

# Brexit goes glossy in Wetherspoon's pubs

Regarding John Harris's article (England's rebel spirit is rising - and it wants a no-deal Brexit, 21 January), in Wetherspoon's outlets across the country, pamphleteering against a deal has become an industry. On every table in every bar (almost 1,000 of them) is what looks like a menu. Called Propel Newsletter, it promises readers falling food prices and cheaper booze in the event of a no-deal Brexit and condemns the "Oxbridge toffs" who would have us think otherwise. Jacob Rees-Mogg is not described as an Oxbridge toff. Instead he is seen smiling with Tim Martin in the 100-page glossy magazine, which customers can pick up free.

written with insights. Going to Wetherspoon's to listen to Tim Martin address a meeting in a pub at 10.30am was, however, only ever likely to expose as narrow a range of sentiments as, for example, judging the moral climate by reference to readers' comments on Mail Online - at best imprecise, or just simply misleading. Abstemious readers should not be misled into believing that all Martin's patrons have signed a pledge to agree with his view on anything, let alone Brexit.

**Les Bright**  
*Exeter, Devon*

● In attempting to explain Brexit fervour, John Harris cites the line in the Sex Pistols song Anarchy in the UK "Don't know what I want, but I know how to get it" as part of a centuries-old English "tendency to indulge in futile, inexplicable gestures". Brexit may be better encapsulated by Johnny Rotten's question to the audience at the end of the last Sex Pistols concert in 1978: "Ever get the feeling you've been cheated?"

Harris also says that "belief in a second referendum still seems to be largely the preserve of a certain kind of middle-class person". Perhaps we should include Nigel Farage in that: in an interview with the Daily Mirror on 16 May 2016 he anticipated a remain victory and said that, if it was a narrow win, pressure would grow for a rerun of the ballot: "In a 52-48 referendum this would be unfinished business by a long way."

**David Osmon**  
*London*

● John Harris cites the futile yell of Johnny Rotten's Anarchy in the UK in his assessment of England's rebel spirit. But for me, as I believe John has already acknowledged in the past, it's Rotten's fatalistic poetry of God Save the Queen that

nails the moment: "There's no future in England's dreaming". Yeah, I think that pretty much covers it. But sadly, I suspect the anger of the potential H-bombs he witnessed in Wetherspoon's will not be defused until they have their day. Only then perhaps will they wake up to the true consequences of their nationalistic dreams of independence, empowerment and status. It's just sad that the rest of us have to be dragged along.

**Colin Montgomery**  
*Edinburgh*

● I grew up in Blackburn in a very working-class family and then lived in an artists' community in Manchester, so I am in touch with both sides of the Brexit argument. People in my local pub talk about how they think politicians will betray Brexit and the people. Then I go to Manchester and I hear university students the same age as me who think the pub drinkers are idiots.

People in working-class towns voted leave out of anger - not at the EU as an institution but against the political class in general. Of course, it is then easy to point at them and say: "Why vote against EU membership then?" But that is to miss the point

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of their anger. For these people politics has not just failed them but forgotten them entirely. Industries that they had pride in shrank. Mine and steel workers, factory workers and tradesmen, had their occupations taken from them.

Then a devastating recession forced many of them to the extremes of desperation. Then we had a referendum and they heard a Conservative prime minister asking them to vote for the status quo. Of course they voted leave. Theresa May says another referendum would damage social cohesion. I agree that in the current atmosphere it would. But if we were to reach out to the people we disagree with we could start to heal these divisions. After all, those guys in the pub in Blackburn and my friends in central Manchester would both buy me a pint, so why not each other?

**Carl Monaghan**  
*Blackburn*

● John Harris evokes George Orwell's comments about nationalism versus patriotism, but is he observing patriots or nationalists? Has the distinction been lost, or was it ever understood? Orwell makes clear the distinction between love of place and identity as being decidedly preferable to a hatred of "Johnny Foreigner" born out of fear and ignorance. Both are usually based on sentimental myths often fed by the rightwing press and insufficiently exposed. Even banal bans on coloured lightbulbs and orders to reduce the power of vacuum cleaners stoke up resentment against the EU when, in fact, these were proposals from the UK government.

Harris refers to a feeling of empathy for the Wetherspoon's patrons eager to swallow Tim Martin's agitprop with their pints. Certainly, the political elite need to begin to understand, and act on, the confusion and resentment felt by traditional communities to such rapid change to their sense of place and identity before the nationalism of the extreme right does it for them.

**Haydn Thomas**  
*Sidmouth, Devon*

## Shop until we drop

*"The Burj Khalifa seen from a Dubai shopping mall. This city is a perfect example of humanity's ability to hide its head in the sand of consumerism and unsustainable development funded by the same petroleum industry that doomed our planet's future. Perhaps my monochrome take of this city reflects the need to sober up from this folly of hyper-urban-mall existence"*

VALIA PAPOUTSAKI / GUARDIAN COMMUNITY

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# Theresa May and the true threat to social cohesion

Theresa May may well be right to worry about social cohesion, which is a nice way of saying that the extreme right wing who are behind Brexit are more likely to turn to violence if their wishes are thwarted than are the pleasant, moderate folk who marched on 20 October last year, parading nice, self-deprecatory slogans such as "I'm really quite cross about this" (May rules out second vote as threat to social cohesion, 22 January).

are likely to behave after Brexit, when, as will probably happen, some of them, at least, lose their jobs, can't get the prescriptions they need, can't afford to buy the foods they used to take for granted and realise they have been sold a pack of lies by the very people they thought were telling them the unvarnished truth. Oh, and that just as many foreign nationals are settling here as before, only most of them now come from the Indian subcontinent. At this point I imagine Messrs Johnson, Rees-Mogg, Duncan-Smith et al will suddenly find they have to pursue exciting other commitments,

well away from the frontline of British politics. Mrs May makes much of her sense of duty. Isn't her principal responsibility to protect the interests of the 66 million inhabitants of the UK, not to satisfy the whims of 17 million highly biddable members of the public, expressed in an absurd simulacrum of democracy?

**Matthew Taylor**  
*Hove, East Sussex*

● It is rather late in the day for the prime minister to be worrying about social cohesion after a decade of Tory austerity and a steady

dismantling and underfunding of our public services. As for a second referendum "undermining faith in our democracy", I suggest that many of us have already been disillusioned by a politically motivated referendum and a leave campaign based on undeliverable promises, funded by dubious sources and subject to covert manipulation by outside actors. Gordon Brown's proposal that we should hold a people's vote preceded by citizens' assemblies is a good one. This might just restore civil discourse and convince the world that this country is still capable of making informed and considered decisions after a mutually respectful debate.

**Susan Newton**  
*Uppermill, Greater Manchester*

## Planetary crisis

How can it be that in all the discussion about Brexit-related threats, so little is said about the disastrous environmental impact of switching the UK's trading focus from our own continent to those that are far away? Are we so unaware of the planetary crisis that threatens us all?

**Diana Francis**  
*Bath*

## Suez divided Britain

Simon Jenkins says "Parliament and public opinion backed him [Anthony Eden] all the way" in relation to the 1956 Suez debacle (May can learn to compromise with a political tip from 1846, 18 January). But opinion in parliament and among the public was bitterly divided. I well remember Hugh Gaitskell's impassioned speeches condemning the illegality

of the operation and Nye Bevan addressing a huge crowd in Trafalgar Square. In my workplace, aged 17, I became aware of just how divisive politics could be, with my colleagues divided pretty well 50-50 for and against. Suez, Iraq and now Brexit stand out as the three times during my life that the country has been so bitterly, and almost equally, divided on a major issue.

**Dr John Coad**  
*Loanhead, Midlothian*

## More tools needed to beat rogue landlords

I agree with outrage about rogue landlords profiting from housing benefit (Law must change, says council that paid £500,000 to rogue landlord, 22 January). But focusing frustration on Brent council - where we're leading the way in cracking down on landlords who make their tenants' lives a misery - is regrettable. Since 2016 we've secured over 140 prosecutions and issued over 100 civil penalty notices; last month we secured a historic victory by using the Proceeds of Crime Act after finding 31 people in a four-bedroom house.

Your report focused on Bernard McGowan, a notorious landlord whom Brent has taken to court four times since 2016. Mr McGowan receives housing benefit directly for only two claimants today, compared with 60 in 2015. The options available to councils to prevent landlords profiting from housing benefit are inadequate. Subject to certain conditions, we can take over direct management of unlicensed and substandard properties. This is hugely bureaucratic and costly, and the landlord is still owed any surplus after management fees.

Landlord licensing helps us drive up housing standards but does not apply everywhere in Brent. We'll be applying to the government to be able to renew our existing schemes and also to extend licensing to more areas of the borough. Permission for borough-wide licensing was refused when we applied in August 2017.

Housing benefit is governed by different legislation to licensing so, regardless of whether a property is correctly licensed, there is a legitimate rental liability - ultimately borne by the tenant. We're calling on the government to link failure to pass a council's fit and proper person test or to manage people's homes safely with this liability. Without this change, rogue landlords will continue to profit from housing benefit.

**Cllr Eleanor Southwood**  
*Cabinet member for housing and welfare reform, Brent council*

## No such thing as too many books

It is not possible to own too many books (Tom Gauld cartoon strip, Review, 19 January). It is, however, common not to have enough space for all your books, a problem that I and many others experience. Now I that have reached peak book, I have made a deal with myself. I still buy books if I want them badly enough. But for each one I buy, I take two to the charity bookshop. A drawback is that the two I move on are generally smaller than the one I acquire, so no net gain in space may accrue.

**Dr John Kanefsky**  
*Morcharth Bishop, Devon*

## Corrections and clarifications

● A caption incorrectly suggested that a photograph showed Barbara Stanwyck with Gary Cooper and Oscar Homolka in Ball of Fire. The picture showed her with two others from that film's cast, Dan Duryea and Ralph Peters (Hollywood's grittiest goddess, 18 January, page 6, G2).

● A photo captioned "The Victorian Tory prime minister Sir Robert Peel" was actually of his son, the Liberal MP Sir Robert Peel (May can learn to compromise with a political tip from 1846, 18 January, page 4, Journal).

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## Gormley man is new flasher of Folkestone

In 1999, we had a student from Ghana on a summer school at Oxford who needed immediate hospitalisation. At A&E, he asked if they wanted to see his passport and medical insurance. The nurse said: "Sir, all I need to know is that you're sick." Let's keep that kind of NHS ('I thought they were killing me': NHS trust halted asylum seeker's cancer treatment, [theguardian.com](http://theguardian.com), 21 January).

**Andrew Shacknov**  
*Oxford*

● Your letter writers' piling in to criticise the pernicious influence of Ofsted (22 January) is welcome and justified; but to inject some balance on the subject, school headteachers and senior managements must accept their responsibility in colluding with its demands for so long, to the detriment of children and true education.

**John Stringer**  
*Chichester*

● Readers should not delay coming to see the attractive Markeaton footbridge (Letters spread photo, 22 January). It is to be demolished with the widening of the A38.

**Keith Burchell**  
*Derby*

● How appropriate that Antony Gormley's statue of a naked man (Letters spread photo, 21 January) should be placed in one of the arches under the promenade at Folkestone: when I was a schoolboy in the town, in the 1970s, they were a notorious haunt of flashers.

**Brian Ferris**  
*Tumbridge Wells, Kent*

● If elderly people were to be prohibited from driving (Letters, 22 January), the roads here in Norfolk would soon be empty. Bliss!  
**Jane Moth (aged 65)**  
*Snettisham, Norfolk*

## Country diary Wenlock Edge, Shropshire

January's cautionary snowdrops open in the lee of a stone wall; they are as white as splashes of wood pigeon droppings under their roost tree, as white as snow that has not yet come. Instead the day is bright and smack-in-the-face cold. Yesterday it rained and smelled of damp sheep; tomorrow will be different. There are emergency sirens on the main road, several: something bad has happened. There is the wave-rumble of a passing aeroplane, going somewhere under a waxing, gibbous moon. There is the clacking of jackdaws in tall trees, agitated by something they take as a warning. All this is swallowed by a north-westerly breeze.

A stream passes through culverts underground and can be heard flowing beneath iron inspection hatches in the road. Yesterday's rain, the flush from fields, ditch trickles, spliced into a watery hawser dragged through clay and limestone down to the brook, through red roots of alder to the Severn, "a stone fountain weeping out my year", as John Donne wrote in his poem Twickenham Gardens.

January is cautious about the passing of time and at this end of the year has more to lose. The robins, great tits, song thrushes - they ease themselves from sub-songs into the shine of day on the shoulder of wind but are still circumspect. There is something lodged in the birds' syrinx, close to the heart, hungry and stern, that holds them back; their evening half-song is now half familiar. Catkins hang stiffly, anticipating bad weather, reluctant to let loose their golden clouds of pollen yet; light catches in the hazel's metallic sheen. In the black buds of ash, purple of birch, bronze of oak and red of hawthorn, the leaves are wrapped tight around a punctuation mark in a story yet to yield.

"You're a caution!" once meant you were astonishing or amusing; January's character is that: fugitive and odd. I dreamed last night that I was given a handful of white pills and swallowed them without thinking. The pills were like snowdrops in the lee of the wall, returning as they always do in the comedy of weathers. As it darkens now at five and the forecast is uncertain, owls call the January cautions.

**Paul Evans**



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