

## Leading articles



## Turning the Page

An independent Royal Charter would ensure press regulation that was robust and independent but still voluntary and consistent with a free press

“By far the best solution to press standards would be a body established and organised by the industry, which would provide genuinely independent and effective regulation of its members and would be durable.”

Thus spoke Lord Justice Leveson in his voluminous report on press standards published at the end of last year. They appear under the heading “Voluntary Independent Self-regulation”. The words “established and organised by the industry” were in bold. Yesterday the national and regional newspaper and magazine industry, including *The Times*, set out to adhere to Sir Brian’s proposal and salvage it from those politicians and pressure groups who have tried to subvert it.

The publication of an independent Royal Charter is an attempt in good faith to implement the Leveson report, introducing the toughest system of regulation in the Western world. At the same time it succeeds where the politicians have failed — it protects press freedom and ensures that journals can remain economically viable while subject to a regulator.

The spirit of the Leveson report was quite clear. There had been many unacceptable breaches of the law by some newspapers and the existing regulatory system and the police had failed to deal

with them. Something new and tougher was needed, and independence was critical. But this should not be a regulator underpinned by statute that, effectively, licensed free speech. It was essential that large media organisations complied with this compliance should be voluntary.

For a while the coalition Government acted responsibly and sought an agreement with the press. But they were hijacked by the anti-press lobby group Hacked Off and the Labour Party, which cooked up an unacceptable scheme late one night. This gave far too much power to politicians to have oversight of the press, imposed an expensive and untested arbitration scheme, effectively removed the press’s ability to draw up its own code and allowed lobbyists to pursue their political agendas through group complaints. The press was told that if it did not sign up it would be punished through the courts with exemplary damages, a threat that Britain’s top QCs regard as unlawful.

The three political parties agreed to put these proposals into a Royal Charter. The problem was that if mistakes had been made and self-regulation worked inadequately, it would require a two thirds majority in both Houses of Parliament to change it, an almost insurmountable task.

Much of this was unnecessary. There is a strong consensus within the industry that newspapers should abide by the Leveson principles. There is willingness to make financial sacrifice to ensure a strong self-regulatory system. There is acceptance that the regulator must be independent from the industry. There is also an overwhelming determination that the system preserves independence from political interference and that it be financially viable. For this reason newspapers have been unwilling to join the politicians’ scheme.

The alternative being proposed complies largely with the Leveson principles, costs taxpayers nothing and commands broad industry support. Furthermore it is being offered for consultation, a step the politicians were unwilling to take with their proposed charter.

A free society requires a free press uninhibited in its coverage of power and the powerful. It requires also a responsible press that does not trample on the rights of others. It is quite possible to have both. The independent Royal Charter respects free speech and high professional standards. It is presented constructively and with the confidence that Lord Justice Leveson’s aim of voluntary independent self-regulation is not beyond reach.

## No Time to Relax

Efforts to boost the economy must be redoubled after better growth figures

As a guide to the health of the economy, yesterday’s GDP figures should not be given too much weight. The growth of 0.3 per cent was stronger than most economists expected and, if accurate, showed that Britain had avoided the dreaded triple-dip recession.

But the margin was so slight and these preliminary figures are subject to such significant revision it may well turn out that the economy did indeed contract in the first quarter. In any case, a large part of the growth came from a rebound in activity in the North Sea. The underlying picture is of an economy bumping along the bottom.

In other ways, however, the figures were clearly significant. Politically, a fall in GDP would have done serious damage to the embattled Chancellor, who has just seen another credit agency strip Britain of its top debt rating and suffered criticism from the IMF over his deficit-reduction strategy.

A contraction in output would also have dented the consumer and business confidence that are so critical to economic recovery. There are signs that both have been improving, with many business leaders saying conditions are better than the

official statistics suggest. But serious challenges remain, not least the deepening gloom in the eurozone. While the threat of break-up of the single currency may have receded for the moment, the eurozone economy is slowing further amid a growing popular backlash against fiscal austerity.

The IMF last week predicted that the eurozone output would shrink by 0.3 per cent this year, with France contracting by 0.1 per cent. Unemployment in Spain has risen above six million for the first time in recent history.

The slowdown is starting to bite even in the north with the Netherlands suffering a triple-dip recession and Germany expected to record growth of just 0.6 per cent this year, less than Britain. The IMF has called on European policymakers to do more to boost growth, while economists expect the European Central Bank to cut its main interest rate next week.

The better-than-expected British growth figure will strengthen George Osborne’s hand as he tries to persuade the IMF not to call for a slowing of his deficit reduction plan. Mr Osborne will be right to resist pressure. But he would be wrong to think

the figures allow him to relax. The economy remains very weak and he must redouble efforts to bolster the recovery.

This means exploring all options for improving the supply of credit to smaller companies. The expansion of the Bank of England’s Funding for Lending Scheme announced this week should help at the margin, but the Government must work harder to ensure that, in an effort to make banks safer in the next boom, regulators do not strangle them now, just when we need them most.

The coalition must also press ahead with its reforms to planning, the channelling of private sector investment into infrastructure projects, better support for exporters, a deal to ensure the building of a new nuclear power station at Hinkley Point and the reduction in red tape that hampers business expansion and job creation.

The Prime Minister is showing a new determination to provide leadership from Downing Street and is expected to spend more time focusing on the economy. The Chancellor should make the most of this. The GDP figures have given him some breathing space. He must use it well.

## Inch Perfect

Just as in the movie, three men have walked up a hill but come down a mountain

Thumbing its nose at the laws of physics, an inch is not always just an inch. An inch more on the waist is easier to carry than an extra inch on your ears. An inch on her stilettos was the making of Marilyn Monroe. Dorothy Parker, when she shared a room at *The New Yorker* with her fellow wit Robert Benchley, said that they “had an office so tiny that an inch smaller and it would have been adultery”.

Now we learn that an inch — barely the height of a respectable radish — is all that stands between being a Sunday-morning hill Rambler and someone who climbs proper mountains, a pastime so

macho that Hemingway regarded it as one of the only three activities (along with bull-fighting and car-racing) that merited being called a true sport.

At the Ordnance Survey’s calibration of 1,998ft, Thack Moor in the Pennines fell 2ft short of being classified as a mountain. Three ramblers have re-measured it. They found that it rises to 609.62m. That is a full three quarters of an inch taller than the 2,000ft magic mountain marker.

This not only makes it England’s 254th mountain, it means that the many thousands who have scrambled up Thack Moor because they felt they

weren’t cut out for the challenge of a mountain can today wake up basking in Hemingway’s admiration for their newly recognised pluck and grit.

Thack Moor’s elevation shows that, while a rose by any other name may smell as sweet, to hill climbers names matter. Your legs may ache no more for having scaled that extra inch, but your heart swells like a pair of bellows. So what if an Alpine climber might look at Thack Moor and, like the Red Queen trumping Alice, proclaim grandly that they “could show you hills, in comparison with which you’d call that a valley”? It’s not as if anyone’s counting.

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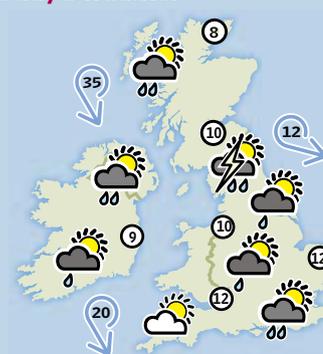


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### Today’s weather



Rain clearing the South East, then turning cooler with scattered showers. Full report, page 64