



Confessions of a reluctant cynic

MY mother never made toast. In fact, she never made breakfast at all. That was my father's job. Some mornings, it was poached eggs on soggy toast; sometimes, it was toast and bacon with Br'er Rabbit molasses; sometimes, toast with melted cheese. And, until we rebelled, it was toast served with the Word of the Day.

I have a whole slew of words that date from those maternal efforts to fill our heads as well as our stomachs: lugubrious, myopic, maudlin, misogynistic. We had to guess the meaning first—I guessed that lugubrious meant wet and sticky because that's how it sounds—and then look the word up in the *Merriam Webster's Dictionary*. Even now, whenever I consult a dictionary, I smell toast.

Another word that I remember from the breakfast table is 'cynical'. 'Sceptical,' I said, showing off. 'Not believing what you hear.' But instead of praise, I was given a lengthy lecture on the early Greek Cynics, who believed that the purpose of life was to live simply and in

harmony with Nature. They also believed that 'the world belonged to everyone and that suffering was caused by false judgements of what was valuable'. But my father's point was this: the original Cynics weren't at all cynical.

I've been thinking about those wordy breakfasts lately because I find myself increasingly obsessed with the 'C' word. In the modern sense. Despite all my efforts, the moment a politician—of any party—opens his or her mouth, a wave of cynicism comes over me. My most recent attack has been triggered by something that isn't even a word: HS2.

This isn't a case of Nimbyism. I am nowhere near the planned high-speed rail linking London with Birmingham and, eventually, Manchester and Leeds. My home on the range where cows and sheep roam, my ancient woodlands and SSSIs are all safe from this mega-project. Well, sort of. As a taxpayer, I will be paying for it for the rest of my life because it won't end up as the £33 billion that

it's estimated to cost, any more than the Olympics will cost the £9 billion quoted in the presentation that won the bid. Then there's the Scottish Parliament building, whose £40 million estimate became £400 million, and the tram project that has ripped Edinburgh apart (it's still unfinished and £500 million over budget).

‘It's the lies, stupid. Lies, lies and more lies’

So what makes me especially cynical about HS2? It's the same thing that makes citizens cynical about politics in general. It's the lies, stupid. Lies, lies and more lies.

I realise there are lies and there are damned lies. The lies that led to the war in Iraq, the lies used to convince us that we can 'win' the war in Afghanistan—those are unforgettable and unforgivable lies that make estimates of costs, length and benefits seem as benign as fibs told

to children with fingers crossed.

But, in the end, there are no small lies. I don't know anyone who believes that HS2 will regenerate the North (it's obvious: more residents in Birmingham will commute to London). Nor do I know anyone who wants HS2. Train travellers have simpler desires: a guaranteed seat when they buy a ticket (more trains); reliable trains (fewer signal failures); cheaper tickets. More and better, not faster.

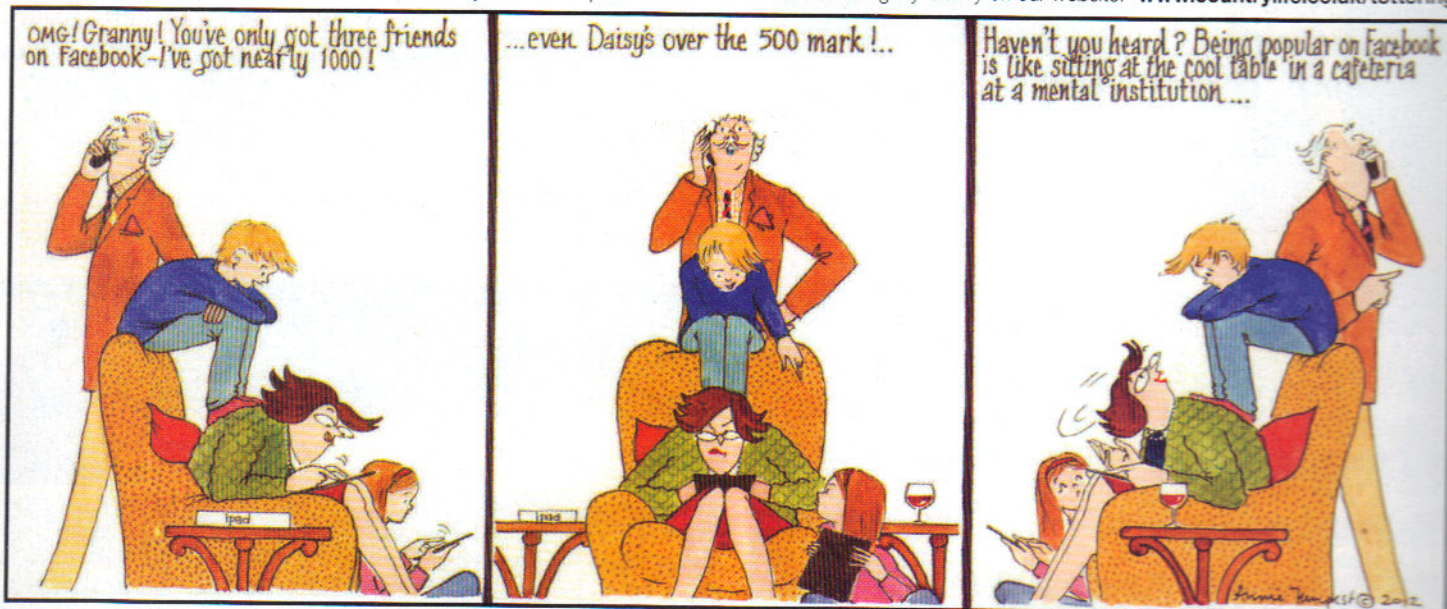
I don't know anyone who believes that the 20 minutes (the 49-minutes figure is another lie) that will be saved on a trip to Birmingham is more important that the rare and irreplaceable countryside that will be torn up for years and years. Worse still, I don't know anyone who feels that they have had a say in this.

Democracy is a rock. Chip away at it—rubber-stamp mega-projects that no one votes for, no one votes *on*—and democracy begins to crumble, turns to gravel, then to sand. We become a nation of cynics, who figure it's not worth voting.

TOTTERING-BY-GENTLY

By Annie Tempest

Visit Tottering-By-Gently on our website: www.countrylife.co.uk/tottering



IPC INSPIRE

A part of IPC Media, a Time Warner company
ABC Member of the Audit Bureau of Circulation

Conditions of Sale and Supply: This periodical is sold subject to the following conditions, namely that it shall not, without the written consent of the publishers first given, be lent, re-sold, hired out or otherwise disposed of by way of trade at a price in excess of the recommended maximum price shown on the cover (selling price in Eire subject to VAT); and that it shall not be lent, re-sold, hired out or otherwise disposed of in a mutilated condition or in any unauthorised cover by way of trade; or affixed to or as part of any publication or advertising, literary or pictorial matter whatsoever. COUNTRY LIFE (incorporating LONDON PORTRAIT) is published weekly (51 issues) by IPC Inspire, Blue Fin Building, 110, Southwark Street, London SE1 0SU (020-314 85000). Website: <http://www.ipcmedia.com> © IPC Media Ltd. Printed by Polestar Chantry, Wakefield ISSN 0045 8856. Distributed by Marketforce UK Ltd, Blue Fin Building, 110, Southwark Street, London SE1 0SU (020-314 83300). COUNTRY LIFE® is a registered IPC trademark. ©IPC Media Ltd 2011.

recycle
 When you have finished with this magazine please recycle it.