

# litmus paper

Issue 2 Friday 8 June 2007

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## TODAY'S HIGHLIGHTS



Kathleen Taylor  
Brainwashing  
12–1 pm/Town Hall

Peter J Bentley and  
Lola Cañamero  
You, Robot?  
6–7 pm/Town Hall

Alex James  
A Bit of a Blur  
8.45–9.45 pm/Town Hall

Slam the Atom!  
8.45 pm–late/Town Hall

## A vote of many colours

**Adam Horovitz**

Politics, in the last 25 years or so, has become as carefully spun as a spider's web, so it was fascinating to watch David Cameron, the Conservatives' new spinner in chief, allowing himself to be gently probed in the sort of intimate surroundings that politicians have tended to avoid since the early 1980s.

Not that Cameron let his carefully brassoed façade slip too much in his talk, *Is Blue the New Green?*, yesterday. After a few jokes and a touch of self-deprecation he was off, stating that the “greening of the Conservative Party” was part of a “rich tradition” which can and should involve everyone, a holistic approach that is guaranteed to unsettle some of the party's natural support.

His talk veered from undeniably alarming statistics on deforestation – “an area three times the size of France has been lost since 1990” – to how his neighbour Jeremy



Clarkson berated him for testing green cars on the *Top Gear* track.

“Do we want to be the generation that destroyed our planet?” he asked. The obvious answer is no, but what will Cameron do about it? The only concrete answers were that aviation taxes “should rise... it's not popular but it's right” and that he intends to make sure that the private sector has incentives to improve biodiversity. He is firmly convinced that Gordon Brown's taxation systems are wrong: “we should tax per aeroplane” rather

than per person, he insisted, and “every increase in a green tax should be offset with a tax cut on, say, families”.

Asked why he was setting out his stall already, given that there's a potential three years before the next election, he answered that Labour hadn't been ready for power in 1997 and he wasn't about to make the same mistake. The only trouble was that, for all his public speaking skills and for all that he's the strongest opposition leader since Blair, the questions he left semi-answered, such as how to deal with the shortfalls of the railways, far outweighed concrete policy.

Cameron is a consummate speaker, and this talk was filled with good ideas and a level of positivity not seen in a Tory leader for many years, but there's still a long way to go before people in his party, and those opposing it, will be entirely convinced his new clothes have not been woven from invisible thread.

## Foetal attraction

**Mimi Mo**

To have a voice in the science community and at the same time be embraced by the public is almost as difficult as being the one sperm that succeeds in fertilising an egg. Prof. Robert Winston is one of these lucky scientists and his talk, *A Child Against All Odds*, fascinated the crowd.

Winston, who researches the science of reproduction at Imperial College London, took the audience on a journey from manipulations of fertility – the historical backdrop of the first IVF attempt, which began in 1750 with Lazzaro Spallanzani – to the ethical and scientific difficulties in conception today. He

described his first-hand observations of Sardinian children suffering from  $\beta$ -thalassaemia, a serious autosomal blood disease, and his personal encounter with Natalie Evans, a woman who started IVF treatment but was legally stopped by her former partner. Both examples suggest that gene manipulation during fertilisation is not only about scientific understanding, but is a social issue that affects society as a whole.

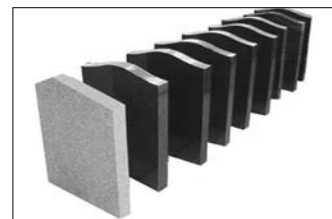
This is the sixth year Winston has spoken at the Festival; “He's almost like family,” said the com-père. The Festival's engagement between science and community aligns perfectly with his insights.

## Rage against the dying of the light

**Peter Wyton**

Should we continue to strive for longer lifespans or is old age an ugliness that shouldn't be prolonged? This was the basis for a chasm of disagreement between visionary Aubrey de Grey, whose beard is centuries older than he is, and Jonathon Porritt, who has spent decades not aging a jot.

Daniel Glaser, a rabbit caught in the converging headlights of these juggernauts, tried desperately to delay the impact by pointing out that, while average longevity had markedly improved in recent centuries, the extremes of old age had scarcely altered. Porritt expended considerable quantities of CO<sub>2</sub> on worrying about its effects. De Grey



propagated rejuvenation therapies wholesale as a means of postponing frailty and dementia.

The audience nodded sagely at every opinion and weighed enthusiastically into an argument that will be going on for millennia. I'm content to leave the last word to Trotsky, who said, somewhere between the mid-life crisis and the ice-pick: “Old age is the most surprising thing that can happen to a man.”

## The cider insider

Andrew Mountford

This was my first session at the Festival where the audience sat round tables and swigged cider. More of that please! Serena "Cider Woman" Marks introduced us to the (albeit obvious to some of my long-standing red-nosed drinking buddies) benefits of drinking cider.

And she should know, given the title of her PhD thesis, "The absorption and metabolism of cider", which must put her amongst the least sober members of the UK science fraternity. It's all to do with phenolics, which act as anti-oxidants, countering the damaging effects of free radicals in the body – cardiovascular disease, and Alzheimer's (the only ones I can remember after a couple of glasses).

Tom "Cider Man" Oliver, a Herefordshire cider maker of quite some standing, took us through the extraordinary life-cycle of cider from crushing and juice extraction, to fermentation and maturation in a cast-off barrel. The result: that most delicious of drinks. It was heartening to hear that there is still something at which the UK excels. So, if an apple a day keeps the doctor away, why not cider?

# Come fly with me

Jon Andriessen

It was a case of out with the old and in with the new as the old guard of Cameron fans made way for a considerably more youthful set, searching out the businessman and guru, Richard Branson.

Arriving hotfoot from the launch of his 20% biofuelled experimental train, Branson seemed more than happy to predict that his technical approach to ending global warming had made giant leaps forward. Virgin have pledged to invest their profits into researching alternative "clean" energies rather than persuading the customer to look for other methods of transport, something that interviewer Jonathan Porritt described as a "get out of jail card", if it works.

Branson has been through something of an epiphany in the last few years, disregarding cynicism and embracing Al Gore and his war on climate change. His answer is simple: we need more sugar to fuel transport and windmills to run everything else – including television, mobile phones and the internet, I presume. Well, it works on his Car-



ibbean island, so why not here?

Despite this, he is currently in the midst of setting up two new airlines. "I'm a businessman and have to compete. If we don't fill the gaps then someone else will," he said, with a slight cough.

Perhaps what was most alarming was an audience poll which indicated 90% of people would carry on flying, regardless of the effects of climate change. For them it's still tomorrow's problem, but for Branson, even if it is too little, too late, he's putting his money where his mouth is. Others may see him as merely tilting at windmills.

## What not to eat

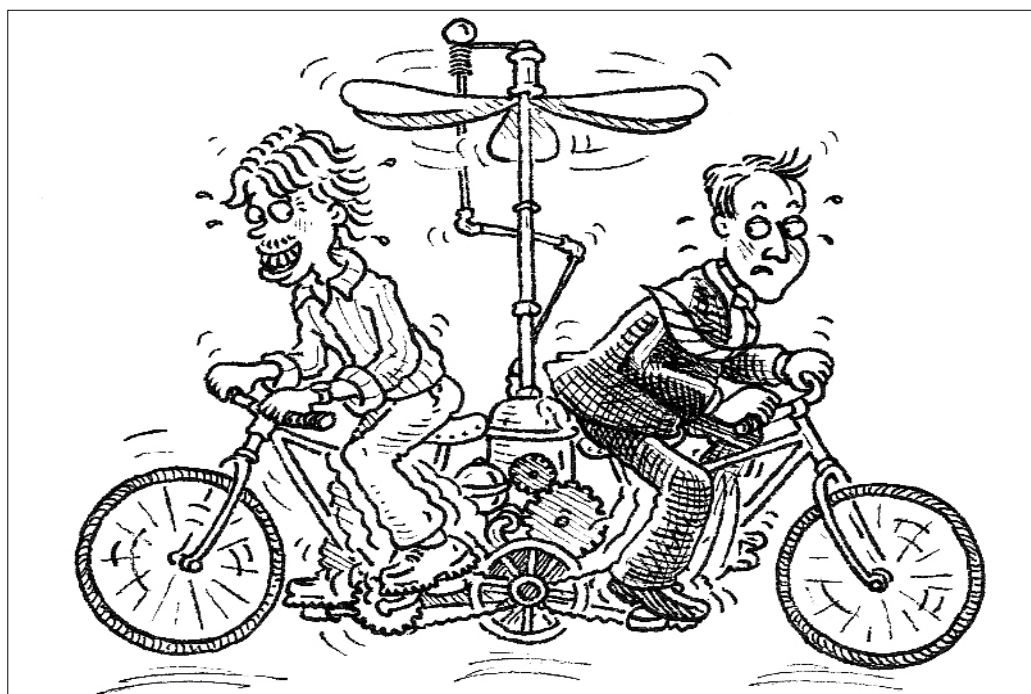
Jane Bartholomew

I'd gone to the *Diet and Cancer* talk hopeful that I'd leave with an abundance of information about diet, physical activity and cancer. I now have a much better understanding of how to put a research study together for a report but this isn't really what I was expecting.

Each speaker was very entertaining and obviously very passionate about cancer research and it was made clear that there is a link between diet and cancer. However, no suggestions were offered about what people should actually eat or avoid. No specific suggestions were made to empower those present.

The audience questions highlighted what people really wanted to know and it was only in the final few minutes that some relevant advice was gleaned. There is no doubt that this is a hugely complicated subject and that, as there is still so much research to be done, it is hard to give concrete answers.

The final message was that cancer is preventable and that the responsibility lies in our hands. Unfortunately, without clearer advice, that responsibility may be too much to bear.



"Push-me-pull-you" by Gemma Hastilow

## THE DROID

David Cameron intends to scrap ID cards, he revealed yesterday, calling them "a tiny plastic poll tax". A subtle way of casting off the legacy of Thatcher, the Droid wonders?

Asked about the future of Virgin Media, Richard Branson simply shrugged his shoulders and replied, "Don't ask me, ask Rupert Murdoch."

A child overheard after the *Hearts and Minds* event: "No, Mummy – emotion comes from the brain, not the heart."