

Patient Power

Did Steve Illiffe (*MT Feb*) have a say in the choice of leading figures whose thoughts were dropped into his reveries about the NHS crisis? The absence of the users' views was paralleled in the article by a failure to consider their strategic and crucial role in the fight for the health service. At the end of the day the health service *is for* users. Unfortunately, the Tories have been the first to adopt a consumerist model to their own ends, and the Left has failed to understand the importance of the role of users.

There are precedents. The women's health movement, some community health councils and a few radical health groups have been working at it for years, realising that users could offer an effective challenge to the cosy alliance between professionals, the private sector and the technology industry. But our ability to be effective depends on access to information and structures which give us power at different levels of decision making. Users must find ways of making well-informed interventions, both at the health authority and at the bedside.

Thanks, Maggie

I would like to express my deep gratitude to Mr John Moore, the health minister, and Mrs Margaret Thatcher for being instrumental in bringing *Marxism Today* to my notice.

As a nurse who took part in the recent protest action, I awaited the establishment press to learn of our impact.

I was saddened, if not surprised, at the slant of some reports and the conspicuous suppression of fact in others. Never has the press's ability to lie, distort and indoctrinate

Abortion Conveyor-belt

Your article (*MT Jan*) perpetuates the myth that women are the de facto supporters of abortion and therefore will naturally oppose David Alton's bill.

Let me remind you that the vast majority of people in the pro-Life movement are women; that we see abortion as institutionalising the physical and psychological abuse of women who are used, become pregnant, then are discarded and pushed onto the abortion conveyor-belt, only to suffer

A 'bill of patient's rights guaranteeing a range of health services' says nothing about quality. And users will only be able to assess quality when they succeed in entering debates about technology, research, ethics, planning, priorities and medical education. These are too important to leave to the professionals.

If resources were to be channelled as close as possible to the citizen, decisions must still be made about services. The community psychiatrists and geriatricians have not had much success in challenging the neurosurgeons and transplant boys in the battle for resources. Perhaps the anger of a few, well-informed, well-organised ordinary people struggling to care for ageing or chronically sick relatives might help shift the balance.

Finally, no clued-up user of the NHS is going to be bought off with having her own medical record encoded on a smart card - unless perhaps there is to be a computer at every surgery and clinic for patients to read off the content and add their own comments! •

Helen Rosenthal, London

been so graphically illustrated at such a personal level before.

Unable to find any accurate coverage of the dispute and issues involved, I found your journal. The coverage and viewpoint of Steve Illiffe (*MT Feb*) and others was a revelation. I also found much more to interest and concern me in it. So I will subscribe from now on. Sod the Tory press.

Thank you Maggie and Johnny for opening my eyes and leading me on to a new and optimistic path. •

A M Mawson, Romford

the devastating after-effects for the rest of their lives.

In their discussion on the Alton Bill the media have concentrated on the minority of abortions. Of the 8,276 done after 18 weeks (in 1986) only 648 were because of handicap; only 92 on women aged 41 or more. What is true of late abortion is true of abortion as a whole: it is done almost always for social reasons, and has put an estimated £320m into the private clinics since 1967. O
DrKathy Yousaf, Hemel Hempstead

Alton's Tactic

It is encouraging to see four women with such diverse political and social experiences agreeing that David Alton's abortion bill should be rejected (*MT Jan*). They expressed in varying ways the fundamental right of a woman to make an informed choice about the future of her pregnancy.

It was a pity, therefore, that you chose to run on your cover a full-colour photo of a foetus.

Black Women's Rights

Marxism Today's coverage of the Fight the Alton Bill campaign (*MT Jan*) might have been designed to alienate just those people who would support a woman's right to choose. The cover (designed by a man) might have been an advertisement for any of the anti-abortion groups, and the discussion completely ignored the debate within the pro-choice movement about its ability to recognise black women's reproductive rights.

There were no black women represented in the roundtable

The Chesterfield Experience

Chesterfield overall gave little support for Hilary Wainwright's optimistic view of its prospects (*MT Jan*). She places great store by the pre-conference briefing papers, which 'reflected some of the serious thinking that has gone on ... in recent years' What she does not say is that those briefing papers were not, nor could be, discussed in the fevered atmosphere of the conference. Had anyone dared to disagree with the fundamentalists they would have been howled down.

The democracy workshop featured John Griffith saying not a lot, Paul Foot giving the standard SWP line and Audrey Wise eloquently avoiding any discussion of the role of parliament in socialist transition, following which the cadres of the SWP dominated the rostrum and that was that. Reports from other workshops suggest a similar lack of debate.

At the event, it was understandable that an open confrontation with closed minds was avoided. The subsequent evasions, however, are startling. The first edition since the conference of *Interlink* (joint magazine of conference sponsors the Socialist Society and

The psychological effect of this is to shift the emotional emphasis towards the fate of the foetus, not the woman - a tactic employed by Alton's supporters.

Hopefully the power of reasoned argument, as illustrated in the article, combined with the growing movement against the bill, will win the day over the manipulative emotionalism of reaction. •
Anita Wright, London

discussion; and, to make matters worse, the presence of Teresa Gorman (racist advocate of 'repatriation' for black Britons) actively excluded black people from the debate.

As a result of your racism, only the interests of white, middle-class women were represented. This denies black women's experience of abortion being forced upon them, of sterilisation without consent and the history of experimenting on black and ethnic minority women with contraceptive drugs such as Depro-Provera. O

Alison Lee, London

the Conference of Socialist Economists) has just appeared but there is neither report nor analysis of the event. Add to this the lack of response to the critical 'Open Letter to the Conference Organisers' in the December *Chartist* and the silence is deafening.

Does this matter? Yes, it does. Contrary to Ros Brunt's report in *Marxism Today*, Chesterfield was not demobilising. It was a revivalist rally which did, as Hilary Wainwright says, bring together those who wanted to recharge their batteries. They did, but not in the way some of the organisers hoped. Instead of learning from past mistakes and coming to terms with new developments, the overwhelming mass of participants at Chesterfield chose to reaffirm old certainties.

There were positive elements of Chesterfield, but if Hilary Wainwright and her colleagues are serious about wanting a sense of the different forces at work, that sense must be realistic, ie deeply critical. Chesterfield blocked the necessary process of coming to terms with the socialist crisis and no amount of selective justification and special pleading will change that. #
Trevor Fisher, Stafford

Mengestu's Regime

In reply to Paddy Coulter (*MT Jan*), perhaps the *Sunday Times* was wrong in calling Mengestu's regime in Ethiopia a gang of bloodstained ideologically-obsessed zealots.

For the ideology is somewhat lacking in a regime that proscribes food aid, food-aid trucks and clothing, blankets and medicines for its troops, despite the perverse proportion of its budget spent on the drive to silence any opposition.

The basic misunderstanding is that Haile Miriam's is a marxist government and this should be defended politically

Cay Rights

In response to 'Clause For Concern' (*MT Feb*), many people think that gay men should be grateful for the 1967 partial decriminalisation of homosexual acts and that lesbians and gays should quietly accept Clause 28 without any fuss. Otherwise, we are warned, lesbian rights may be diminished even further.

The lesbian and gay liberation movement in this country is thus being reborn. It has nothing to lose. Over the past 20 years real liberation has been sought. Advances were made but no additional legislation supported those advances. Then the wretched HIV virus made its way into this country by way of the homosexual community and now that community is being blamed for the very existence of Aids! Homosexuals are to be punished because a virus threatens the sexual freedoms of heterosexuals.

There are between five and ten million lesbian and gay people in this country. We see that it is now not just important to have Clause 28 deleted, but time for us to relaunch our cause and demand total equal-

Candour

We are much relieved to know that, whereas Beatrix Campbell (*MT Feb*) casts grave doubt on the validity of the vaginal orgasm, Julie Burchill reassures us and states with disarming candour that she at least has them and, she implies, very good they are too. This is

Unacceptable Levels

You ask (*MT Jan*): What kind of chief executive of Channel 4 Michael Grade will be?

Two days before that issue

by the magazine. Horse manure! Would a real marxist regime conduct such a programme against its already starving peoples, or keep a paranoid stranglehold on a country's centralisation? Military might over development can be seen at a glance at Addis Abbaba airport. As for the capital's streets - military transport outnumbered civilian quite severely.

There is not a famine in an African country that hasn't been strongly exacerbated by civil war (and brutal regimes in conjunction most often). • *Rachel Jackson, Cairo*

ity with all other human beings. We have settled for too little since 1967.

We wish to be free to show our love for each other when we happen to be in public. We wish to stop having to hide. The wealthy, successful and famous among us wish to shed the constant fear of being 'found out', of being exposed by the media. We want to form relationships with the full support of the law and demand all those legal and financial benefits which have previously been reserved for those who are heterosexual, including the right to be able to adopt children into our stable and loving relationships.

We demand that *Jenny Lives With Eric and Martin* should be released as the first of a new line of resources which enable all of us, heterosexual or homosexual, to start being honest with our children. And we demand the introduction of rigidly-enforced laws which will make it a criminal offence for any section of the media, the gutter press especially, to incite non-acceptance of lesbian and gay worth. •

John Piper, Manchester

absolutely splendid and adds, no doubt, to the gaiety of nations. But now perhaps we could put our knickers back on and tackle the boring old subject of how to survive the Tories without losing our shirts. •

Given and Derek Kartun, London

arrived in the post he removed *Acceptable Levels* - a film about the cover-up in Ireland - from the schedule.

We knew. • *Mike Belbin, London*

Political Camouflage

David Edgar's article (*MT Feb*) illustrates several of the reasons why I left the Labour Party. I particularly liked his definition of political moralism as 'the pursuit of emancipation by intimidation'.

But he is quite wrong to suggest that Labour's programme contains any commitment to Green politics. There are no signs that Labour will ever develop such a commitment. Labour has tacked on some Green policies as a form of political camouflage, but any party can do that - and by now they all have.

Labour's election manifesto laid its emphasis on the indiscriminate pursuit of economic growth and job creation. The

Strategic Intervention

Neal Ascherson omits the important fact that it was strategic considerations, not merely reform in itself, that caused the Soviets to intervene in Czechoslovakia in 1968 (*MT Feb*). The Brezhnev doctrine was a rationalization of what was seen as a defensive imperative - to keep the buffer zone intact. This was implicit in the Warsaw letter, which said that the frontiers of the socialist world had moved to the Elbe and the Sumava heights - a military concept.

As C G Jacobsen, Adjunct Professor of Strategic Studies at Carleton University, Cana-

proposed Ministry of Environmental Protection was encouragingly listed as a change which would 'cost little to implement'. There was no commitment to phase out nuclear power, but there was an intriguing pledge to 'ensure a safe future for Sellafield'.

David Edgar argues that the 'proof of the pudding' for any economic policy must be that it 'works', and that moral content is important only on the social side of a political programme. Try to imagine an economic policy with an acceptable moral content, David, then you will be starting to think Green.

Green politics are not just Green round the edges - they are Green all the way through. O

Dave Bradney, London

da, says: the Soviets 'could not tolerate hostile control over the mountain ranges of western Czechoslovakia (east of which the plains stretch flat, if marshy, to Moscow)'

It was neither ideological zeal nor concern that the Prague spring might extend to Moscow that made Brezhnev say that he was willing to risk a third world war to stop Czechoslovakia from leaving the bloc; but fear that the *miniglasnost* would give the West a foothold inside the buffer.

As for what Gorbachev would have done, he might have taken the same line as Kosygin, who opposed military action. •

Brian May, Brussels

Editorial Note: We welcome letters. Please send them as soon as possible after publication of this issue to Letters,

16 St John St, London EC1M 4AY. Brevity means you are more likely to be published. We reserve the right to cut. O



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