet the public pay for these bodies (like Trading Standards) to do a job that they seldom seem to actually carry out.

**Martin Sandaver**  
Hay-on-Wye

### Vietnam trades independently

Vietnam is indeed "an ardent joiner of multinational organisations" but none of the groups Andrew Rawnsley ("Lessons from the east about what folly it would be to choose isolation", last week) quoted have supranational ambitions comparable with the European Union. The prosperity Rawnsley witnessed in Vietnam was a product of the 1986 transition to a "socialist-oriented market economy", in practice a combination of both market forces and economic protectionism similar to policies implemented by Japan and South

Korea after 1945, and China from 1978.

The rise of China has yet to persuade Vietnam or its neighbours to surrender control of their borders, currency, or economy to an EU-style union. If Vietnam can embrace modernity and international cooperation, yet retain its national independence while bordering 1.3 billion Chinese, why can't Britain?

**John Butler-Allen**  
Kidderminster

### Hens' lives are hardly 'enriched'

The old "barren" cages, now banned, typically held four or five hens, with each bird allowed less than a sheet of A4 (shared) floor space of sloping wire "Most farmed chickens endure hideous lives...", last week). Modern "enriched" cages hold 40-60 hens, with at least 750 sq cm (shared) floor space per hen – that is 150 sq cm larger than a sheet of A4 – and must include perches, small screened areas for egg laying and a scratching area. This "enrichment" still fails miserably to allow hens to carry out their natural behavioural patterns, thereby imposing on them lives of total frustration.

**Clare Druce**  
Holmfirth, West Yorkshire

### UK did not welcome fleeing Jews

Rowan Williams ("Tomorrow, we have a chance to stop the death of innocents", last week) evokes the Kindertransport as an example of what should now be emulated in relation to amendments to the immigration bill. Yes, the then UK government did enact legislation to allow settlement of sorts. But the 10,000 Kindertransport children were the exception rather than the rule: many more millions perished. UK government attitudes to Jewish immigration 1932-48 were consistently hostile, with powers resting with successive home secretaries on who should and should not be granted entry, with the narrow economic argument that some Jewish adult immigration might be possible to help relieve a servant shortage.

**Bruce Ross-Smith**  
Oxford

### English skills are worth having

So Kwame Kwei-Armah is "perturbed" by a restaurant notice saying "Waiters wanted – must speak immaculate English", seeing this as a sign of "anti-immigrant feeling" ("London – the view from outside", New Review, last week). But surely he is being at best condescending in assuming that "immaculate English" is spoken only by British-born white people? I see nothing wrong in public-facing organisations wishing to employ staff who can communicate well in English. Or in encouraging anyone from whatever background to increase their employment chances by becoming as fluent in the language as possible.

**Karen Lane**  
Ilford, Essex

## THE READERS' EDITOR ON... MEMORY AND IMAGES



Here's a little survey. Look back across your life and name the four most significant news images you can remember. Take a moment.

Ready now? OK. Naturally, we will all choose different events according to our ages, but I would be willing to bet that most adults among you would list the planes going into the Twin Towers on 9/11 among your four. You might also have the Chernobyl disaster, the Challenger spacecraft explosion, the fall of Saddam Hussein, the 7/7 bombings in London, the Japanese tsunami.

Equally, a significant image need not necessarily be violent. You might have included the release of Nelson

Mandela, the triumph of Barack Obama, the fall of the Berlin Wall or the misery of the Ethiopian famine.

Whatever your choice, it's very likely that you saw at least one of those images at an early age and it has stayed with you for the rest of your life. When I did this quick survey recently I made the assassination of President Kennedy in 1963 my first choice. I was eight years old at the time.

My other nominations included the moon landings and the Vietnam war – events that took place in my adolescence. Despite a lifetime working in newspapers, when asked to pick memorable images my instinct was to go back to a time before I understood what made the news.

I'm grateful to my colleague at SBS in Australia, Sally Begbie, who came up with this unscientific survey and tested it on eight non-editorial staff at her TV station before trying it out on 40 journalists from around the world at the annual conference of the Organization of News Ombudsmen in Buenos Aires.

Her home sample of men and women aged from 23 to 53 all included the Twin Towers in their choices and at least one image seen in their childhood. Interestingly, one respondent listed an image of a woman clinging to a tree in the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004, but could not be sure if it wasn't a still from the film *The Impossible*, based on the disaster but made eight years later.

Another claimed to remember a chilling image of a school murder in Kobe, Japan, which was never shown on TV or used in a newspaper. The respondent was astonished that she had imagined it. "I can see it so clearly, it was just so shocking," she said, confirming Begbie's theory that "the viewer is capable of filling in the details even when they are not shown them".

Of the 32 stories recalled by Begbie's home sample, terrorism (9/11, Isis killings, the Madrid train bomb) topped the list, with politics, somewhat unexpectedly, coming second, in moments of political crisis or change. Revolution and protest (Tiananmen Square, the

Berlin Wall, *Je suis Charlie*) took third place, followed by natural disasters (tsunamis, famines), moonshots and the Challenger disaster.

War, murders and massacres were way down the list.

The readers' editors and broadcasting standards editors gathered at the conference came up with similar events in their nominations, and again most reached back to their childhood for a defining image. As Begbie said: "News producers need to remain aware of their responsibilities... the audience is impressionable from a young age." Among the 22 nations represented at the conference, "local" news figured low down the order; international events dominated, as they did in the Australian survey.

"Those international events were all terrorism-related," said Begbie, "but if you consider that terrorism represents a threat to western civilisation, then

perhaps news consumers see it as something close to home, an event they can imagine might directly affect them."

She concluded that the images we retain were actually more about power than mere violence – power in all its forms: terrorism, politics, the power of the natural world, the power of human invention. She also maintained that the images that most people recalled were generally symbolic and not particularly graphic, or detailed. All of which tends to support the practice of most mainstream media to avoid blood and gore.

Begbie suggested that in an overcrowded visual landscape, and with the barbarous propaganda machine of Isis releasing terrifying images, news media need to show restraint. "Less is likely to be more," she added.

Newsrooms need always to ask themselves if the use of graphic material is essential to the story being told. Common sense – and her survey – suggests that it rarely is.

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