

CROSSBOW - The Bow Group magazine

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BOW

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Binge Britain

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Editor's Note



We've all been there. That fateful day sometime after Christmas when you finally step on the bathroom scales and realise that all that living it up does have consequences after all. And there you are, on your belly and thighs, unforgivingly apparent on the dial on the bathroom scales.

Gordon Brown must be feeling something of the post-binge blues. There he was, spending and borrowing merrily when the terrible day came for him to step on the financial scales and see the damage after the binge. His response? Re-set the scales and start borrowing some more.

But Gordon Brown is not the only one who has been bingeing unsustainably. As a nation, we have been stuffing ourselves silly: going to the mall, holidays, eating or drinking. Personal debt is sky high, obesity has become a pandemic and, as

the media and politicians keep reminding us, we have a national drink problem.

But is bingeing simply about the amount you consume? Or is it to do with the care-free and 'devil may care' attitude with which you do it? And is it the irresponsible attitude that is most worrying, or the sheer volume of what we've spent or consumed?

There have been studies done on how important the concept of 'delayed gratification' is to a child's life chances. Children are given the choice of having a marshmallow now, or waiting twenty minutes and then being given two. Those children who show an ability to be restrained now for added gratification later perhaps unsurprisingly do significantly better in their careers.

Is this a value that has been eroded in a buy-now, pay-later culture, where we expect almost instant gratification thanks to huge advances in technology? Or is it simply that during the boom-times, an 'eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die' attitude is almost inevitable?

People who take to the bottle or whose eating is out of control can often be suffering from depression. Is a feeling of hopelessness and powerlessness in the face of large multi-nationals and an increasingly distant Government driving us to vent our frustrations through something we can effect – our food and alcohol consumption?

In this edition of Crossbow, we attempt to answer some of these questions. Guardian columnist Yvonne Roberts suggests that our booze culture is actually symptomatic of a brand of depression, found in young men struggling to find identity in post-manufacturing Britain. Meanwhile, economist Ruth Lea takes apart the Government's binge on taxpayers' money and Rt Hon John Redwood MP uncovers wasteful spending in Whitehall. Shadow Skills Minister John Hayes MP argues that the Government has wasted the opportunity to train people to flourish in the workplace and the Bow Group Political Secretary Ryan Shorthouse assesses the political landscape post-Glasgow, saying that the Labour Party needs to recycle the optimism which swept it into power in 1997. We also announce the winner of the Bow Group essay competition.

They say you can never have too much of a good thing, so go on, gorge yourself on this – with the expectation of much more to come from the Bow Group in the Autumn. Have a good summer!

Charlotte Leslie
Editor, Crossbow

The Bow Group - Council 2008

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We've had the party. Now the hangover

by Ruth Lea

Since Britain's fortunate departure from the Exchange Rate Mechanism in 1992, the economy has grown well. In no small part this was because of the 1980s supply side revolution, which concentrated on trade union control, tax reform and privatisation, and the 1990s macroeconomic reforms, based on inflation targeting and fiscal consolidation, which were implemented by Chancellor Norman Lamont and followed through by his successor Ken Clarke. The transfer of interest rate setting from the all-too-politicised Treasury to the Bank of England, one of Gordon Brown's earliest decisions as Chancellor and undoubtedly his best, was a very good move.

"Let us remind ourselves just how good the golden economic legacy the Conservative Government handed over to the new Chancellor in 1997 was".

Let us remind ourselves just how good the golden economic legacy the Conservative Government handed over to the new Chancellor in 1997 was. The public finances were heading into surplus, unemployment was falling, inflation was under control, economic growth was good and the current account of the balance of payments was in "balance". Just the opposite is the case today. And yet our new Chancellor claimed he had inherited a "mess" which he, through his unique alchemy, would turn to the economic equivalent of gold. He would end the "Tory boom 'n' bust cycle". As the economy lurches towards stagflation he probably prefers to forget these hubristic words.

But before leaving these musings about Gordon Brown's economic inheritance from the previous Government, may I quote the following passage from Tom Bower's biography of our former Chancellor when he entered the Treasury at the dawn of New Labour's better tomorrow:

"These are fantastically good figures', the official concluded. 'The state of the economy is much better than predicted.' Eyes swivelled to Brown. 'What am I supposed to do with this?' he snarled. 'Write a thank-you letter?'"

(Tom Bower (2004) Gordon Brown, HarperCollins)

There were no thank-you letters. For the next ten years, the state of the economy was good, though it should be emphasised that factors other than the startlingly healthy economy Mr Brown inherited were operating.

The international backdrop was outstandingly benign. Oil prices were modest, falling to \$10pb in the late 1990s, and China's rise as the workshop of the world, producing high quality goods at low prices, greatly benefited the British consumer. Consumers had indeed "never had it so good", and much better than Harold Macmillan could ever have dreamed of. The global economy was, on the whole, buoyant, trouble-free and optimistic. Our Chancellor, of course, took personal credit for the effects on the British economy of these benign global developments.

Underneath the prosperous and confident surface, problems were being stored up. In the US easy credit led to an over-priced housing market that is still falling. And the associated defaults on the notorious sub-prime mortgages triggered a financial crisis that many consider the most severe since the 1930s.

Self-certificated NINJA ("no income, no job and no asset") mortgage lending was, to say the least, accompanied by more than a prudent degree of risk! Along with much of the rest of the global economy, the "credit crunch" hit Britain by storm last August and, even though the narrowly defined financial squalls may have eased, the economic effects are now intensifying as the housing

market falters and, toxically, prices inflation picks up, driven by higher fuel, utility and food bills.

In Britain, a rapid build up in personal debt in recent years has stimulated a consumer binge and powered the recent housing boom. Lending to individuals has risen to over £1,400 billion, with well over 80% secured on dwellings, whilst the household saving ratio has collapsed. This may be regarded as imprudent and unwise behaviour. But many British people like spending. After all, what is wrong with enjoying conspicuous consumption? And why save when you can spend? And if you can borrow, why not spend? Britain experienced a consumption blow-out. And the good old British perennial, the housing market, caught fire. Prices almost tripled over the last decade. This behaviour was not, in one of Gordon Brown's favourite words, "sustainable".

In addition, the Government's profligate behaviour stoked up growth, quite unnecessarily, as well as wrecking the public finances. As I have already commented, when Mr Brown entered the Treasury the public finances, after a quite torrid time in the early 1990s, were heading for the black. All has now changed.

I'm sure we all remember Gordon and his friend Prudence. They went out together for a couple of years at the beginning of Gordon's reign at the Treasury, following his decision to adopt the hair shirt public spending plans bequeathed by Ken Clarke. But Gordon and Prudence were incompatible, despite his upbringing in a Scottish manse. Labour Chancellors are, quite simply, predestined to spend any money they can get their hands on – whether it's from the "hard-working taxpayer" or borrowed on the never-never. It is genetic. It's in the stars and in the genes. They believe that showering taxpayers' money on the public services will earn them the perennial gratitude of the electorate. And, boy, did Mr Brown

spend. The numbers bring tears to the eyes.

'Labour Chancellors are, quite simply, predestined to spend any money they can get their hands on. And, boy, did Mr Brown spend'.

The state spending taps were turned on in FY2000 (financial year 2000/2001) after a couple of years of politically-imposed restraint. Between FY1999 and FY2007 public spending benefited from an annual average increase of nearly 7% in current prices. Over the decade FY1997 to FY2007, state spending rose in total by over 80%.

This was well above the rate of growth in the whole economy and, as a consequence, the share of total spending to GDP has risen from less than 39% in FY1997 to around 42% currently. Even allowing for inflation, the annual average increase over this period was nearly 4½%, again well above the growth rate of real GDP. The public sector, with the exception of our disgracefully under-resourced armed forces, has been showered with taxpayers' money.

We now know that much of this money has been wasted. Whilst the private sector, driven by the realities and disciplines of competitive markets,

clocks up productivity increases, productivity in key parts of the public sector has fallen substantially. Falling productivity means, quite simply, squandered resources.

Waste apart, Mr Brown's spending bonanza has wrecked the public finances. When the economy was growing and tax revenues were rising Aesop's ant would have saved for the economic equivalent of winter. Aesop's ant would have saved for the day when the economy would hit just the sort of economic squalls we are now facing from the toxic combination of the credit crunch and rapidly rising inflation.

But Mr Brown is no Aesop's ant. Public borrowing could reach £50bn this year and, irony of ironies, the UK is being reprimanded by the EU for its imprudent fiscal policies.

The economy has been on the economic equivalent of steroids, which is quite simply unsustainable. The party in both the public and the private sectors has to stop. It is now stopping. The key question concerns the severity of the hangover.

There is undoubtedly a risk that Britain will face a full-blown recession with falling GDP, a collapsing housing market and rapidly rising unemployment, coupled with rising inflation. But, even if this dire scenario is avoided, it will not be a happy

time. As a minimum of pain, there is likely to be dreary period of slow growth and, given the rapid food and fuel price increases and higher taxes, a genuine reduction in many people's living standards.

British people are simply not used to falling living standards. Consumer confidence will be further eroded by slipping house prices and the impact of the "credit crunch", as higher interest rates and tightening lending criteria make it harder and more expensive for people to obtain credit. For many this will feel like recession, even if there is not a full-blown recession as economists narrowly define it (i.e. two successive quarters of falling output).

There will be very little monetary easing from the Bank of England in the near future, given the inflationary situation. There are even calls for higher rates, which I hope will be resisted. And the Government, given the poor state of the public accounts for which it is wholly responsible, are unable to cut the tax burden of people who are particularly hard-pressed. They are hoist on their own petard. After a decade of partying, the hangover will be unpleasant and prolonged.

Ruth Lea is Economic Adviser to the Arbutnot Banking Group and Director of Global Vision



The Government needs to slim down its waste line

by Rt. Hon John Redwood MP

For the last ten years Gordon Brown has encouraged an intellectual rigor mortis in any debate over taxation or public expenditure. Whenever any Conservative MP has suggested that not every pound spent in the public sector is a pound well spent, or that the government should try reducing the amount it spends through taxation and public borrowing, the Prime Minister's immediate reaction has been to accuse the Conservatives of wishing to cut vital services and to challenge us on how many doctors, teachers or nurses we wished to cut. This is both crude and silly. I know of no MP who wants fewer doctors, teachers or nurses, nor do I know of anyone who does not wish to see the necessary resources given to our schools and hospitals.

There is a growing realisation that the government has badly squandered the economic legacy it inherited from the last Conservative government. The last decade has been a period of unprecedented growth in the world economy. Chancellor Mr. Brown should have taken the opportunity to reduce the tax burden and make the UK economy leaner and more efficient, as was being done in countries like Ireland. Instead, by frittering away the proceeds of growth, going on a debt binge and by introducing more than a hundred tax increases, he ploughed millions of pounds into the public sector while worrying little about how they were spent. Today food and fuel prices are rocketing, demand is faltering and house prices are falling. The government finds its sums do not add up and it has no way of reducing the tax burden on businesses and families to ease the hard times ahead. Britain is the only developed country which is going into the economic downturn raising taxes instead of cutting them. As for our public services, the trains still do not run on time, too many schools are still failing our children, too many people are still

being treated in dirty hospitals, and our soldiers face shortages of the vital equipment they need to carry out their duties.

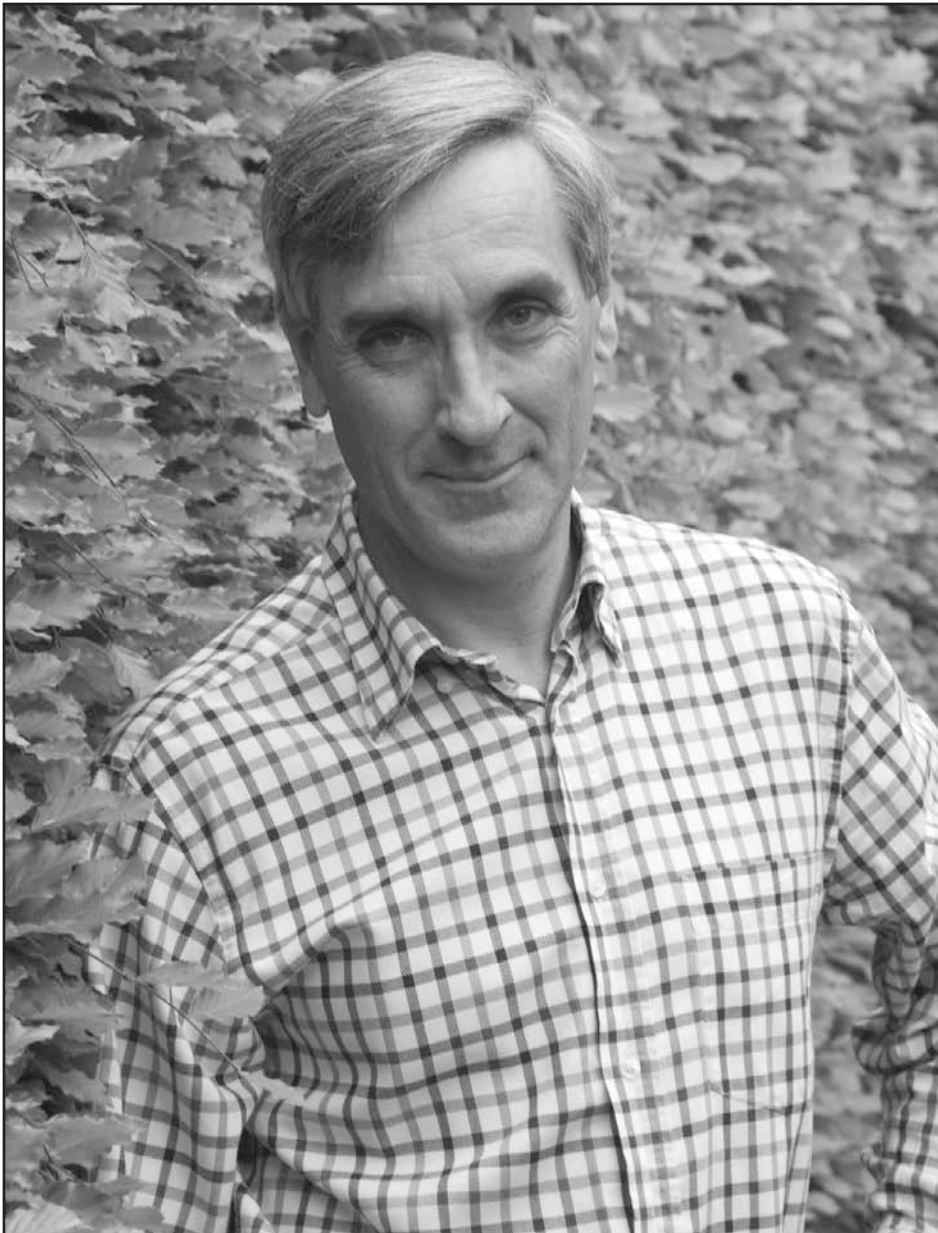
'People now feel their income squeezed and are no longer inclined to believe Labour's line that good public services require higher taxes'

So where has all the money gone? Some of it was indeed well spent, and like all others I welcome the increased numbers of doctors, teachers and nurses which have been recruited over the last decade. Unfortunately, they account for only a small proportion of the public sector's expansion since 1997. More telling has been the growth in the Whitehall bureaucracy. In the time Labour has been in power, the cost of government has gone up by over fifty percent and the number of civil servants increased by more than 300,000. They have added another layer to our system of government by introducing unelected regional government in England. Central grants to these bodies have increased by thirty two percent in seven years. There are now more than 3,200 press officers across the government departments and public quangos, and the number of NHS managers has grown at almost triple the rate of NHS nurses. For every extra £100 spent by the NHS, £56 is spent on higher wages and administration, and another £9 is lost through inefficiency. There have been nine major reorganisations of the NHS in nine years, which is estimated to have cost a total of £3 billion. The Home Office spent £6.5 million on an unsuccessful attempt to persuade the police force of the merits of a reorganisation. The Department of Environment and Local Government has been renamed on four separate occasions, each time requiring substantial expenditure on new signs,

headed notepaper and more. We could fill a book on the number of new rules, regulations and requirements – most of which are “gold plated” by our Euro-enthusiastic Labour Party – which have been imposed on us by Brussels, each one requiring more and more enforcement officers, compliance officers and other box tickers and form fillers.

The large increase in the number of bureaucrats and civil servants is not allied to an improvement in efficiency. With growing regularity, Ministers have had to come to the House of Commons to apologise for botched projects, wasteful expenditure, and delayed implementation. Not only did the Millennium Dome greatly overrun its budget, it then lay idle and purposeless once the Millennium celebrations were over. The Scottish Parliament, originally estimated to cost between £10 million and £40 million, ended up costing £431 million. The Government have been particularly inept at handling large IT projects. Between 2001 and 2006, four major projects spanning four departments have gone wrong. The overall budget for these projects, which were forecast to cost £9 billion, overran by nearly £34 billion. The government spent £539 million on a new computer system for the Child Support Agency, only to discover that it worked no more effectively than the previous one. The Department of Work and Pensions also wrote off £141 million on a new computer system. At the beginning of this year the Guardian estimated that the cost of various abandoned government IT projects had reached £2 billion since 2000. Since then, two more have been abandoned: the “Police Portal” and the “integrated prisoner tracking”. These will add considerably more to the £2 billion figure.

The government has been especially wasteful in its procurement methods.



The Public and Commercial Services Union run a "Waste Report" scheme, where they invite their members to contact them with examples of waste in the civil service.

Some of the stories they have publicised include a Ministry of Defence contractor charging over £60 for a computer mouse that would otherwise cost £5, and HMRC employing consultants on an average daily rate of £750, who sit opposite civil servants doing the same job for £120 a day. There are many similar anecdotes examples of wasteful practices in local government, such as the revelation by Hull City Council that it costs them £50 to replace a 35p light bulb, an action requiring the attention of four members of staff.

Even more money is lost due to official incompetence. The Ministry of Defence

managed to lose 200,000 sets of body armour which were badly needed by our troops in Iraq. Benefit fraud and errors caused the DWP a loss of £2.5 billion last year, and £57 million was paid out to dead people in 2006.

Just before the last General Election, the government did show some signs of realising that it needed to get a grip on how much money was being thrown at the public services and ensure that it was being spent wisely.

Its own Review Committee, headed by Sir Peter Gershon, calculated that the Treasury could cut £22 billion of annual expenditure without having any adverse effect on important frontline services. Yet when the Conservatives proposed tax cuts of just £4 billion at that election, the Labour machine again went into overdrive, with Cabinet ministers, like

sheep bleating "four legs good, two legs bad", repeating the mantra that our secret agenda was the large scale sacking of doctors, teachers and nurses. The public have moved on from this. People now feel their incomes squeezed and are no longer inclined to believe Labour's line that good public services require higher taxes when they have already paid so much for so little in return.

Nor are people likely to be scared off by claims that tax cuts would mean a "black hole" in the public finances. Having seen the amount of money the Government has squandered on Northern Rock, on botched IT systems, on more and more unnecessary layers of government and "jobs for the boys", they see that Labour has created a far bigger black hole than that which they ever believed the Conservatives would create in the public finances.

David Cameron has been right to say that the proceeds of growth will be shared between lowering the tax burden and improving the public services. The main priority for any new government after the General Election will be to get the public finances under control.

This will involve some difficult decisions about our spending priorities, and taking much greater care to ensure that taxpayers get as best value for money as possible. As we have seen in London, where more and more examples of Ken Livingstone's prolificacy have been uncovered and jettisoned by the new administration, it is possible to cut out waste without affecting the overall numbers of doctors, teachers or nurses. The British people, badly feeling the effects of the credit crunch, hope and expect that this best practice being pioneered by a Conservative administration in London is extended to the Treasury after the next General Election.

Rt. Hon John Redwood MP is Member of Parliament for Wokingham and is the Chairman of the Conservative Party's Economic Competitiveness Policy Review

Recycling ambition

by Ryan Shorthouse



So Labour stumbles on. Gordon failed in his home territory, losing a majority of 13,507 in Glasgow East to the increasingly popular SNP. This summer, the far sides of the Labour Party will be calling- more vocally than ever- for him to go. The ultra-Blairites, the voice of the Mondeo Man, will say Gordon has lost touch with Southern England. Expect more noises from Charles Clarke and Alan Milburn. Defenders of the industrial towns in the Party's traditional heartlands, contrastingly, will be bellowing that the New Labour project has failed. Dead and buried. The last of its architects still in Westminster, Gordon Brown, must be slayed.

Brown is stuck in the middle of this tiresome feud- accused by one side as being in the other camp without actually being in any. Ironic that John Major keeps rearing his head these days. Like Europe did to the Tories in 1990's, this battle between the Islington luvvies and the Northern terriers threatens to destabilise the party for a decade.

'Times are tough Gordon, but there's no need to rub our faces in it'

Labour has stopped believing that "Things can only get better". From Bournemouth to Brixton, people in 1997 were swept away by the optimism of New Labour. Now it's gone sour. Labour has wasted the hopeful spirit that it built in the 90s. The narrative has changed from one of hope for the future- of a better NHS, rising school standards, a better deal for the lowest paid- to doom and gloom with rising oil prices and the global credit crunch. Times are tough Gordon, but there's no need to rub our faces in it. Just look across the Atlantic. Even in difficult times, people want to be inspired. That's why the Democrats picked Obama.

David Cameron gets this. Accompanying his pessimistic rhetoric on social breakdown is ideas for the future. He has set out policies detailing how the Conservatives will create more good

schools and make Britain the most family-friendly country in the developed world. One of his main missions is to fix society just as Thatcher fixed the economy. Cameron inspires with his message of hope; Gordon grates with his dithering and talk of trouble.

Just as Blair did back in Labour's good old days, Cameron appeals to those who are ambitious for the future: that big tent called the aspiring classes. The left of the Labour Party are fearful of targeting them. To them ambition means rampant individualism, greed at all costs; it means life is a race, and those left behind have nothing to blame but themselves, and those in front are responsible to only themselves. Indeed, despite good intentions, Blair could be criticised for prioritising equality of opportunity- introducing Sure Start and expanding university places - to pardon the vast gulf between rich and poor that widened under his ascendancy. Left behind? Well, that's your fault; we did all we could for you in the beginning. Philosophically, the left are uncomfortable with ambition. And worse still, ambition became ugly under New Labour: it became associated with a "look at me" culture, canoodling big business and invading Iraq to show how important Britain was in the world again. And the torchbearers of Blairism showed that ambition can be simply self-serving, Cherie Blair and Lord Levy publishing autobiographies to gloat about their achievements.

Shame. Labour needs to reconnect with the aspiring classes. Ambition made the New Labour project a political success initially; if the party stands any chance of winning the next General Election, it must rediscover it. But ambition need not be associated with ugly individualism. It can be redefined. Talk about the ambition of parents rather than the ambition of individuals. Promoting individual ambition can exclude the have-nots and the less capable; but few cannot associate with the desire to give their children and their grandchildren experiences and opportunities they never had. That is a powerful message; it is the sort of

"emotional literacy" which Jon Cruddas MP, that maverick of the left of the party, said Brown urgently needed to find. The Tories have been much more successful at appealing to ambitious parents. Last October, the start of Brown's downfall, George Osborne made two policy announcements: to raise the threshold for which families pay inheritance tax and to abolish stamp duty for first-time buyers. Both help parents with the task of helping their children get on in life. Shop around and ambitious parents will find more: a supply-side revolution in education to help parents whose children would otherwise be doomed to a failing school as well as health visitors and home-based maternity nurses to support parents with giving their children the best care in the critical early years.

Labour, meanwhile, seems to be making it harder for ambitious parents. It wanted to double income tax for the lowest paid to fund tax credits, rather than letting parents keep the money themselves to spend on their kids. And it intends to raise fuel duty by 2p a litre, another burden on those parents who want to drive their children to football training or drama classes. Worse still, whereas Tony Blair made clear his priority was "education, education, education", Gordon Brown seems to be obsessed about keeping Scotland and England together. The Union is important. But not as important as people's family and children, which David Cameron has put at the centre of what he will offer to the British public.

The Labour left needs to allow the party to embrace ambition again- the ambition of parents to give children the best start in life. If it doesn't, it has truly lost touch with what made New Labour victorious in the beginning. David Cameron, meanwhile, is gradually becoming the champion of the aspiring classes. Take that crown, and we know what happens next.

Ryan Shorthouse is Political Secretary of the Bow Group and Deputy Editor of Crossbow Magazine

The boys on the booze

by Yvonne Roberts

Once upon a time, for many young men, getting drunk was restricted to christenings, marriages and funerals and the occasional indulgence. A brake on teenage excess was a basic lack of funds, adhering to standards of respectability in a close knit community and a lack of opportunity.

"Happy Hour" didn't exist. There were no supermarket shelves stacked with bottles, garlanded with the promise: "Buy one, get one free".

Today, masculinity has been customised to suit the market place. Alcohol and advertising make a seductive couple, prompting the young to reach for a glass to feel 'better' about themselves. Now, a 'real' man doesn't hold his drink - in certain parts of the country, at weekends, he's more likely to vomit it into the gutter. Then sleep it off the next day. One of the band of young men who are literally well and truly 'wasted'.

Is this due to a gargantuan and insatiable appetite for instant gratification? Or are other factors at work beyond personal indulgence? Is it an extreme example of the disregard for consequences, common to all youth? Two bottles of vodka a day just doesn't add up to cirrhosis of the liver for many eighteen year olds, until it's too late. All of these elements might be at play - but to regularly drink to obliteration requires a certain kind of determination that, in some cases at least, seems rooted in despair rather than an almost demonic pursuit of hedonism.

Young men, like toddlers, need boundaries. They require a reason to abide by the rules. In the case of the nineteen or twenty year old, that reason might be his desire to invest in his own future. If he's in a dead end job or no employment at all, if he believes he can't even get his foot on the ladder of opportunity, then why not get wasted? In years gone by, those same young

men might have been serving apprenticeships. They would have had connections to older and wiser men on the factory floor, in the works, who kept an eye on their behaviour, who upheld notions such as a breadwinner's duty is to put money on the family table not pour it down his throat. Culture acted as a control.

Now, those influences are gone. Heavy industry and manufacturing have been replaced by the service sector. But drifting from one casual job to another doesn't provide the long term attachments that once gave the young and unruly cause to show responsibility and maturity. A working class male serving an apprenticeship had a purpose, an identity and status- and a sense of self worth.

'The women don't want them- except as fleeing partners- if they can't bring in a good wage'

A twenty year old then might be a husband, a father, a breadwinner - but not a penny came from the state; and that was a source of pride. Research from the National Child Development Study shows that over the past decade or so depression, anxiety and a lack of attachments have become particularly prevalent among non-academic young males. The women don't want them - except as fleeting partners - if they can't bring in a good wage.

A study by the University of Glasgow demonstrated how a large number of young men are seriously adrift. This group are not so much a 'wasted' generation - more a generation treated as wastage, given poor education and prematurely labelled failures, often in primary school, by a system too focussed on the academic to the detriment of the vocational.

In the Scottish study, government programmes had failed to provide entry into secure areas of the labour market. Yet, initially, these young men had taken jobs often in "intolerable conditions" rather than not work at all. The study found that eventually, because benefits are low, energies became focussed on "making ends meet rather than finding work".

Pushed out, these NEETS (Not in Education, Employment or Training) are nevertheless part of a consumer society that is relentless in its message that you are what you own. Petty crime, the black economy and drowning your disappointments; anger and frustration in booze isn't inevitable, but in these circumstances, neither is it easily avoided.

In 2006, Britain came 25th out of 29 industrial countries for the percentage of 17 year olds in full time education or training. Education should be the door to opportunity - instead, it is the marker by which a child is judged a failure as early as six and seven.

Alcohol, of course, for many in society is a pleasure, a relaxation, a dis-inhibitor and a release. For this kind of drinker, moderation may be learned over time. For others, bingeing on booze is an anaesthetic. It blots out the knowledge that in a society that has never been more aware of "respect" and standing - they amount to nothing. And what the fathers believe, so too do the sons.

The challenge for politicians is how to give hope and aspiration to young men without access to the social capital so accessible to the more affluent - education, emotional support, prospects, income? Labour has so far failed in this endeavour - can the Conservative Party do any better?

Yvonne Roberts is a Guardian columnist and author

Binge Politics

Jean Gross calls for an end to short-term solutions to long-term problems

In a well known experiment, a group of four-year olds were given a marshmallow and promised another, but only if they could wait twenty minutes before eating the first.

The researchers then followed their progress into adolescence, and demonstrated that the children with the ability to wait were better adjusted and successful in life. The ability to delay gratification is of central importance in child development, so much so that that it is now taught in schools, as part of a new SEAL (Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning) curriculum which gives pupils the skills they need to set themselves long-term goals and work towards them with patience and resilience. Educational programmes like these are highly promising – many US studies for example, have demonstrated significant reductions in drug abuse and binge drinking in high-risk youth.

Politics and politicians, however, offer young people poor role models for the ability to wait. Electoral success demands the opposite – a stream of quick-fix initiatives that will have an instant effect. Too much youth crime? Then increase the proportion of young offenders sent to prison, creating a powerful statistic to wield when under fire. The alternatives, investing in better parenting support and better mental health services, will take too long.

Poor education results? Then pour in money for booster classes for borderline attainers in the one to two years before they take exams, even though it is likely to be too late to remedy vital deficiencies in the basic language, literacy and numeracy skills that are shaped many years earlier.

Paradoxically, the too-much, too-quickly excess that characterises binge politics is not the fault of politicians. It is a consequence of democracy itself, hinging on the five-year lifespan of a

parliament, worsening over the term of office and exacerbated by unpopularity in the polls. A political attention span of no more than five years prevents us from tackling key long-term problems facing the nation. The obvious one is environmental issues, but let us consider another example – how to tackle the binge generation itself.

We have on our streets increasing numbers of young people who live in fractured communities and sit on the margins of society, involving themselves in substance abuse, in crime, in debt and increasingly in violence. There are no quick fixes for them, but there is an urgent need for solutions. Some of the influences on their behaviour are current, lying in cultural and community pressures. But research has convincingly shown that the largest contribution to their dysfunctionality is made much earlier in the life span. It stems from parents who were unable to say 'no' to their child or said it erratically and harshly, and who parked their children in front of the television instead of talking or playing with them. It stems from the school failure that saps children's self-belief and engenders a conviction that nothing they can do can change their future.

"The too-much, too-quickly excess is a consequence of democracy itself, hinging on the five-year lifespan of a parliament, worsening over the term of office and exacerbated by unpopularity in the polls"

Yet all of these early negative influences are preventable. Skilled home visiting programmes for mothers in the year after a baby is born to disadvantage result in 50% lower arrests and 80% fewer convictions for the targeted children twenty years later. Group

parenting programmes for parents of 4-8 year olds have been shown to halve the rate of the severe 'conduct disorders' that are the prelude to later antisocial behaviour.

Effective early intervention to tackle literacy and numeracy problems as soon as they appear, like the Every Child Reader and Every Child Counts programmes, are demonstrating that six and seven year olds who are in the bottom 5% of the ability range can catch up completely with their peers after around 38 hours of one-to-one teaching, outperforming the national average for all children two years later.

By their nature, these effective early interventions are intensive, highly skilled and expensive at the point of delivery. But home visiting programmes for infants provide savings, in the form of reduced welfare and criminal justice expenditures and increased tax revenues, that exceed the programme costs by a factor of four over the life of the child, with the original investment returned well before the child's 15th birthday. And a pound spent on early literacy support will result in savings of between £15 and £18 to the public purse by the time the recipients reach the age of 37.

We need more statesmen and women who are willing to wait for these returns. Perhaps it is time for them to come forward from across the political divide, and agree the two or three long-haul issues - those that involve the future of our planet and our children - where there might be a consensus on what needs to be done, whoever is in government. The alternative is continuing to face daily in the mirror an image of bleary-eyed, short-term political excess – hardly the best model for a nation.

Jean Gross is the Director of the Every Child a Chance Trust.

What's in your shopping bag?

Zehra Zaidi thinks commercialism amongst children and young people carries more than just a financial cost

Changes in lifestyle - longer working hours, with often both parents working - have meant that children have become more independent. They have become consumers at an ever younger age due to two factors. Firstly, increased pressures on parental time have led to children being given what has been termed by Juliet B. Schor in her seminal book "Born to Buy" as 'guilt money'. Secondly, particularly in the case of older children, they are increasingly taking on part-time jobs such as babysitting and waitressing.

Television advertising and a wave of new media such as the Internet and mobile phones have opened up the family home to a world full of competing brands and because of the change in lifestyle, children are now more likely to be taken shopping.

The dynamics between parents and children have altered as household spending on items such as cars, holidays and leisure is increasingly dictated by children. The rise of children's 'pester power' has proven to be a dream for advertisers. Indeed, harnessing brand loyalty at a young age is seen as a key marketing objective as there is a greater likelihood of sticking to the brand upon reaching adulthood.

A research study by the National Consumer Council (NCC) into the "Shopping Generation" estimated child orientated consumption to be worth around £30 billion:

- The children's clothing market is worth £6 billion, whilst UK toy sales account for an annual £2 billion

- Children under 16 spend £680 million on snacks and sweets, £660 million on clothing, £620 million on music and CDs, £400 million on footwear, £350 million on computer software, £250 million on magazines and £83 million on toiletries
- Almost 60 % of secondary school children and 20% of primary school children own mobile phones
- Four in five children (aged 5 to 16) have their own TV, over half have a video recorder or DVD player in their room and one in five has access to the internet in their own room.

A culture of cool has been created which impacts upon children's relationships not only with parents but also teachers. Parental authority has been undermined by the pull of the latest "it" item and parents are being set up to fail if they cannot meet the consumer demands of their children. At school, teachers find it increasingly hard to impart discipline and the benefits of healthy living. Not wearing the correct clothes or not owning certain brand items can even lead to bullying and this cause is difficult for either teachers or parents to eliminate.

The message given to children is that their status and happiness is linked to what they buy and what they wear. However, consumerism tends to promise more than it can deliver and this can lead to cynicism and disappointment.

The Children's Society is currently undertaking the first independent national inquiry into childhood. Its' preliminary Lifestyle Summary noted that "A major theme emerging from the evidence is the increasing concern of the negative effects of commercial pressures on children". Professor Philip Graham, Emeritus Professor of Child Psychiatry at The Institute of Child Health in London has noted that "One factor that may be leading to rising mental health problems is the increasing degree to which children and young people are preoccupied with possessions; the latest in fashionable clothes and electronic equipment".

Excessive consumerism has created a culture of Haves and Have Nots. "Every new product that promotes inclusion, whether the trainers on your feet or the clothes you wear, can also create exclusion".

The NCC study revealed a marked poverty aspiration gap. Children in the most disadvantaged households - socio-economic groups C2 and DE, single parent households or homes with both parents on welfare - were the ones most interested in consumer and materialist concerns. According to the study, consumerism is more likely to be a symptom, rather than a cause, of poverty.

The NCC study also found that children from disadvantaged backgrounds may leave the education system early because they are so keen to enter the adult consumer world and have what better off children seem to have. Not only that, the most common reasons given by young people who commit

crimes are boredom, to get money or to be able to conform to peer behaviour - consumerism can easily drive the latter two.

The negative impact of consumerism amongst inner city kids per se has been vociferously refuted by some. The blogger Carmen Van Kerckhove summed up the opposite side of the coin perfectly when she wrote:

"All of us, regardless of our income/wealth level, spend money on things that we really can't afford. We all aspire to own objects that are out of our reach. This is not some kind of "inner city mentality." It's a mindset that we all buy into, pun intended. Also, don't we all go for the instant gratification over the long-term gratification? Can you really blame a kid for wanting an iPod more than

something as amorphous as "education?"

Conclusion

'You are what you wear'. 'Clothes maketh the man'. These are all too commonly heard phrases. Amongst children and young people, clothing and accessories take on enhanced meaning. They are used to construct identities and provide a social status - inside or outside the school grounds - which can sometimes compensate for a difficult school and family life.

However, increased consumerism amongst children and young people can have serious long-term implications. Parents, as well as teachers, are in the unenviable position of "playing David to the corporate Goliaths". Advertisers must be more socially responsible in

marketing their brand labels. It is impossible to shut brand labels and consumer trends out of the home. However, parents can seek to engage with children about their consumer spending and needs. They can also impose limits on mobile phone usage, internet access and even pocket money.

Consumerism may have empowered children and young people on one level but we must be very critical of the kind of power it is. What kind of power is it when only their position as consumers or their ability to influence household spending matter? Is that the message we wish to impart?

Zehra Zaidi is a Conservative European Parliamentary Candidate for the South West, a lawyer and community activist

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Crossbow set an essay competition to members to write on the theme "Is bingeing bad?"

ESSAY COMPETITION

Pride of the Binger

by Martin Hewitt



"A QUARTER OF ADULTS ARE BINGE DRINKERS". I blinked. The words shone out at me from the laptop, screaming at me to accept that drinking more than 4 pints in an evening was worse than locking crosshairs on Bambi, or taking that extra plastic bag at Waitrose. Incredulity swept over me as the article continued: "...defines binge drinking as men having more than eight units and women having more than six units per day" it moralised. "Recommended limits are three to four units for men and two to three units for woman per day, but not every day" it preached.

Of course not, two glasses of wine two days in a row was clearly the cause of Bacchus' descent. The notion that I could be straying outside this faux-puritanical "recommendation" by offering to kill off the bottle was one my sensibilities could not accept.

Binge is the subjective phrase du jour. It is a synonym for excess, for gluttony, greed and selfishness, a derogatory phrase, designed to shame the binger, a picture of desperation, moving from glass to glass, drinking their fill and hungrily awaiting the next with scant regard for financial sense or societal responsibility. Whether the poison be alcohol, fast food, shopping or, that other peril of our age, travelling on anything other than a train or a bike, the word from Westminster is that we are all doing too much of it, and should stop, right now, because, well, someone, somewhere has taken offence to our activity. But a life of indulgence is a life well lived. To live one devoid of experience, of rigid adherence to rules of practicality, to never push one's boundaries, experience less due to some mythical oversight, whether in the form of public

opinion or, increasingly, the law, is to lie six feet under wondering simply "oh, was that it?"

My primary poisons are food and alcohol. These I freely admit. I find few things more pleasurable than an expertly roasted pork belly, served with a crisp, dry cabernet sauvignon, my appetite having been whetted by an expertly toasted slice of home-made bread, fluffy and warmed under a delicately placed slice of foie gras. By my reckoning, I've intruded upon four special interest groups in that sentence, all of whom, if they had their way, would seek to ban, curb and restrict those activities in which I take pleasure, simply because they disapprove. Of course, they are well within their rights to disapprove. The world would be a dull place if people couldn't express themselves freely. The disapproval is not what I take issue with. By all means, publish your information about alcohol abuse, the process of gavage and the merits of soy bean curd over meat, but, please, do not seek to impose your will on what I choose to purchase with my (heavily taxed) income, nor the volumes of said purchases I choose to throw at my liver and digestive system in general. The phrase "binge" has stolen the semantics of "indulgence", added a dose of puritanism, and given birth to a media catchphrase, turning an odious-sounding word (it even feels greasy and obtuse on the tongue) into a widely-accepted and repeated pejorative phrase for those who indulge in those things that people seek to control out of nought but envy or simple control-freakery. There is no such thing as "binge-carrotting", nor "binge-training", for those who subject themselves once, twice, thrice daily to the unrelenting sadism of Network Rail. No, those things few would take

pleasure in. Pleasure is liberating, it is the very essence of freedom. To be able to do something in which one takes immense pleasure is to be at the very zen of personal liberty. Imbibing, consuming, experiencing, enjoying whatever one might fancy, simply because one might fancy it, crafting the world around one into an environment in which the hairs on the back of the neck rise up in triumph, the endorphins firing like a Formula One car racing around Monte Carlo, the crescendo of Nessun Dorma, the first drive off the tee, the clang as the starting gates fly open, followed by the thundering of hooves, these are all sensations that bring us to terms with the very essence of our humanity. The assumption that human beings are not fundamentally rational beings, that, in these pleasure-seeking pursuits, the only outcome is disaster, and that people should simply sit at home, paragons of meekness and modesty, is one that pervades the current, abjectly authoritarian, climate.

Bingeing is the true human condition, a desire to experience more and more and more, until our bodies, weary from living fully, expire and collapse, exhausted, satisfied, but never sated. Bingeing will never be curbed. As long as there is blood in our veins, even if it has a high alcohol content, excess will always be sought, and there will always be those who frown on it and peer down their nose at those enjoying their lot. Experience is the world's oldest pastime, as established as its oldest profession and, wherever persecution is brought to those who seek to experience, rebellion will shortly follow. But then again, it is always the disapproval which makes the contravention that much more indulgent.

ESSAY COMPETITION

Confessions of an information binger



By James Skilling

There was a time when the first thing one would do on getting up would be to flick the switch on the kettle or to open the curtains to let in the fresh white light of a new day into the darkened room or even allow oneself an extra five minutes in bed to listen to a report on the Today programme about the plight of the banana plantation worker in the Dominican Republic. However, these old habits have been surpassed by one far more important necessity, to switch on the laptop.

You see, I would classify my laptop as the new electro-domestic appliance, holding rank amongst the kettle and the washing machine. It is reliable, necessary and functional. Seeing the laptop light up is more invigorating than coffee, more satisfactory than light, more useful than washing. What can I say, I have a problem!

I take my morning walks around the blogosphere, I scan the online editions of morning papers, I say hello to the familiar characters that I see along the way, never stopping too long other than to "leave a comment" on the latest headline, I pop into the shop to renew my online subscription to the Financial Times.

I find this time is useful to gather my thoughts and to build up some idea of what I need to do that day and who I need to see- "agenda setting" I call it.

You may have guessed it by now, I am addicted to information, not the life

improving, fundamental sort that establishes how speed, light and time are linked or looking into the beneficial effects of splitting an atom. No, my niche is the day to day news, which by and large is made up of a strange mix of who said what to who and for what reason.

All this is relatively new to me. I used to lead a perfectly normal and balanced life, meeting real people, writing with a pen, taking proper exercise and focusing on the middle distance.

The internet, the great portal of information, while responsible for condensing many of the vices of modern society and traditional taboo, (one just has to look at the hobbies of Second Life members to see what a world without the structure of imposable laws would be like), it has made the collation of information much easier and because of its proximity, much more alluring.

The democratization of opinion has seen an explosion of people willing to add their two pennies worth about whatever subject and for an information binger like myself, connecting to the internet is like a entering a Willy Wonker's information factory.

Questions do arise about the reliability of information and statistics, millions of people consult Wikipedia everyday, a website that all internet users have the ability to influence and change. Have

we all suddenly become experts or has the power given to us by the internet to publish our views simply gone to our head?

The ability to harness this information to make it beneficial is obviously a skill and one that needs practice. Hours can be lost in a determination to follow an individual news thread to its end, consulting on opinion and facts along the way. Unfortunately I haven't perfected the skill yet.

I finish most days with a sense of dizziness unable to form one single coherent opinion of my own or even, in my daze, to remember what the original story was. Information binges can leave you feeling unsatisfied and confused.

Time is distorted on these chases around the web for information. There are times when one has the sense that a story is four days old when in reality it is only 4 hours old. These are the problems faced by information bingers; they feel as though they are riding the crest of a media wave, perceivable only really to themselves.

This is the tale of an information binger. How do I have the time to write this article I hear you cry, if I have such a problem? Well I am in the middle of an "information blackout"; the technician is repairing my internet connection as I write. I have been forced to fall back on my own opinion, instead of seeking others'. This could be the start of something . . .

ESSAY COMPETITION

Binge Britain

By John Phelan



Britain has gorged itself in the last few years. As a nation, in the decade to 2007 our spending on holidays more than doubled to £1,068 per annum and spending on other forms of entertainment rose by 76% to £250 per month. But it was in housing that the UK really splashed out. Between 2001 and 2006, UK house prices rose by a staggering 90%.

To fund all this, a spending binge has been accompanied by a borrowing binge. Between 1997 and 2008, the number of credit cards rose from 36 million to 71 million and consumer debt has now topped £1.4 trillion. 80% of UK consumer debt is made up of mortgages and 1 in 10 adults now spend more than their income. Any sign that this bingeing might lead to a hangover was blithely swept aside. In 2004, when consumer debt broke £1 trillion, Hilary Cook, an investment director at Barclays Stockbrokers, said "We are borrowing against assets which have gone up massively, interest rates are still relatively low and we all have jobs."

In these grizzled times of shrivelling credit and dwindling house prices, we might afford ourselves a wry smile at such attitudes. Like the confident predictions of the Federal Reserve in summer 1929 that "the fundamentals of the economy are sound", with hindsight we can see that Del Boy is about to fall through the bar.

But if a little more restraint would have been welcome in the fat years, it is worth remembering Adam Smith: "What is prudence in the conduct of every private family, can scarce be folly in that of a great kingdom". Reversing this, we can ask if this prudence was displayed by our leaders.

The answer is no. For all his nicknames incorporating 'Prudence' or 'Capability', for all the hackneyed descriptions including 'dour' and 'responsible', and for all the 'Golden Rules' of fiscal probity, no one in Britain has spent borrowed money on quite such a colossal scale as Gordon Brown. Between 1999 and 2008, government spending rose as a share of GDP from 37% to 42%. In cash terms, he will spend £163 billion more in 2007-2008 than he did in 1999-2000.

Despite the fact that the economy has been on an upward swing with an attendant rise in tax revenues, it still hasn't been enough to cover the tab for this truly legendary session.

Although government spending was 42% of GDP in 2007-2008, tax receipts are only 36.8%. Like the British people, Gordon Brown resorted to borrowing. The fiscal deficit has risen from -0.1% in 2001-2002 to 2.7% in 2007-2008. If politicians are meant to lead by example then tens of thousands of British people have followed Gordon Brown's example right into debt, negative equity and bankruptcy court. It might look as though this binge followed by hangover is the old 'boom and bust' which Keynes regarded as an inevitable and wasteful failing of capitalism. But a friend of mine bought a flat 18 months ago, at the top of the market. At the time he commented that "Property never loses its value". Now HBOS is predicting a 9% fall this year.

This friend grew up in the same suburb as me and saw the same crash as me in the early 1990's. Like me, he saw negative equity and repossessions. Yet he, and millions of

others, continued to believe that the bubble would never burst. And this wilful ignorance is not an inherent part of the capitalist system. There is nothing in the economics of Adam Smith or Milton Friedman which dictates that people will delude themselves. Perhaps, as William Stanley Jevons wrote in 1867, "These periodic collapses are really mental in their nature, depending on variations of despondency, hopefulness, excitement, disappointment and panic."

A recent study by psychologists at Stanford found that compulsive spending was linked to depression and anxiety. More recently scientists have located the areas of the brain that control (or rather don't control) spending, the nucleus accumbens and the insula. However, the Stanford report claimed that only "5.5 percent of men and 6.0 percent of women" are compulsive spenders, not the sorts of numbers which would explain the binge.

We have seen in the last few years, with people betting on an ever upward trend, a type of mass delusion which has its own psychology. What is clear is that psychology gives us a set of tools which can help us understand the uneconomic behaviour of homo economicus.

This ability for self delusion, as demonstrated by my humble friend and Ms Cook of Barclays, has a long history. Writing on just such another bout, JK Galbraith commented that "Men have been swindled by other men on many occasions. The autumn of 1929 was, perhaps, the first occasion when men succeeded on a large scale in swindling themselves." It wasn't the last.

No train, no gain

by John Hayes MP



Train to Gain is a Government scheme, rolled-out nationally in 2006, designed to encourage employers to sign-up to subsidised training for staff aged over 25. Under the scheme skills brokers approach businesses, assess their training needs, and persuade them to participate in training programmes. Ministers have made much of Train to Gain being 'demand-led', driven by the needs of business. In reality, Train to Gain is driven by what Government is willing to fund to meet its targets. As such it reflects the inadequacies of an unreformed system. The Government narrow focus on lower level skills means that much of what happens under Train to Gain either replicates training employers would otherwise pay for themselves or simply means assessing what people can already do and giving them a qualification for doing it. As such Train to Gain involves an enormous waste of public resources, money which would be much better spent on ways to genuinely improve our nation's skills levels.

Train to Gain is directed at the provision of level 2 qualifications – GCSE equivalent and below the level of

intermediate technical skills (level 3) regarded as entry level to skilled occupations in other European countries. As a result the training on offer does not provide the technical competences many employers actually need. Dianne Johnson, a director of an electrical contractors and engineering firm in Cheshire, told a BBC investigation into the Train to Gain that 'in our industry, it's a waste of time because most of the people who apply to us for a job have reached the same level of education that the scheme trains people to reach.'

Where business has accessed Train to Gain, research into the pilot stage suggested that as much as 90% of the provision was deadweight. Employers were using the programme funds to finance the training they would have provided in any case. A more recent LSC survey found that the Government has not learnt the lessons of the pilot; £91 million had been spent on training that companies previously paid for themselves. More than two-thirds of business taking up training under the scheme had arranged training courses themselves in the previous 12 months.

'Massive amounts of public money have been committed to Train to Gain even though most employers saw no measurable financial benefit to their business from participating in the scheme'

The focus on assessment and the provision of basic qualifications means that Train to Gain is, at least, as much about the accreditation of employees existing skills as it is about adding value. The paucity of real training through Train to Gain was highlighted by David Sherlock in his final report as Chief Inspector of Adult Learning.

He warned that there were instances 'where little or no teaching of new skills

took place and where little or no value had been added to the capability of the individual employee or employer, or to the national stock.' John Hyde, managing director of a hospitality industry training provider recently told the Guardian that the basic Train to Gain contract does not pay for much beyond assessing.

There are also doubts about the cost effectiveness of the skills brokerage service established as part of Train to Gain. 11% of the overall Train to Gain budget is being spent on skills brokers, £66 million between 2006 and 2008.

Yet, the recent LSC survey of Train to Gain found little evidence that Skills Brokers were targeting employers with no recent experience of training their staff. There is a danger that the establishment of Skills Brokers has simply added yet another costly layer of bureaucracy to the provision of training, with little real benefit in practice.

The Government is spending half a billion pounds on Train to Gain this year, rising to £1 billion by 2010. Massive amounts of public money have been committed to Train to Gain even though the LSC has found that most employers saw no measurable financial benefit to their business from participating in the scheme.

Learners derive little benefit either as the narrow focus of Train to Gain on the skills needs of their current job means people do not get the training they need to progress in their career, gain promotion and higher wages.

If we really want to improve skill levels then we need to give individuals real choice about training. But Building a system driven by genuine demand also means reforming the supply side so that colleges and other providers have the freedom they need to respond.

John Hayes is MP for South Holland and the Deepings and Shadow Minister for Skills

Wind Chill

Tony Lodge on why wind energy will not fill the UK's energy gap



Wind energy promises a clean and free source of electricity. We are told it will reduce our dependence on fossil fuels and will reduce the output of greenhouse gases and other pollution. But does wind power live up to the claims made by its advocates? How benign is its impact on the environment? Will it really be able to deliver the promise of clean, cheap and reliable electricity? Or would the money spent on it be more effectively directed towards supporting new technologies which will allow us to develop more reliable and cheaper forms of baseload energy in a cleaner way.

Firstly, the scale of Labour's failure and lack of direction on energy policy since 1997 can and should be laid bare in light of spiralling energy prices and the tragic likelihood that six million households will be facing fuel poverty by Christmas, as average annual energy bills hit £1,500. Since 1997 there have been seven Labour Energy Ministers who between them have produced three contradictory Energy White Papers which have categorically failed to prepare and encourage new and varied baseload power supplies for the future. Over

the last eleven years the UK has seen the construction of over 12 Gigawatts of new gas fired power stations to generate electricity. There have been no new nuclear or clean coal stations built over this period; so much for the much heralded balanced and secure energy policy.

The gas price is connected to the high oil price; this in turn effects the cost of the electricity these gas fired stations produce. The majority of the gas used by them is now imported. Labour's risible record on energy is there for all to see; an increasing overdependence on gas for our electricity generation, no strategy to tackle the looming 2015 energy gap and six million households struggling to pay their bills due to a chronic lack of energy diversity.

However, to compound this precarious lack of action on future energy provision the Government recently announced plans that look towards intermittent and costly wind energy. Gordon Brown has given the green light for up to 10,000 new wind turbines to be erected across Britain. There are fewer than 2,000 turbines in Britain today so the increase is unparalleled. Britain has been given binding EU targets to generate 15% of all energy from renewable sources by 2020; this will mean that nearly 40% of all electricity will have to come from renewables.

The challenges now facing Government, local planners, wind farm companies and consumers are considerable. They are only likely to grow if the Government is to reach the EU's target. They include:

- For central government, a substantial increase in the subsidy given to wind companies through the Renewables Obligation (RO).

This will increase electricity bills as the (RO) is sourced from consumers' electricity bills. It is in effect a subsidy, thought it does not pass through the Treasury accounts.

- For local authority planning departments, a massive rise in (almost certainly unpopular) applications for new wind farms
- For wind farm companies, an increase in subsidies as raw materials become more expensive and planning applications become longer and harder to approve
- An increase in hard pressed households trapped in fuel poverty (when more than 10% of household income is spent on energy bills) due to an increase in their utility bills to subsidise thousands on new wind turbines across Britain. There could be 6 million households in fuel poverty by Christmas 2008.

This huge increase in renewables, particularly wind, will require a substantial increase in the amount of money taken from consumers' electricity bills to subsidise new wind farms through the Renewables Obligation (RO). The RO is the Government's principal policy instrument to encourage the development of the renewable electricity sector. It is an indirect subsidy system drawing funds from consumer bills and passing them to the renewable electricity sector. This currently amounts to £1 billion a year, an amount which will have to rise significantly to fund the construction and development of thousands of new turbines. But what of wind's performance as an energy provider?

Wind generation does not provide a

reliable supply of power. It must be 'shadowed' by baseload power stations such as nuclear and coal as it is intermittent. Over-reliance on it could lead to supply interruptions if the wind does not blow, blows too hard or does not blow where the wind farms are located. Importantly, such high-demand periods of cold and hot weather correspond to periods of low wind so overdependence on intermittent wind can actually increase carbon emissions as conventional power stations are required as back-up. Wind farms perform well if their average output reaches as much as 35% of their generating capacity. But this rarely happens. Evidence shows that, throughout Europe, wind turbines have produced on average less than 20% of their capacity in recent years. In comparison coal fired plants run at about 75% capacity and nuclear plants can operate as high as 92% capacity. This level of consistent baseload supply helps keep prices down.

'Through taxes and subsidies given to the wind companies from their own bills the local community are inadvertently funding the potential despoliation of their landscape and environment'

Politics Home conducted polling for the Wind Chill report which showed only 15% of people were either very willing or fairly willing to pay more for wind. In contrast, 61% were unwilling. New plans for thousands of unpopular wind farms will tie down and dominate local government planning procedures for long periods. Councils examining wind farm applications are not obliged to take into consideration the economic viability of the project or whether the topography and meteorological conditions are suitable. Before turbines are proposed meteorological masts are erected to gauge wind speeds and conditions, but these mast results do

not have to be made public to either the planning inquiry or local community. This lack of accountability and openness is undermining confidence in the planning process on wind applications. Given this, only the wind turbine company knows if it is erecting turbines which could effectively be useless. In turn, local campaigners have been incensed by a letter from Energy Minister Malcolm Wicks to a Midlands Conservative MP who is fighting an unpopular wind application. The Minister writes, "It is up to individual developers to decide whether or not to disclose their wind speed readings to the public."

Wind farm companies have deep pockets (partly filled with income from the Renewables Obligation) with which to fight planning applications. For example, in Norfolk an unpopular wind application which was overwhelmingly opposed by local residents and local Conservative MPs has already been rejected by a planning inquiry twice, but the wind company is appealing and could seek a third planning inquiry. If that is unsuccessful, they look set to resubmit their scheme. Ironically, under the RO subsidy scheme, developers can keep returning until they have worn down the inspectors and the local community who have to fund their own legal representation. One could argue that through taxes and subsidies given to the wind companies from their own bills the local community are inadvertently funding the potential despoliation of their landscape and environment. Importantly, the MoD has opposed proposed wind developments as they will interfere with national air defence radar and pose a threat to trainee helicopter pilots.

The Royal Academy of Engineering has calculated that the cheapest form of wind energy is two and half times more expensive than nuclear or coal generated electricity, the first of which is a carbon free baseload source. This significant price differential is likely to get worse, not better, as the cost of

the raw materials required for wind turbines soars. The Government has now accepted that the total cost of meeting the EU's binding 2020 renewable target will be £100 billion. This is the equivalent of over £4,000 for every household in the country. Some analysts have claimed it could be as much as £4,700 a household. This will drive many, many more households into fuel poverty, where more than 10% of household income is spent on energy costs. A renewable energy source which should be better examined and supported is undoubtedly tidal, as David Cameron has already said. Tidal is not environmentally intrusive and can provide more reliable and sustainable renewable energy. It does not blight our precious landscape and our 11,000 miles of coastline and severe tidal ranges offer huge potential.

Britain must now develop its nuclear, clean coal (with the ability to retrofit carbon capture and storage technology when it is ready) and tidal resources to meet the looming energy gap. More reliance on gas fired power stations coupled with overzealous support for environmentally invasive and unreliable wind farms will not plug the energy gap or secure our energy supply. On the contrary, this policy drift will help drive energy prices higher.

Tony Lodge is author of "Wind Chill: Why wind energy will not fill the UK's energy gap", published by the Centre for Policy Studies. He is a Research Fellow at the CPS and a Council Member of the Bow Group.



Healthy Mind, Healthy Body Corporate

Mark Nicholson wants a bit more personal responsibility



I have a confession to make. In this neo-medieval confessional age all should admit their flaws and be absolved by the all-knowing public, and mine is that I am not a binger. If I overindulge, it is the opposite flaw of excessive moderation. I have prevaricated, equivocated and trimmed with the wind in the manner of the putative politician that I am rather than taking the bolder, purer stance of the idealist I was or the statesman I aspire to be. To this and to the political game I may well be addicted, possibly against my better wider interest. I may however take solace that I am unlikely to expire from a surfeit of real or symbolic lampreys.

Then again, who would admit to 'binging' if they did not wish to appear on daytime TV. Binging as a word carries negative implications. It is shameful, private, secretive. Not all obsessive behaviours are seen as negative or described as binges. Workaholics and fitness fanatics are seen as useful, virtuous and admirable, if a little eccentric, for their dedication. Equally, few people binge on apples or other healthy food. It is the fat and sugar component that encourages binging on food and, at the same time, stamps that binging as shameful.

Binging is by nature excessive and cannot be sustained, crime enough itself in these times when appearing to be concerned about the environment is all

Yet binging does not carry only health risks but moral and practical risks also. Morally, just as the waistline of a body natural or corporate is expanded by binging on food, so its mind is enfeebled by lack of the self-control that distinguished civilised men from beasts. There are also good practical reasons not to binge in any aspect of our behaviour. In most branches of human activity, from military command to insurance underwriting, there is great virtue in knowing where to stop. Maybe it is because of an addiction to excess, to success or to the desire to stay in control that political careers tend to end in failure. Nineteenth century liberals were then possibly mistaken in believing that it was temperate climate that bred temperate politics. It may rather be moderation in human temper that achieves this effect, healthy minds thus breeding healthy body politics, rather than vice versa. Even the regimes of the interregnum, seemingly the most anti-binging in British history, were rejected for their own excess of zeal.

Today, many of our most pressing social and political problems are a result of various binging and indulgence of the senses. From obesity through binging on food, family breakdown through indulging emotion, maximising leisure through welfare dependency and acquiring wealth without toil through crime, the following of the broad way of worldliness is at the root.

'If Britain is to remedy the effects of this binging it will require a bout of bulimia of which John Prescott will be proud'

The difficulty that liberal states have in dealing with these problems is that the unwritten contract between the state and its citizens is one-sided. Unlike a company, the state cannot sack its citizens and indeed is responsible for them if they injure themselves or are out of work. The missing element is personal

responsibility. It could be argued that the state requires its citizens to obey its laws. However merely doing this is the equivalent of 'working to rule'. Just like a company, a responsible culture needs to be inculcated, something which is hard to achieve through state diktat, especially after the rise of the permissive society in the 1960s. There are however indications that people are finding this hedonistic world view - prioritising personal pleasure - binging and living to excess - ultimately unfulfilling.

The alternative of abstention and 'the narrow way' need not be dull, indeed it can enhance quality of life. Psychologists have identified the central role of 'flow', the feeling of satisfaction and fulfilment obtained by setting a goal and achieving the objective. This basic idea can be traced back to the Aristotelian concept of life's purpose as a mission to improve character, achieve noble goals and experience self growth.

One immediate mission by which we may test our national character is to overcome the credit crisis. Bankers and investors have recently binged on junk bonds and are now spewing them out, onto both those who worshiped the latest gilded calf and who did not. Similarly, the body politic has binged on increased tax revenues and the consequent engrossed public sector has made the whole more lethargic and less nimble than hitherto, even as election campaigns are like to focus more on the rarer aspects of the state which need feeding up. Meanwhile, younger, more nimble European nations with tighter public belts and slimmer waists are attracting the attention of more investors as the UK's charms become increasingly rubenesque. If Britain is to remedy the effects of this binging it will require a bout of bulimia of which John Prescott would be proud.

Mark Nicholson is a Chartered Accountant and was PPC for Ealing Southall in the 2005 election

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Chairman's Note

by Annesley Abercome



I'm delighted to be able to make my first contribution to this magazine as Chairman. Since the last issue, the Conservative Party have been making significant electoral gains. Crewe and Nantwich and London were symbolic of the Conservatives' revival. Over the last two and a half years, under the leadership of David Cameron, we have witnessed an intellectual renaissance within the Conservative Party. The Party is now offering a well thought out narrative of what Britain will look like under a Conservative government.

The Bow Group, as it has been in previous decades, is in a unique position- it has the opportunity to shape the debate and political agenda as we enter a turning point in British politics. This is where I ask all readers of this magazine to get involved. If you are a member, then take this golden opportunity to make your voice heard: write a paper, write an article for Crossbow or come to one of our many excellent political and social events. Politics thrives on fresh thinking. Persuade your friends and colleagues to join us. Come and shape the agenda with the Bow Group - Britain's oldest think tank.

I am also very pleased that several Bow Groupers are Parliamentary Candidates and we hope to see them in the House of Commons after the next General Election - Chris Skidmore (Kingswood), Charlotte Leslie (Bristol North West), Dr Fabian Richter (Bath), Chris Philp (Hampstead and Kilburn) and Damian Hinds (East Hampshire). They have made significant inroads recently with their respective campaigns and have been working extremely hard. It can be a lonely business being a parliamentary candidate and I hope that the Bow Group can give them full support and perhaps send some troops along to help at some stage before the next General Election.

We held an essay competition recently focusing on the topic of bingeing. There are several interpretations of this. Is it right to binge? Is it a sign of greed or selfishness? Or if our freedom to binge does not harm others, then is it purely one of the features of a liberal democracy? Can we afford to binge in the current climate? These are all questions that were all considered in the contributions submitted. The overall quality was exceptionally high. Perhaps the next time I engage in what might be considered to be a binge activity - two large slices of cheesecake instead of one, one glass of wine too many, too much shopping in the summer sales - one thing is certain: the Bow Group will not escape my mind when doing so.

The Conservative Party today is successfully managing to bring perceived dichotomies together. Delivering lower council tax with more efficient delivery of public services in local government. Pursuing a new 21st century Routemaster bus in London that will meet modern health and safety and accessibility regulations while being retro in styling. Offering a lower fuel duty when global oil prices rise. And, finally, offering a programme to help the most disadvantaged communities with less state control through social responsibility.

Today's Conservative Party is drawing up an alternative, exciting new agenda that addresses the concerns of Britain today. The Bow Group has an exciting role to play in this.

I look forward to the year ahead. Have a great summer.

Annesley Abercorn
Chairman, The Bow Group