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Times Online

SEARCH

From The Sunday Times

January 27, 2008

Making a new Britain

Last week President Nicolas Sarkozy announced his 300 ideas to change France. Our correspondent asked some of our brightest Brits for their one idea which, if put into practice, would radically change our country for the better. What would you choose? Post your comments in the box at the foot of the page



Jessica Jonzen

Roger Scruton philosopher

A constitutional rule that, for every new law imposed on the British people, an old law should be removed from the statute book – regardless of what the European commission says. It is evident to every normal person, and even to some politicians, that the hitherto friendly relation between the people and the laws that govern them has been undermined by the mad desire to regulate most things and to criminalise everything else. Give us a break and you will see what the British people are still able to do.

Rory Bremner satirist

I would introduce compulsory youth community and environmental projects for 18-year-olds. A six-month programme split between community projects in the UK and abroad – like a flood relief programme in Bangladesh – it would apply to everyone whether from state or public school and would work like conscription but, instead of military training, school-leavers would learn the importance of contributing to their community.

Paul Ormerod economist

I would make more explicit the connection between tax and services received by abolishing the PAYE system. Instead of income tax being deducted by employers at source, I would make everyone sign a cheque to pay their tax. While it would increase administration in the first instance, it would bring home to people what they are paying for. When you physically hand money over, you inevitably question whether you are receiving value for money. This system would put political pressure on public services to ensure they deliver efficiently and would prevent the waste of public funds.

Bob Geldof campaigner

I would get a submarine, throw a rope around the island and drag it 300 miles south. That way we would all be living in a tropical paradise.

Frank Furedi sociologist

We should get rid of the rules that prevent teachers touching children in school and stop parents from taking photographs at plays and sports days. Such rules just foster an atmosphere of mistrust. We've lost the idea that we are all responsible for each other's children.

David Starkey historian

I would remove everyone earning less than £25,000 a year out of the tax system. At the moment we have a ridiculous circular

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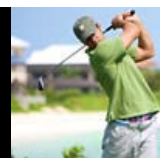
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system in which people are taxed, then given their money back in tax credits. It produces the idea of the state as provider – for something like one-third of the population. It imprisons people we should be liberating.

Fay Weldon novelist

We should elect our public services representatives locally. Britain is too heavily populated to manage centrally, so things need to be micro-managed. If the head of the police is no good at their job then you should be able to vote for a new one. This would increase the power of the people to tackle unsatisfactory services and would mean that jobs are done with the welfare of the community in mind rather than central government targets. It would certainly make councils sit up and do their jobs properly.

Alan Milburn, MP

Give people the chance to control their own budget for education, old age, health, child-care or training. For example, parents of children with special needs could choose to receive services as they do now or instead they could get a budget from the government worth the annual amount. That would allow them to personalise care according to their family circumstances. Similarly, as the postwar baby boomer generation grows old it seems unlikely that we will tolerate a council-decided care home in the way that previous generations have done. We are far more likely to want to live out the end of our lives cared for in our own homes by people we choose with budgets we control.

Jeremy Clarkson writer and broadcaster

Get rid of the M4 bus lane. Now. And for ever.

Jilly Cooper novelist

I would make penalties for cruelty to animals far harsher. People who are cruel to animals are simply given pathetic fines rather than being appropriately punished.

Lord Bramall former chief of the defence staff

Parliament should have the final say on when we go to war. I really don't think that in this day and age you can go into a full-scale war without getting the assent of parliament. There will be some operations that you need to keep secret but in any of the recent big campaigns – the Falklands war, the first Gulf war, the Iraq war – there was absolutely no reason why you couldn't have, if you'd wanted to, tested the will of parliament. There was a vote on Iraq, but it was on the wrong premise. If it had been on the right premise, they might have got a different answer.

Chris Woodhead former chief inspector of schools

I would introduce an education voucher for parents with school-age children. The voucher would pay for a state education but could be cashed in at independent schools as payment or part-payment. It would help to make the rhetoric of parental choice a reality; would promote new providers of education in to the market and at a blow, would destroy the state monopoly which has created appallingly low standards which we see in so many schools today.

AN Wilson writer

Instead of not being allowed to park on yellow lines, I think yellow lines should show cars where they can park. They're so ugly that the cars would hide them, at least temporarily. Then we should scrap all road signs and have them redesigned by John Ruskin so that they're not as ugly too.

Grayson Perry potter

Ban chewing gum. It makes you look dumb and makes the street ugly.

David Goodhart, editor of Prospect magazine

I think we should have a high-speed rail link. We're the only big country in Europe not to have one and it's absurd that it takes six hours to get to Glasgow. It would take a lot of strain off the roads and would relieve pressure on London.

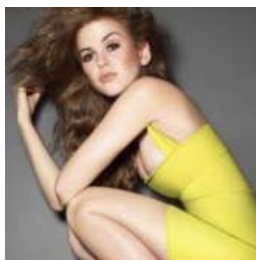
AA Gill writer

Close all the shops on Sundays again. I miss Sundays where I'm not doing anything. At the moment it's just an extended Saturday. That sense of quietness is lost. It's to do with the tyranny of shopping – I get bilious that there's no reprieve from the screaming pressure to consume.

Professor Karol Sikora cancer specialist

Inspiring people to stay well is the key to health. Keep it simple – diet, exercise, low alcohol intake and no smoking are the messages. We pay nearly £2,000 a year each for our National Health Service insurance.

A no-claims discount would give the incentive for people to stay



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healthy. Add a bonus for good lifestyle and attendance for appropriate screening. Get the message over that health is an individual responsibility – it's priceless and the best thing we've got.

Michael Burleigh historian

I get so annoyed by litter. It astonishes me when you're stuck in traffic and see someone wind down their window and just throw rubbish out onto the road. I would introduce larger fines, dispatch more people to clear it up and develop educational programmes so that people learn that it is socially unacceptable to litter.

Shaun Bailey youth worker

We should teach parenting in school. One of the reasons we have problems with young people is that they're not used to doing anything that doesn't involve some payback to themselves. They don't have parents who've made sacrifices for them and that affects how they enter parenthood.

Nicholas Serota director of the Tate

I would like to see art as another "R" in the school curriculum. Visual education is as important as being able to read and write.

Brian Cox physicist

Britain has always been brilliant at blue skies research, driven purely by curiosity. The invention of the electric motor was not driven by someone looking for an alternative to horses. It was Michael Faraday messing about in a lab with magnets and wires. If you fund scientists for pure research you get immeasurable practical benefits for society and the economy.

Frank Field MP

I would give people control over their public funds. The spend on the average child up to the age of 19 is now £100,000. If a mother wants to stay at home with her children for the first couple of years instead of going to work she should be able to draw down, say, a quarter of that, in the knowledge that the benefits she receives later will be proportionately lower.

Andrew Mawson social entrepreneur


We need to get out of short-term politics and take the long-term view. You have to start with one high street shop and understand its inner workings before you build a thousand. Government seems to think you can build a thousand schools if you have the correct policy framework, without understanding the practical inner workings of just one.

Andrew Motion poet laureate

I would like a project called WhizzGo to take off. Instead of owning your own car, you hire small, environmentally friendly cars. We should set a target date within the next 10 years for all vehicles to run on something other than petrol – something green.

Sarfraz Manzoor writer and broadcaster

It should be harder to buy alcohol and drink it in public.

 HAVE YOUR SAY

If we want to get rid of litter (Michael Burleigh, historian) then we should do what Ireland has done and tax plastic shopping bags into oblivion. It's worked there.

Richard, Cambridge,

I would make all politicians self employed; they could then come to the hustings individually and tell us what they intend to charge us, in total, to do the job for the next five years, if elected, this sum would be divided into sixty equal parts which would be paid per calendar month till the next election.


We would then be spared the un edifying spectacle of our esteemed representatives scrambling to get there snouts into the taxpayers trough, they could arrange and pay for there own pensions, there would be no question of redundancy payments when we kick them out for incompetence. There would be no allowances such as travel, housing, and office expenses for them to fiddle, there would in fact be no question of any further payments in cash at all, and it would I believe concentrate their minds wonderfully.






Barry Eltringham, High Spen, Tyne & Wear

Remove the dominance of the link between Government and the City which distorts government policy and the economics of the nation.

dave, chorley, UK

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