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ODD GUNNAR SKAGESTAD

Oslo ■

20 Letters

Letters are welcome and should be addressed to the Editor at
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Thailand's monarchy

SIR - I feel obliged to set the facts straight on a few points that you have raised once again concerning the Thai monarchy ("The battle of Bangkok", "A polity imploding", May 22nd). To portray the conflict in Thailand as a fight between the rural poor, and urban elites "who are closer to the revered King Bhumibol and his family", is misconceived. To use terms such as "the royalist elite" and "the palace" misrepresents the role of the monarchical institution. But to come to the conclusion that the monarchy has taken sides, and is no longer above politics nor an important guarantor of the nation's stability, is the worst misjudgment of all.

Throughout his reign the king's words and actions have reflected his commitment to democracy; he has taken great care to remain above politics and never join sides. The appointment of an interim prime minister after the coup in 1991 was in accordance with his constitutional role. The signing of royal commands appointing coup leaders to administer state affairs, as in 2006, are consistent with his apolitical role.

Moreover, Thailand's monarchy has evolved and will undoubtedly remain one of the kingdom's pillars of stability. Doubts could be raised about your neutrality. The *Economist's* analytical framework coincides with the attempt by some groups to draw the monarchy into the present conflict and so advance their political ends.

The nature of the crisis does not lend itself to a simple resolution. That is why the prime minister proposed a comprehensive reconciliation plan, including safeguards against politicising the monarchy. Most Thais support this participatory process of reform, giving us hope that we can pull through this crisis.

VIMON KIDCHOB

Director-general

Department of Information
Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Bangkok

Education and altruism

SIR - There is another factor in the steady decline of Catholic school finances over the past 45 years ("God and times tables", May 15th). The precipitous drop in the number of actively religious, particularly nuns, has deprived Catholic establishments of a large pool of cheap labour. Consequently costs have risen as schools have slowly been forced to pay market wages for staff that are increasingly composed of laity.

JESSE OLSEN

Kansas City, Missouri

Face off

SIR - I disagree with the notion that Facebook does not have a natural monopoly ("Dicing with data", May 22nd). The value of any network rests on the number of connections it provides to a user. A Facebook user may switch to another service, but if none of his friends is using the new service, its value will be less than the dominant network. The situation is analogous to telephone networks: a company may, with some investment, put up its own telephone lines, but the harder task is to convince a significant number of users to switch networks.

By beating MySpace for control of the social-networking market, Facebook has won an overwhelming business advantage that few adversaries will dare challenge. By this measure, Facebook is a utility and should be regulated.

JOHN DE MOTT

Austin, Texas

Defending the EU

SIR - I fear that the point about British, or rather English, Euroscepticism may have been missed, yet again (Charlemagne, May 22nd). The animosity felt by some in Britain towards Europe is a direct consequence of the European Union's failure to engage fully with the British public. The EU is one of the worst advocates of its own cause and does not promote the benefits of membership to British nationals,

such as retirement to Spain, capital investment in Britain's poorest regions, cheap Italian and French wines and the now ubiquitous tapas bars in almost every town and city in Britain, patronised by Europhile and sceptic alike.

The EU needs a British champion to debunk the "Barmy Brussels" myth and move the focus away from Polish workers "stealing British jobs", which only provides ample fodder to the right-wing media and minority parties.

DEWI WILLIAMS

Senior lecturer in
European law
Staffordshire University
Stoke-on-Trent

Commons land

SIR - Although it was interesting for its bicoastal perspective, Lexington's column on Boise in Idaho neglected the larger context of the city's growth (May 15th). Inland cities in the American West such as Boise have grown because of migration from elsewhere. Lexington emphasised the draw from larger, coastal metropolises, but left out another historical source of migration: the surrounding inland countryside. These rural places have often become so depopulated, especially in the Great Plains, that they cannot contribute much to further urban growth in the American West.

Since 1987 we have argued that large near-deserted parts of the Great Plains would eventually have to pursue an environmental path we call "the Buffalo Commons". Lexington cited our work, but he misinterpreted the Buffalo Commons by seeing it solely as a national park, a federal creation. We have instead discussed it as potentially made up of Indian, NGO, private-sector and state land as well. Several NGOs are presently working at forming the Buffalo Commons.

DEBORAH POPPER

Professor

College of Staten Island

FRANK POPPER

Professor

Rutgers and Princeton
Universities

An own goal?

SIR - Analysing only the money flows from visitors to the World Cup in South Africa ignores what we call "the big event blues" ("Who profits most?", May 15th). This theory suggests that momentous international events, such as the Olympic games and the World Cup, may actually reduce visitor arrivals in total to the host city or country. Many travellers, such as businessmen and even holiday-makers, will stay away from a destination just before, during and shortly after a big event. They assume that there will be too much disruption to normal movement and that many prices will be higher. In general, they are right.

You reported that visitors to South Africa for the World Cup will number 373,000, staying an average 18 days. In an average month South Africa counts about 830,000 visitors. We estimate that those staying away during the World Cup could be as high as 7%, or 50,000 visitors, although some of these would merely delay their visit.

MURRAY BAILEY

Research director

Travel Business Analyst

Hong Kong

SIR - We are told that "noteworthy encounters between Brazil and Norway are rare" and are pointed towards Norway's "unexpected" victory over Brazil at the 1998 World Cup ("Vale of the trolls", May 8th). "Rare" and "unexpected"? Well, sort of. All in all, the Norwegian national team has played Brazil four times, scoring two wins and two draws and suffering zero defeats. As a matter of fact, Norway is the only national team to have never been beaten by Brazil.

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