

Man v machine.

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Turn Turkey away

SIR - Those who favour Turkish membership of the EU usually put forward two arguments ("Why Europe must say yes to Turkey", September 18th). They are that it is too late to say no and that admission will encourage Turks to embrace liberal democracy—your key recommendation. Both arguments are weak. Although Turkey has gained candidate status it is not too late to admit that we are wrong. The other argument rests on two disconcerting assumptions. The first is that liberal democracy is so weak in Turkey that a mere "no" from Europe would suffice to throw the country into the embrace of hardline Islamists. The second is that membership of the EU will suffice to induce a transformation of Turkey to a modern, truly democratic and liberal society. Democracy comes from within; it cannot be imposed from outside—look at Baghdad.

Why should Europe shoulder the risks of Turkish membership? The rewards of making a nice gesture to the Muslims, which could bring some stability to the Middle East, are uncertain and scant. The costs are certain. Turkey is huge and poor and will absorb a disproportionate share of EU funds. Given that Europeans are sceptical about Turkey, why proceed?

MARCO FANTINI
Brussels

Freedom for democracy

SIR - One finds typical entrenched European thinking about democracy in the statement, "you still have to run it properly" ("No way to run a democracy", September 18th). Who would *The Economist* have control American democracy in order to run it properly? There is a reason why America is the world's most vigorous democracy—our culture has and always will resist entrenched control by any individual or group. The "ills" you point to are nothing more than the expres-

sion of the checks and balances that continuously evolve from the American conscience.

STEPHEN BRAHM
Hemet, California

SIR - Why does barely half the eligible electorate bother to vote in America? Why does anyone vote at all? It is inconceivable that my vote for president will affect the outcome in my home state of Virginia. Likewise, it is as unlikely that everyone else will behave rationally and choose not to vote, rendering my ballot substantial. If I submit my absentee ballot in the election, I will do so for no reason beyond conviction and enjoyment.

WILLIAM PEGUES
Ottawa

SIR - You fail to mention one of the most glaring democratic deficits in the United States. The 600,000 residents of Washington, DC, have no representation in the Senate and only a non-voting delegate in the House of Representatives. Yet, unlike residents of Puerto Rico, the US Virgin Islands and other territories who are similarly placed, we pay a full share of federal taxes and suffer the highest level of state tax in the country. Democracy? Humbug.

PATRICK MACRORY
Washington, DC

Retired hurt

SIR - Without wishing to diminish our present Labour government's largely successful attempts to wreck British pension schemes, credit must also be given to a previous Conservative administration ("How Labour wrecked your pension", September 18th). Margaret Thatcher's government was directly responsible for the pension mis-selling scandal and with it the weakening of the influence of company schemes. Her chancellor, Nigel Lawson, required companies and pension-scheme trustees to eliminate excess surpluses from their funds. The result of this raid was that firms were prevented from

building up surpluses in good times but encouraged to take contributions holidays instead (or increase benefits extravagantly). When bad times came more members suffered losses of benefits than would otherwise have been the case.

The unholy combination of political point scoring and blinkered Treasury greed may be good for actuaries and pensions lawyers, but give a thought to pensioners.

RODERICK RAMAGE
Coppenhall, Staffordshire

Legacy of empire

SIR - The British legacy of appointed government in Hong Kong is to blame for the lack of democracy in the former British colony ("Suffrage on sufferance", September 18th). Over 156 years of rule, the British government failed to see the need for democracy. Only during the negotiation to turn over the colony to China was the question of democracy brought up in earnest and enshrined in the Basic Law.

Had democracy been well established in Hong Kong when it was turned over to China, it would hardly have been conceivable that it could be undone. It is the British government that has handed Beijing the excuse to drag their feet on the issue of democracy in Hong Kong.

ANDREW CHAN
Toronto

Out of harm's way

SIR - You suggest that Britain's new Mental Health Bill, if made law, will allow ministers to evade public blame for murders by the mentally ill ("Psycho politics", September 11th). Speaking as a psychiatrist, I am alarmed. Debate tends to presume that psychiatrists can reliably predict which people will commit violent crimes, and then focuses on the ethics of whether these people should be detained. I can no more accurately predict who will commit murder than I can the lottery numbers. I can guess,

based on knowledge of past behaviour and current illness, but no more than this. No psychiatrist can do more. Therefore, fearful of shouldering the blame for murders committed by patients, we will be under pressure to detain ever more of them, in case they commit murder in the future. The public (of whom at least a third will suffer some sort of mental distress in their life) should be very afraid.

DR EMMA CRAMPIN
London

Man v machine

SIR - You state that companies may put customers off by installing impenetrable voice-mail systems that are designed deliberately to prevent connection with a real person ("Do it yourself", September 18th). You also say that menus cannot cover every eventuality. How true. Anyone who has called the consulate of any country to inquire about a passport, entry regulations, visas, etc, will confirm this. The most enthusiastic adopters of voice-mail are those least interested in the opinions of their customers. At the top of the list are governments.

RICARDO CABEZA
Hong Kong

SIR - Self-service goes back before 1916 and Clarence Saunders's Memphis Piggly Wiggly supermarket ("You're hired", September 18th). Between 1869 and 1872, the Bon Marché department store in Paris made two ground-breaking innovations: it displayed its wares for customers to inspect (ie, self-service) and introduced price tags (so no longer was the price determined by haggling). The vending machine, introduced in the late 1800s, also pre-dates Piggly Wiggly.

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Melbourne, Australia ■

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