

A N G L A I S

L V I I

ORAL CONCOURS 2015 ANGLAIS - LVII

David Cameron calls on obese to accept help or risk losing benefits

People who cannot work because they are overweight or suffering addiction problems could be threatened with losing their sickness benefits if they do not accept treatment under plans due to be outlined by David Cameron on Saturday.

Under proposals that are likely to be met with resistance from charities and some medics, the Conservatives will consider whether to reduce payments worth about £100 a week for those they consider could do more to help themselves by going on medical programmes designed to make them to lose weight, stop taking drugs or give up alcohol.

The prime minister has asked Prof Dame Carol Black, an adviser to the Department of Health, to examine whether it is appropriate to withhold benefits from those who refuse assistance.

Similar ideas have been floated before by Conservative-controlled Westminster council but were criticised by Dr Lawrence Buckman, the British Medical Association GP committee chairman, as "draconian and silly".

Under the claimant contract, guidelines introduced in 2013 mean jobseekers can have their unemployment benefits withheld if suspected addiction problems are preventing them making enough effort to get into work.

When this was introduced, it was criticised by charities such as DrugScope, which warned that the change set a "dangerous precedent" and would breach the principles of the NHS constitution.

Cameron will say: "Too many people are stuck on sickness benefits because of issues that could be addressed but instead are not. Some have drug or alcohol problems, but refuse treatment. In other cases, people have problems with their weight that could be addressed, but instead a life on benefits rather than work becomes the choice.

"It is not fair to ask hardworking taxpayers to fund the benefits of people who refuse to accept the support and treatment that could help them get back to a life of work.

"The next Conservative government is determined to make sure that the hardest to help get the support they need to get them back to a fulfilling life."

The announcement is part of a week in which the Conservatives will focus on welfare policy ahead of May's election. The party will say there are 100,000 claiming sickness benefits who have treatable conditions but are not accepting medical help.

Cameron will say: "I have asked Professor Dame Carol Black to undertake a rapid review into how best to support those suffering from long-term yet treatable conditions. In particular, I have asked her to consider whether people should face the threat of a reduction in benefits if they refuse to engage with a recommended treatment plan — it is vital that people who would benefit from treatment get the medical help they need."

Black said: "I am deeply interested in trying to overcome the challenges these types of benefit claimants pose. These people, in addition to their long-term conditions and lifestyle issues, suffer the great disadvantage of not being engaged in the world of work, such an important feature of society."

ORAL CONCOURS 2015

ANGLAIS - LVII

Solution to zero-hours contracts is to rebrand them, says Iain Duncan Smith

Zero-hours contracts should be rebranded as "flexible-hours contracts", Iain Duncan Smith, the Conservative work and pensions secretary, has said.

Duncan Smith said the zero-hours description was inaccurate and added to "scare stories" spread by Labour and the media.

He defended the contracts – which do not guarantee any hours of work for an employee – after the Labour leader, Ed Miliband, criticised the "epidemic" of zero-hours working arrangements in the UK since the Conservatives came to power.

Miliband has repeatedly said it is not right that employees get a text message late the night before to tell them whether they have any work in the morning.

He has pledged to ban "exploitative" zero-hours contracts and make sure people are given more secure contracts if they are working for an employer for three months.

But speaking on Sky News, Duncan Smith said: "I think, with respect, the media and others have got this completely wrong, the flexible-hours contracts I'm talking about which are named 'zero-hours contracts', they are taken by people who want that flexibility. The reality is what we've had from Labour is a series of scare stories about these."

Speaking later on the BBC's World at One, he said he was "genuinely furious" with the Labour party for trying to whip up opposition to zero-hours contracts.

He also refused to outline where the axe would fall in £12bn of planned benefit cuts. Asked whether he would want to cut child benefit by rolling it into universal credit, the new single welfare payment, he said: "That's not on the books now. Of course, a future government may well want to look at that."

Responding to the comments on zero-hours contracts, the shadow business secretary, Chuka Umunna, accused Duncan Smith of "trying to dress up insecurity as flexibility" and suggested he was "living in a parallel universe".

Labour argues the number of zero-hours contracts has tripled since 2010 but the Office for National Statistics cautions that this may be because of increased awareness about what they are.

In response, the Conservatives claim zero-hours contracts account for just one in 50 jobs and that only 2.3% of workers are on zero-hours contracts.

Duncan Smith and others in the Conservative party, including the prime minister, have argued that many people are happy on zero-hours contracts.

"We know first of all that people who do them are more satisfied with their work-life balance than those who are on fixed-hours contracts, interestingly enough and the average number of hours they work is not, as some people say, tiny numbers, it's actually 25 hours work a week," he said. "So, a tiny proportion of the population is involved in that but overall more people in work, more people have that satisfaction of security, of a good wage packet that brings them and their families hope for the future."

Esther McVey, the employment minister, has previously tried to rename zero-hours contracts as "enabling-hours contracts".

ORAL CONCOURS 2015

ANGLAIS - LVII

The US minimum wage must increase

So there they were in Durham and Raleigh in the rain this week, workers, many with their families, demonstrating in favor of an increase in the federal minimum wage.

How easy it is for the senators and House members in Washington to dismiss them, to talk about the minimum wage with tired old logic about how boosting it too much, from the current \$7.25 an hour, would just be too risky for the economy. It would hurt the small-business person, don't you know. Can't afford it. Got to keep the economy moving. Can't have people lazing around living big on \$8 an hour, for goodness' sake.

Yes, how easy it is for these public servants, who get six-figure salaries and cushy retirements all on the government to tell some of America's hardest-working people that they'll just have to suck it up.

They've been telling them that for years. The minimum wage was last increased in 2009 as the last step of a three-step increase approved by Congress in 2007. Before 2007, the minimum wage hadn't changed in 10 years.

Now, thankfully, some corporations are seeing the light. Wal-Mart, the largest private employer in the United States, has announced it's going to raise the wages of 500,000 people. McDonald's is going \$1 an hour over local minimum wages. Recently, as noted on this page, some restaurants in the Triangle are going over the minimum wage, some substantially.

Because here's something Republicans in Washington don't seem to understand: A rising tide really does lift all boats. If the minimum wage were higher, those workers would have money to engage in a little commerce with other businesses. A goodly portion of the nation's economy would benefit. And families would be able to do more for their children.

That's a dream, the American Dream, that most members of Congress mentioned at one time or another in their campaigns for office.

Consider one of the people who protested in the rain last week in Raleigh, a woman supporting three children with a minimum-wage job at a fast-food restaurant. "Right now," she said, "I have to budget my money and choose which bill I'm going to pay. My kids need new clothes. I'm not able to get those. They want to go on trips or to the circus, but I can't take them for lack of money."

Then there are those workers who in their budgets have to figure in medicine and how they can survive taking half-doses of blood pressure pills or diabetes medication because they can't afford the whole prescription.

Some of those conservatives in Congress would say, "Get a job." But these people have jobs – jobs businesses need. They're working. Hard. But many have to get food stamps, and absent health insurance, get their health care the only way they can, at emergency rooms.

The minimum wage ought to be called the starvation wage. It should be no less than \$10 and preferably \$15 an hour. The tide must rise under all.

ORAL CONCOURS 2015

ANGLAIS - LVII

Protesters try to force affordable housing up the election agenda

Over 2,000 people are to rally in Westminster in a bid to force the shortage of affordable homes up the general election agenda amid fears neither the Conservatives nor Labour will make the housing crisis a campaign priority.

Tuesday's "Homes for Britain" event – the largest protest yet at successive governments' failure to address the shortage of affordable housing in the UK – comes as campaigners voiced disappointment at Labour's refusal to include housing on its five-point election pledge card and the social housing sector's fear that the Conservatives' campaigning is focused only on home ownership.

The national event follows a series of local protests against alleged "social cleansing" by landlords replacing affordable housing with more expensive units for sale. Campaigns at the New Era estate in east London and in Chelsea at the Sutton Estate have been backed by the comedians Russell Brand and Eddie Izzard respectively. On Tuesday night, Brand is set to lead a "sleep-over" at the threatened Sweets Way estate in Barnet.

Campaigners from across the country will converge on Westminster for a rally that will see speeches from the Conservative party chairman, Grant Shapps, the Ukip leader, Nigel Farage, and the Labour communities spokesman, Hilary Benn. Also addressing the crowd at the Methodist Central Hall will be Ken Loach, who made the film *Cathy Come Home* in 1966 about a family made homeless by eviction, as well as the heads of the TUC, Frances O'Grady, and CBI, John Cridland.

"Politicians are misreading the level of public concern about this issue," said David Orr, chief executive of the National Housing Federation which represents social landlords and helped organised the rally. "We are being offered palliatives instead of understanding the depth of this problem. Our failure to come up with a proper housing policy is now having a clear impact on our potential for economic growth and we can't allow that to happen any longer."

Sir Michael Lyons, the former BBC chairman who carried out a review on housing for Labour, last year said the nation needs at least 243,000 homes a year to keep up with the number of new households being formed, but over the last decade only an average of 137,000 homes a year have been built.

The rally organisers – who also include the Home Builders Federation, which represents housebuilders, and the Residential Landlords Association – are calling for the next government to draw up a plan to end the housing crisis within a generation in the first year in office after the 7 May poll.[...]

The NHF also released an analysis showing how property owners in London and the south-east benefited disproportionately from the housing boom since 2010 with 97% of all property wealth growth happening in those areas. It found London now holds more than a quarter of the nation's property wealth at £1.2 trillion. The figure is more than the north-east, north-west, Yorkshire and the Humber, and the east Midlands put together (£1.1 trillion).

The Guardian, 17 March 2015

ORAL CONCOURS 2015

ANGLAIS - LVII

Auf wiedersehen, Britain: 'Merkel ready to cast UK adrift' over quotas on migrant workers

The German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, has warned David Cameron she would be prepared to see Britain leave the EU rather than give in to his demands for new quotas on migrant workers coming to the UK.

Ms Merkel is understood to have told the Prime Minister he is approaching a "point of no return" where his demands for changes in Britain's relationship with the EU are not acceptable to Germany.

Her comments come ahead of a key speech, currently being worked on in Downing Street, in which Mr Cameron will spell out his plans for EU Labour market reform as part of his proposed renegotiation of Britain's membership. Last month Downing Street sources suggested that the Prime Minister was looking at a system to control EU migration by capping the national insurance numbers issued to foreign workers.

But the out-going President of the European Commission suggested that such a proposal would be incompatible with the principle of freedom of movement which was an "essential" part of the union. This is a sentiment shared by Ms Merkel.

Der Spiegel cited sources in Berlin saying that if Mr Cameron insisted on limiting the number of immigrants from other EU states, "there will be no going back". It quoted the sources as saying: "Should Cameron persist [in this plan], Chancellor Angela Merkel would abandon her efforts to keep Britain in the EU. With that a point of no return would be reached. That would be it then."

Speaking after a meeting of the European Council last month, Ms Merkel said Germany would not interfere with the basic principle of freedom of movement, but emphasised: "That doesn't mean that there aren't various problems." Ms Merkel added that she had discussed these problems with Mr Cameron, including benefits for unemployed EU migrants. She added: "However, it is my view that this must be resolved in a way that on the one hand allows us to tackle abuses, but on the other, does not deviate from the basic principle of freedom of movement in Europe."

Yesterday there were signs that the German warning may have been heeded by Mr Cameron. The Sunday Times reported that the Prime Minister was looking at ways to stretch existing EU rules "to their limits" rather than insist on measures that would require a treaty change.

This could include deporting foreign nationals after three months if they had not found a job and were unable to support themselves.

"The focus is on drawing up a German-compliant package of measures," one minister said. "Cameron needs to square Merkel or we won't get anything. We've got to stretch the existing rules to their limits. There is no right in the EU to stay somewhere if you can't support yourself after three months. That will be part of the package, I have no doubt."

Mr Cameron has said he will hold an in-or-out referendum on EU membership in 2017 if he wins the May general election. He has said he wants Britain to remain inside a reformed EU but it is far from clear that the reforms he wants will be accepted by other members.

The Independent, 3 November 2014

ORAL CONCOURS 2015

ANGLAIS - LVII

Keep calm and carry on: Brits getting intolerant of noise pollution

People are becoming increasingly intolerant of loud music, barking dogs, noisy neighbours, road traffic and aircraft noise, a major government survey has found.

According to a government survey of attitudes conducted once a decade, noise has risen from ninth to fourth since 2000 in the league table of perceived local environmental problems and is now on a level with air pollution and only behind dog fouling, litter and the loss of green belt land.

Research by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs found that 48% of the 2,750 people surveyed in England and Wales felt that their home life was being spoilt by noise, with one in five saying it kept them awake at night.

But while the survey found little change in the proportion of people saying they are affected by unwelcome noise, 11-17% more people said they were significantly upset by it.

"There has been a strongly statistically significant increase in the proportion of respondents who report being bothered, annoyed or disturbed to some extent by road traffic, neighbours, aircraft and building ... despite no material increase in the proportion of the population hearing noise from these four sources," said the report.

The survey also found 10-16% fewer people saying they were not at all adversely affected by noise. "This suggests that the population may be less tolerant of noise than in 2000," said the report.

Neighbour noise and road traffic continue to be the two biggest noise problems, aircraft noise was found to be the fastest growing source of irritation, with nearly three quarters of respondents reporting hearing it and 13% giving 'moderate', 'very' or 'extreme' ratings for being bothered, annoyed or disturbed.

John Stewart, chair of HACAN, the group which campaigns for noise reduction around Heathrow, said the airport has seen a five-fold increase in complaints about noise over the past year. "The results [of the survey] are revealing. This dramatic increase in the numbers disturbed by aircraft took place during a decade when planes were becoming a little quieter. It can only be accounted for by the rise in the number of aircraft using UK airports."

However, a spokeswoman for Heathrow airport said a large number of the complaints came from a single individual, with the top 10 complainants making almost 2,000 complaints per person.

Nearly 200,000 noise complaints were made to local councils in 2012 but, says the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health, fewer than 20 people were fined.

Older, retired people were found to be less likely than middle-aged adults to report negatively about the amount of noise in their local environment.

"Noise is an inevitable consequence of a mature and vibrant society. With the increase in population over the past decade in the UK and the development of infrastructure to accommodate that increase, it follows that some noise must continue to occur, indeed as an inevitable consequence. However, the results suggest that the population may be less tolerant of noise than in 2000," the report concluded.

The Guardian, 26 January 2015

ORAL CONCOURS 2015

ANGLAIS - LVII

Lack of financial literacy among voters is a 'threat to democracy'

With a pre-election budget only a couple of days away, full of terms like deficit and GDP, Manchester University students have provided a useful reminder of how little voters understand of the economic terminology economists, politicians and the media throw around.

According to a poll of more than 1,500 adults, around 60% failed to offer the correct definition of GDP when given five choices. A quarter said they did not know. The survey, which was devised by the Post-Crash Economics society at Manchester University and pollsters YouGov, also found that almost half of respondents were unable to pick the right definition for the government's budget deficit from a multiple choice question. Further analysis found that 19% of those intending to vote Conservative and 21% of those intending to vote for the Liberal Democrats confused the deficit with total government debt.

The Post-Crash Economics society came to prominence after it rebelled against the straitjacket of Manchester University's orthodox free-market teaching programme. It argued that alternative ways of thinking, especially about the causes of the crash and the failings of orthodox economics, have been pushed to the margins.

Now students are concerned that with a budget and, more importantly, an election coming up, much of the voting public will be shut out of the debate. Zach Ward-Perkins, a researcher on the project, said ignorance among voters and especially lower socio-economic groups, means "democratic debate stagnates into discussions between small elite groups over small differences behind the backs of an increasingly disillusioned and unrepresented public." He added: "This status quo is a grave threat to our democracy."

The survey fits with studies by newspapers and political parties that find only a minority of voters grasp the jargon and concepts commonly used in economic discourse and repeated in the media. Only 30% of respondents were able to correctly define quantitative easing. A further 21% said they had simply never heard of it. Yet, as the students point out "Quantitative easing amounted to the creation of over £375bn and the Bank of England openly admits that it benefitted the top 5% richest households most."

The survey showed that more than half of the respondents talk two or three times a month at most about current affairs (where it applies to economics). Of these people, only 1% said the subject was unimportant. They blamed the terminology (19%), and the lack of interest among their friends and family (39%) for their failure to debate money issues. Another 17% ticked "yes" to the statement "economics is out of my hands so there isn't any point in discussing it".

Of those who never talk about the subject, most said they had no interest or it never came up in conversation.

Politicians and economists are unlikely to pay heed. Anyone who has learned the language of economics can end up patronising others. But the media should try harder. On budget day, the Guardian will publish a glossary of terms to help readers. Hopefully we will also write in plain English and keep the jargon to a minimum.

The Guardian, 16 March 2015

ORAL CONCOURS 2015

ANGLAIS - LVII

Warner Music reveals streaming income has overtaken downloads

The boss of major label Warner Music Group has warned rivals to "think very carefully" before restricting the free tiers of streaming services like Spotify, after his company revealed that it now makes more money from streams than from download sales. The tipping point came in the first quarter of 2015, according to WMG's latest financial results, which saw the label's revenues grow 4% year-on-year to \$677m, helping it record a net profit of \$19m. That included a 33% increase in streaming income, as it overtook WMG's download revenues for the first time.

"The rate of this growth has made it abundantly clear to us that in years to come, streaming will be the way that most people enjoy music," chief executive Stephen Cooper told analysts in the company's earnings call. "Not only that, we are also confident that streaming's ongoing expansion will return the industry to sustainable, long-term growth."

Cooper's comments come at a time when the economics of streaming music are the subject of intense debate within the music industry, with two main issues. Firstly, whether streaming – and the free, on-demand streaming tiers of companies like Spotify and Deezer – is making as much money as artists, songwriters, and labels and publishers representing them, want. And, secondly, whether streaming even pays off for the companies providing it, given that flagship service Spotify recorded losses of €162m in 2014 alone.

On the former point, Cooper's opposite number at Universal Music Group, Lucian Grainge, has spoken out publicly about his desire to focus more on paid subscriptions than free streaming, reportedly egged on by Apple as it prepares to relaunch its Beats Music service globally in June. "The ad-funded part of the music ecosystem – that's on-demand, ad-funded – as I've said before, is not something that is particularly sustainable in the long term," said Grainge at the Code/Media conference earlier in 2015. "Ad-funded isn't a sustainable business for them ... or for us. That's why people get restless."

Grainge's comments have been interpreted as a desire by his company to restrict or even remove the free tiers of services like Spotify, but Cooper advised caution in his comments to analysts.

"There are any number of models out there, and all of those models – ad-based, subscription-based or with both – are better than piracy. To be crystal clear: piracy is zero revenue, it's the theft of intellectual property, and it's not good for anybody. So all of these models are better than piracy," said Cooper. "With respect to going to a strictly subscription world, I think that you can find evidence that when music is not generally available, people will seek out sites on the internet that will offer up that music for no charges, and in many instances, with no economic model. "Before people conclude that freemium should be burnt at the stake, we should think very carefully about the consequences." However, this does not mean that WMG – like Universal and the third major label, Sony Music – will not use its bargaining power when renewing licensing deals to nudge streaming services towards trying to turn free users into paying subscribers.

The Guardian, 12 May 2015

ORAL CONCOURS 2015

ANGLAIS - LVII

Scientists have discovered nature's newest, strongest material

It's as strong as steel and tough as a bulletproof vest, capable of withstanding the same amount of pressure it takes to turn carbon into a diamond. Scientists have discovered nature's newest, strongest material, and it comes from ... a sea snail.

All hail the mighty mollusk.

In a study set to come out this month in the Journal of the Royal Society Interface, British researchers announced that the teeth of shelled, aquatic creatures called limpets are the strongest biological material on Earth, overtaking the previous record-holder, spider silk.

The teeth, which are so small they must be examined with a microscope, are composed of very thin, tightly-packed fibers containing a hard mineral called goethite. Limpets use them to scrape food off of rocks, but lead author Asa Barber said humans can adapt the technology to build better planes, boats and dental fillings.

Barber, a professor at the University of Portsmouth in the United Kingdom, tested the tooth fibers for tensile strength — the amount of force they can withstand without breaking — by attaching each end of a very small shaving to a lever and pulling on the sample with an atomic force microscope. He found that the material had a strength of 5 gigapascals, about five times the strength of most spider silks.

"People are always trying to find the next strongest thing, but spider silk has been the winner for quite a few years now," Barber told the BBC. "So we were quite happy that the limpet teeth exceeded that."

The teeth also bested several man-made materials, including Kevlar, a synthetic fiber used to make bulletproof vests and puncture-proof tires. The amount of weight it can withstand, Barber told the BBC, can be compared to a strand of spaghetti used to hold up more than 3,300 pounds, the weight of an adult female hippopotamus.

Their secret is in the size of their fibers, which are 1/100th the diameter of a human hair. The ultra-thin filaments avoid the holes and defects that plague larger strands — including man-made carbon fibers — meaning any structure they comprise is also flawless, regardless of how big it gets.

"Generally a big structure has lots of flaws and can break more easily than a smaller structure, which has fewer flaws and is stronger," Barber said in a university press release. "The problem is that most structures have to be fairly big so they're weaker than we would like. Limpet teeth break this rule as their strength is the same no matter what the size."

Barber said understanding the mechanics of limpet teeth could help engineers make their products sturdier — a process called "bioinspiration."

"All the things we observe around us, such as trees, the shells of sea creatures and the limpet teeth studied in this work, have evolved to be effective at what they do," he said. "Nature is a wonderful source of inspiration for structures that have excellent mechanical properties."

He looks forward to seeing limpet tooth-inspired Formula One race cars, among other things.

Now if only Barber could get drivers to adopt an entire limpet aesthetic — a sea snail-shaped race car is something we would really like to see.

The Washington Post, 18 February 2015

ORAL CONCOURS 2015

ANGLAIS - LVII

Facing Mixed Messages, Alabama May Gain Clarity on Gay Marriage

MOBILE, Ala. — After days of judicial confusion, some clarity may come on Thursday to Alabama's approach to same-sex marriage, as a federal judge considers whether to compel a probate judge here to issue marriage licenses to gay couples.

While a ruling would pertain only to the probate judge in Mobile County, it would send a signal to judges statewide, who are caught between a federal ruling that lifts the state ban on same-sex marriage and an order from the State Supreme Court chief justice to ignore the ruling.

For now, probate judges in 23 of Alabama's 67 counties are issuing marriage licenses to gay couples. Licenses are being handed out only to straight couples in 18 counties, and no marriage licenses at all are being issued in 26 counties.

"I think the great majority are essentially kind of confused," said Shannon Minter, the legal director for the National Center for Lesbian Rights, who is representing four gay couples in Thursday's hearing.

Their confusion is understandable.

On Jan. 23, Judge Callie V. S. Granade of Federal District Court ruled that Alabama's ban on same-sex marriage was unconstitutional. On Monday, with the United States Supreme Court electing not to intervene, same-sex marriages were expected to begin taking place across the state.

But on Sunday night, the chief justice of the State Supreme Court, Roy S. Moore, ordered Alabama's probate judges not to issue marriage licenses to gay couples. He argued that the ruling, in which only the state attorney general was the defendant, did not compel the state's probate judges to act.

Judge Granade recognized that as technically correct in a separate ruling this week, though she emphasized that the state's ban had been ruled unconstitutional and that probate judges had an obligation to obey the law.

On Tuesday, to clear all this up, six gay couples asked Judge Granade to rule on the issue and listed the probate judge here in Mobile County, Don Davis, as a defendant. The result is Thursday's hearing, though it is not known whether the judge will rule immediately.

Among the issues being closely watched is whether, if Judge Granade rules in favor of the gay couples, she will impose a fine or some other penalty on a probate judge who does not comply.

Mr. Davis, who has kept his office closed because of the "conflicting orders," asked the State Supreme Court on Monday for guidance. That request was turned down unanimously on Wednesday night for procedural reasons.

In a concurring opinion, Justice Michael F. Bolin of Alabama Supreme Court called the whole episode a "circus" and had kind words for almost no one involved. But, echoing Chief Justice Moore, he raised the question of whether lower federal court rulings are truly binding on states, and he suggested that only a United States Supreme Court decision, expected in June, would settle the matter.

This line of thinking, in addition to Chief Justice Moore's insistence that he would never accept same-sex marriage, suggests that the judicial quarrel roiling Alabama could continue for some time [...].

Mr. Minter, however, does not seem fazed.

"I'm confident that if we get a positive ruling from Judge Granade tomorrow, it will resolve any remaining confusion or uncertainty on the part of other probate judges," he said [...].