

Daily Universal Register

UK: MPs debate and vote on the Welfare Reform and Work Bill; third-quarter growth figures released by the Office for National Statistics; financial reports from Apple, Twitter and BP; the annual police bravery awards are presented.

US: The UN security council discusses the Middle East.

Nature notes



Song thrushes are singing again, but only at dawn and late in the evening. They have not been heard since the end of July, and this will

be no more than a brief revival, lasting for only a few weeks, with most of them silent again over Christmas. This short outburst of song is like advance notice to other song thrushes that they will be taking up their territory wholeheartedly in the new year, when they will start singing regularly. It may also help the young males to learn the song before they themselves set up their first territory. It is one of the finest British bird songs, delivered from a treetop with loud, clear whistles and trills that are often repeated several times in a row. Some immigrants from the north are also flying in now, often with the redwing flocks that are pouring in and spreading through the country. Redwings are very similar to song thrushes, but have a scarlet patch under the wing and a creamy white stripe above the eye. The only birds that are singing steadily at present are robins, which hold winter territories. A wren's song may ring out occasionally from under the yellowing bramble bushes and the crumbling bracken.

DERWENT MAY

Birthdays today



John Cleese, pictured, actor, *Monty Python's Flying Circus* (1969-74), *Fawlty Towers* (1975-79), 76; Professor Michael Driscoll, economist, vice-chancellor, Middlesex University (1996-2015), 65; Peter Firth, actor, *Spooks* (2002-11), 62; Sir Paul Fox, controller, BBC One (1967-73), 90; Francis Fukuyama, political economist and writer, *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992), 63; Glenn Hoddle, footballer, England (1979-88), and manager, England (1996-99), 58; Sir Raymond Johnstone, chairman, Forestry Commission (1989-94), 86; Admiral Sir John Kerr, commander-in-chief, Naval Home Command (1991-94), 78; Simon Le Bon, singer, Duran Duran, *Rio* (1982), 57; Kit Malthouse, Conservative MP for North West Hampshire, deputy mayor of London, business and enterprise (2012-15), 49; Peter Martins, ballet master in chief, New York City Ballet, 69; Vanessa-Mae Nicholson, violinist, 37; Kelly Osbourne, TV presenter, 31; Ivan Reitman, film producer, *Ghostbusters* (1984), 69; Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, president of Brazil (2003-11), 70; AN Wilson, writer, *Winnie and Wolf* (2008), *Victoria: A Life* (2014), 65; Lt-Col Sir Malcolm Ross, comptroller, Lord Chamberlain's Office (1991-2006), 72.

On this day

In 1968 an estimated 6,000 marchers, protesting against US involvement in Vietnam, confronted police outside the US embassy in London; in 1986 the London Stock Exchange's "Big Bang" took place, transforming the way that shares were traded.

The last word

"Death is nothing at all; it does not count. I have only slipped away into the next room." Henry Scott Holland, theologian, in a sermon preached on Whitsunday 1910



Who's in Charge?

In seeking to derail a key component of the government's economic policy the House of Lords has not just defied tradition. It has defied democracy

The House of Lords has precipitated a constitutional crisis in which it cannot be allowed to prevail. An alliance of peers and bishops, all unelected, all asserting a political power that they do not have, joined forces last night to try to force George Osborne to rethink a central plank of his economic plan. A rethink on points of detail may be needed, but it cannot be forced on the government by the upper chamber.

The tax credit cuts, as set out in the summer budget, have been approved three times by the House of Commons, the crucible of British democracy. The toughest of two motions passed by the Lords last night ostensibly requires the government to delay the cuts for three years pending a review of their impact. This would, in effect, kill the measure. The Lords rebellion is an egregious case of over-reach regardless of the merits of the arguments for and against the cuts. The fact that the motions passed with the help of more than 90 Liberal Democrat peers when the party has eight MPs should disqualify them as a roadblock to government policy.

The government has been guilty of malpractice in steering these cuts through parliament. A secondary statutory instrument was used when they should have been included in the finance bill

and thus immunised from meddling by the Lords. But the principle remains: money bills are not for unelected peers to veto. Mr Osborne should drive this measure in essentially the same form through the Commons once again, defying any repeat rebellion from their lordships in the process. He should then respond to the legitimate concerns of those who may be made worse off, and those of his backbenchers worried on their behalf.

Tax credits were introduced under the last Labour government to help working families stuck on low wages. As wages stagnated despite the post-2008 recovery, the cost of tax credits rose from £4 billion to £30 billion a year, a sum rightly seen as an unsustainable subsidy for low-wage employers. In principle the cuts announced by the chancellor in September end this subsidy and make £4.4 billion in savings which are needed to deliver a budget surplus by 2020. In practice it is not employers who will feel the worst of the pain, but the working poor whom the Conservatives claim to champion.

The Treasury says that eight out of ten families will be better off with the Tories' living wage and higher tax thresholds. It has not published its research, however, and others tell a different story. The Resolution Foundation claims that everyone

in the poorer half of the workforce will have a drop in income if the cuts are introduced as planned next April. Within that group the poorest 30 per cent will suffer most. Being in work rather than on benefits does not save 8.4 million households from a fall in take-home pay. Having children means the cuts will hurt more than not having them, and — at current growth rates — a single parent in full-time work on the living wage will be worse off until 2019.

During and since the election both occupants of Downing Street have been clear that deep cuts to welfare are needed. They won a famous victory and in broad terms they have a mandate to cut. Yet Mr Osborne's urgent need for £4.4 billion by next spring is a result of timetables for a surplus by the next election. It is worsened by ringfences, including one around pensions and pensioner benefits worth £111 billion, that he and the prime minister have created for themselves.

It is a good thing that he is said to be in "listening" mode, because it is hard to avoid the suspicion that the Treasury misjudged where the real burden of these cuts will fall. It is not too late to ease their impact on the neediest, and this is Mr Osborne's next task. Mr Cameron's is to remind the House of Lords who runs the country.

Clinical Cloud

Data from trials of new drugs must be fully available to independent scrutiny

Medical science depends on evidence. Were it left merely to hunch and intuition, even of the most skilled practitioners, then patients' safety and welfare would be put at risk. Hence it is vital, both for patients and for public confidence, that clinical trials of medicines are open and transparent. Yet pharmaceutical companies are lobbying to prevent the public release of the full data from these trials. It is a short-sighted and misguided intervention on specious grounds.

Campaigners for transparency cite cases in which drugs have been released where full data would have revealed possible side-effects or caveats about effectiveness. They include Tamiflu, a medicine for flu treatment and prevention, and Seroxat, an anti-depressant. In the case of Seroxat, manufactured by GlaxoSmithKline, independent researchers found that the full clinical data suggested a link to suicide and self-harm among teenagers taking the drug. The summary results had not revealed it.

The pharmaceutical companies' concerns are not groundless. They are justifiably wary of compromising the anonymity of patients who are

involved in the trials. And research conclusions are intellectual property. Yet the evidence is that the balance is falling too heavily against disclosure. Especially, but not only, in the field of mental health, successful treatment varies widely. Anti-depressants may have side-effects or indeed may have no effects. The science is not speculative but it is a field where research can take unpredictable paths.

It is the ethos of science is that no one has the last word and that everyone's research is subject to review. Yet scientists maintain that pharmaceutical companies are summarising data at such a high and aggregated level that they are rendering it incapable of being independently checked. An article in the technical journals will typically be some 10 to 15 pages long, whereas the data set on which it is based will be huge.

The temptation to present the results in a favourable light, without qualifications, is a natural human impulse. That is why the data needs to be available in full. The pharmaceutical companies are becoming more open and are in principle committed to transparency. A voluntary standard

is being developed by the European Medicines Agency, a collective of national regulators, that would make full data from clinical trials available for all drugs that come to the market. This will be implemented next year, and is likely to become more widely invoked as an international standard.

Yet the regulators have no transnational powers. The standard will be voluntary. Some pharmaceutical companies are seeking to accomplish transparency through a standard championed by their own consortium, called Transcelerate. Its methods seem unimpeachable: a wish to publish data while protecting the anonymity of patients. Yet the actual techniques proposed seem to result in data so limited or heavily redacted as to be incapable of full peer review.

Pharmaceutical companies need to have incentives to pursue research. Market mechanisms, subject to rigorous regulation, are a proven method of expanding the boundaries of knowledge. Yet without the full data, and with purely summary results, pharmacological research will be more of a marketing than a medical exercise. That is in no one's interests.

Shades of 2001

Afghanistan's near future looks ominously like its past

The spectre of al-Qaeda is returning to haunt Afghanistan. A year after American troops supposedly ended combat operations there, Osama bin Laden's son and second-in-command have moved back to the lawless Afghan borderlands from which the 9/11 attacks were launched.

They did not come alone. This month an al-Qaeda build-up in Kandahar province was hit with 63 US airstrikes and "one of the largest ground assault operations we have ever conducted in Afghanistan", according to a Pentagon spokesman. The war that President Obama was determined to end before he left office is not over.

It has merely entered a new phase in which a failure of western resolve has been seized upon by militants bent on making a barely functioning state a haven for terrorism once again.

The Taliban still ranks as the main threat to Kabul. It claims not to support al-Qaeda, but the truth is more complex. Uzbek fighters linked to al-Qaeda were among the raiders who stormed the strategic northern city of Kunduz last month.

They held Kunduz for only three days. President Obama responded by cancelling the withdrawal of the last US troops stationed in the capital, but too late. The notion of an orderly transition to full

Afghan responsibility for security was exposed as a charade. The Afghan National Army, trained and equipped at vast western expense, was weakened at Kunduz by deserters and ineffective without US air support. The Taliban units that withdrew after that show of defiance face a challenge from Islamic State cells in three quarters of the country's provinces, but they collude with al-Qaeda as they did before 9/11. Mr Obama once said that he was not opposed to all wars; just dumb wars. The Afghan conflict was never dumb. It was right and necessary, and a demonstration that no war is won that is not finished.