THE TIMES DIARY

Sugar puff

What has David Frost got that we mere journalists lack? Consider his latest piece of entryism. Every Monday, under the mirthless scrutiny of Bernard Ingham, the Prime Minister's press secretary, the heads of the government's various press offices gather to discuss the week's news coverage. Earlier this month Frost penetrated this inner sanctum – to give an address on the very wonderful prospects offered by breakfast television. Why has the same privilege never been accorded to reporters who regularly tread the Whitehall beat? Many would wax eloquent on the need for more open government at the drop of an invitation.

● *Is* Labour Weekly *over-eager to break bad news, or just having trouble with deadlines? Yesterday's edition carried the following front page headline on the previous morning's Commons debate: "Tories win with racist and sexist law." Oops.*

Sure of shell?

Whatever Tory backbenchers might think of Pakistani fiancés, Japanese and Portuguese oysters are now officially British. A general licence authorizing their release into the wild has just been issued by the Ministry of Agriculture. The licence is the first to be issued under the Wildlife and Countryside Act, one of the objects of which is to prevent the introduction of plants and animals that threaten indigenous species. Piscine immigrants (not to say irritants) which it is now too late to do anything about include black bass, bitterling, pumpkinseed and zander.

"Vladimir, this is Piet from the South African embassy. You should have a lot in common."

Wall to wall

Spare a thought for painter Graham Rust. As you read this he is poised just below the 40-foot high ceiling at Ragley Hall, the Marquess of Hertford's Warwickshire home, paintbrush in hand. He has until March to finish a mural covering a wrist-numbing 5,500 square feet which he has been painting, off and on, for 13 years. It is called "The Temptation" and will be the greatest addition to Ragley Hall's works of art since the eighteenth century. Payment has been by instalments, but the fee is undisclosed. I am told there are particularly good likenesses of, among others, the Duke of Kent and Jocelyn Stevens, both godfathers of Lord Hertford's son, Harry.

High class

Egon Ronay, a distinguished contemporary of one of the nine new peers announced this week, tells me that Professor Peter Bauer, professor of economics at the London School of Economics, was possibly the most brilliant pupil of their Budapest school generation. From 1925 to 1933 Bauer sat on a classroom bench one row in front of Ronay at the school run by the Piarist teaching order. Apart from being a whizz at table tennis and enjoying ice skating, Bauer was a formidable historian, Ronay says, and in his final year won first prize in a nationwide history competition. Aside from Ronay and Bauer the class of '33 also boasted one Lothar Gidro-Frank, who is now professor of psychiatry at Columbia University, New York. All in all quite an impressive vintage.

Counter blast

After news reports of the Soviet diplomat's wife in New York accused of stealing a $4 pair of children's tights, Moscow seems to have decided that attack is the best form of defence. According to *Tass*, two years of Reaganomics have forced 32 million Americans to drag out a miserable existence in poverty, with many resorting to shoplifting in despair. It is not clear if this means that the Soviet diplomat's wife is innocent, being neither poor nor unemployed, or if she had just been caught doing what everyone else does anyway.

With Lewis Carroll again in the news – a memorial plaque was unveiled in Poets' Corner, Westminster Abbey, yesterday – I have just had the pleasure of speaking to Mrs Edith Biggs, a hale 98-year-old who is surely the only person still alive to have met him. She was about eight at the time and living with an aunt in Oxford who knew Carroll. Mrs Biggs vividly recalls the *Alice* menagerie tiles round the fireplace in his room in Christ Church and his "extraordinary walk ... his body leaning backwards and his legs pushed out forwards, a sort of strut".

PHS

Where is the new Ernie Bevin?

The Hague

The US Treasury Secretary, Donald Regan, has come up with some thoughts about the world's economic relations that could make a dramatic difference.

For the first time in the Reagan Administration, he has defined problems in a way that could halt the trend to disorder, destructive rivalry and possibly catastrophic collapse. Although he denies it, his new views are a reversal of the policies Washington insisted upon as late as September, and the policies the US has pursued less shrilly since Richard Nixon abandoned the gold standard in 1971.

The events that opened Regan's eyes seem to be the hairline success of a rescue operation for Mexico and the elaborate efforts needed to prevent default in Argentina and Brazil. No doubt the Federal Reserve chairman, Paul Volcker, and the Secretary of State, George Shultz, played an important part behind the scenes in getting Regan to launch what amounts to a trial balloon.:

The key elements are:

● Recognition that economic factors are all linked and cannot be resolved in isolation. Sagging trade, international debt, currency movements, credits, interest rates and the unregulated slosh of the nearly trillion-dollar Eurodollar pool all feed each other and aggravate the world recession.

● Recognition that domestic US economic decisions not only have a direct effect on the Third World as well as America's industrial partners, but also that the decisions of others affect US prospects.

Regan acknowledges that international institutions set up in the wake of the Second World War to help prevent another crisis like that of the 1930s, and so perhaps another war, can no longer cope adequately. Something more is needed, a lender of last resort that would be a kind of world federal reserve, a handle on the loose Eurodollars that made those staggering debts possible, a rein on excessive currency fluctuations.

It sounds very exciting, the kind of creative impulse that put the world back together after the war and enabled it to reach great prosperity for nearly two generations. Unfortunately, it seems to be nothing more than that. So far, the trial balloon is filled only with air. Regan says he has no proposals.

It drives the mind back to the start of the Marshall Plan. The then Secretary of State, George Marshall, had nothing specific in mind either when he made his 1947 Harvard speech noting Europe's distress, and offering US help if the countries could get together and work out an effective way to use it.

The British Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin, leaped to accept. The Marshall Plan started in 1948. It worked brilliantly and changed the world because the vision came before the haggle and the participants all shared in moulding the proposal. There was no take-it-or-leave-it.

Who will be the new Bevin? There is no obvious candidate. Margaret Thatcher has the courage of her convictions, but they are familiar old formulas that failed before. She is not innovative. West Germany's Helmut Kohl can hardly be expected to take any initiative before elections next March. He comes to power as a man of austerity, a trimmer. President Mitterrand of France dreams large, but he is under intense domestic pressure and preoccupied with holding steady on his political and economic tightrope. Smaller countries can't get together.

Any one of them nevertheless, could generate the momentum needed. If they don't, there is another precedent that could ease the way for common action. That is the inspiration provided by the late Jean Monnet, who sired the European Community by poking and nudging leaders together and firing them with his inspiration.

Helmut Schmidt of West Germany could play that role. He is out of office and has said he will not run for Chancellor again. But he knows all the players still in the game, and he well knows the issues and the possibilities.

The lender-of-last-resort idea is not new. International Monetary Fund resources are to be enlarged, perhaps by at least 50 per cent. Europeans have long been urging US intervention to help stabilize currencies.

But this the first time the Treasury has seen the linkage and invited the shaping of a package that could face the gamut of needs. Some bankers, predictably, are already resisting possible moves that would limit their international free-wheeling. The Administration is not ready to admit that it must jettison some ideological maxims about government intervention and recovery.

Still, Europe has been given an extraordinary chance to put substance to Regan's musings and create a new era of partnership. There is no time to lose. Quibblers and selfish, shortsighted interests will be building obstacles to block a bold move. Will the new Ernie Bevin please speak up?

Flora Lewis

© New York Times

Ouch! Bowdler takes a swipe at Bunter

by Celia Haddon

Billy Bunter, the Fat Owl of the Remove at Greyfriars School, is alive again for a new generation – but in a toned-down version. No longer is the lying, thieving Bunter seen bending over a chair, trousers strained tight, awaiting the tremendous swipes of a descending cane from the sadistic beak, Mr Quelch. In four new Bunter books now on sale the stories have been rewritten to spare the tender minds of today's children. Bunter is quickly but discreetly caned with a minimum of fuss. The old relish in six of the best is not thought decent in 1982.

Today's liberals may cry "no censorship" at the slightest excuse, but bowdlerism is alive and well. Texts are being discreetly allowed to go out of print, or being carefully rewritten to protect the cherished values of our age.

Shakespeare, expurgated by the Victorians, is uncut now, but the same desire to protect and influence the innocent – for the best reasons – remains. Now as then, children's literature is most often the target. *Little Black Sambo* is denounced as racialist. G. H. Henty's adventures are hopelessly imperialist.

In the librarians' attempts to guard our young from contaminating literature, Billy Bunter did not escape. An Ipswich librarian banned the stories from the open shelves, because "nowadays we are wiser and realize that excessive fatness is a physical disability like any other, not the result of gluttony. Bunter and his sister were gluttons, and we do not want to perpetuate this mistaken image."

Other critics were unhappy about the stories' public school elitism; their chauvinism; their snobbery (servants and deferential working-class characters); and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, who talked funny English. Perhaps because of this disapproval, Billy Bunter was on the way out in the 1970s.

Billy Bunter started life as a minor character in 1899 in a boys' weekly paper, invented by Charles Hamilton, a prolific boys' writer who used the pseudonym Frank Richards. By the early years of this century, Bunter had become the main figure in a series of schoolboy stories in *The Magnet*. The war, with its paper shortage, finished *The Magnet* but Bunter rose again as the hero of a series of books.

Throughout the 1950s and '60s he flourished, starring in 38 books, yearly annuals and even a children's television series with Gerald Campion in the star role. It took the moralism of the committed '70s to kill him.

"I felt all along that Bunter should be republished", says his new publisher, Jeremy Greenwood, of Quiller Press. "But I thought it was certainly necessary to have the Bunter books cut and edited. There were anachronisms like pounds, shillings and pence, Latin construing and things which modern children would simply not understand. Then, if you are going to cut at all, it's almost impossible not to do more."

The new Bunter editions offer a fascinating insight into how life has changed in merely 30 years. In the 1950s, children might not have been studying Latin but they knew it existed. Today, we must assume that those aged nine to 11 would be mystified by it. Bunter's old adversary, Mr Quelch, used to teach the Remove Latin translation and poor Bunter never could cope with pious Aeneas. That has had to go. Nor is the slow pace of Frank Richards's writing acceptable today. The new version uses easier words, and is shorter to allow for a dimished attention span.

"You could count on a rather better word knowledge then", says Mrs Una Hamilton-Wright, who is Frank Richards's niece. "I'm delighted with the new versions."

But it is Mr Quelch's swipes that present the biggest dilemma. The original Bunter tales are unashamedly detailed about the strokes of the cane, the ritual of bending over, and the pain caused. "I had to make some difficult decisions," says Kay King, the children's author who had the unenviable task of editing the stories. "So much depends on the whackings that they couldn't just go. I decided to have them done privately in Mr Quelch's study."

Her decision is probably correct. Though children can still watch television space serials full of humans burning to a crisp, and though juvenile crime and vandalism is soaring, our society is unhappy about teachers caning children. In the Kay King version, Mr Quelch tells Bunter why he is whacking him. The original Quelch never bothered. To diminish the pain, some of the "Yaroooooohs" (spelt with no less than five "o"s) and "Yow-ow-ow-ow-ow"s (five syllables, at least) and the full-blooded "Yow-ow-whoooooooooop's have been excised altogether.

Updating Billy Bunter is rather like trying to make Tarzan less sexist, Sherlock Holmes less authoritarian or dependent on drugs and Sexton Blake more liberal. As George Orwell once pointed out, Bunter is among these famous characters in British fiction who feature in Not Great Literature. Frank Richards used to churn out a million words a year, producing so many schoolboy stories that Orwell concluded that Bunter was produced by a team of writers. But even in the 1940s, he recognized that Bunter was already out of date.

The nightmare of trying to update the slang without losing the flavour has produced a mildly transatlantic Bunter. Kay King's solution is to borrow from American comic strips. In 1982 Bunter and his pals use the language of Batman – "miserable microbe", "bloated bloodsucker" and "pilfering penguin" are interspersed with the old "beasts", "rotters" and "bounders" of the original version.

"I've tried to increase the vocabulary", says Kay King. "It was extraordinarily small. I've kept in most of the slang." A pale shadow of Hurree Jamset Ram Singh's speech remains in the way he calls the Fat Owl "My Dear Bunter."

It seems unlikely that Frank Richards would have objected to the rewritten Bunter. He was always careful to avoid offence, which in those days lay in sex or bad language. Indeed, he had his own moments of doubt about Bunter.

"I confess that I am sometimes astonished, as well as tremendously pleased by the world-wide fame achieved by Billy Bunter, who, in himself, can hardly be esteemed an admirable person", he wrote. "He is lazy, he is untruthful, and nobody's tuck is safe from his fat fingers. He is, in fact, an Awful Example and a Warning to Youth!"

Billy Bunter of Greyfriars School, Billy Bunter's Double, Bunter Does His Best, and *Billy Bunter Comes for Christmas,* by Frank Richards, edited by Kay King and illustrated by Victor Ambrus, published by Quiller Press, £4.95 each.

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BUNTER & QUELCH, 1950

"I hardly know how to deal with you, Bunter", said Mr Quelch, with slow, grim thoughtfulness. "You are not only the idlest boy in my form. You are not only the most obtuse. You are the most untruthful. You are the most unscrupulous. You have been punished on several occasions for purloining food. Punishment appears to have no effect. You seem no better for even a severe caning."

"oh, no, sir!" gasped Bunter. "Not at all, sir! Worse, I ... I think, sir. I ... I d-don't think caning does me any good, sir."

"Once already this term, Bunter, you have been caned for taking a pie from the pantry ...."

"That was all a mistake, sir!" groaned Bunter. "I ... I never went down the kitchen stairs at all. Mrs Kebble thought I'd gone down, sir, just because she saw me coming up ...."

"On that occasion, Bunter, I gave you three strokes with the cane. It has not caused you to mend your ways", said Mr Quelch. "I shall not give you three strokes now, Bunter."

"Oh! Good! I ... I mean, thank you, sir. C-c-can I go now?"

"I shall give you six ...."

"Oh, crumbs!"

Mr Quelch picked up a cane from the study table. Billy Bunter eyed that proceeding with deep apprehension. Mr Quelch pointed to a chair with the cane.

"Bend over that chair, Bunter."

"I ... I ... I say, sir ...!"

"Bend over that chair!" rapped Mr Quelch, in a voice like unto that of the Great Huge Bear.

"Oh, crikey!"

Billy Bunter, in the lowest of spirits, bent over the chair. He gave an anticipatory wriggle as he waited for the descending cane. But he did not have to wait long.

Swipe!

"Yaroooooh!" roared Bunter.

"Oh! Oooooh!"

Swipe! swipe! swipe!

"Yow-ow-whooooooooooop!"

SWIPE! Mr Quelch seemed to put extra beef in the last swipe. It fairly rang on Bunter's tight trousers. It cracked like a rifle-shot! Louder still sounded the anguished yell of the hapless Owl.

"Yow-ow-ow-ow-ow-ow!"

"Cease that ridiculous noise, Bunter", snapped Mr Quelch.

"If you make another sound, Bunter, I shall cane you again!"

Sudden silence.

"Now leave my study", said Mr Quelch, "and I warn you, Bunter, to let this be a lesson to you.I warn you that you have very nearly exhausted my patience. Go!"

● *Billy Bunter of Greyfriars School* by Frank Richards (Charles Skilton, 1950, 7s 6d)

BUNTER & QUELCH, 1982

Mr Quelch regarded Bunter thoughtfully. "I hardly know how to deal with you, you wretched boy. You are idle and you are obtuse. You are also the most untruthful and greedy boy that I have ever met. You have been punished time and time again for purloining food, but punishment appears to have no effect whatsoever."

"No, sir. You're right, sir. Doesn't help. Don't make a scrap of difference," agreed Bunter, hopefully.

"It is not so long ago tht you took a pie from the kitchen – –."

"It was a mistake," groaned Bunter. "I told you. I never went down to the kitchen. Wouldn't. Mrs Kebble got it all wrong. She just thought I'd gone down because she saw me coming up – –."

"That is quite enough!" snapped Mr Quelch. "I caned you after that episode, Bunter."

"Yes," said the Owl, quickly. "Didn't do no good though. Didn't help."

"That is right. It didn't." The Owl's hopes began to rise, but they were dashed as Mr Quelch went on, "Perhaps that is because your punishment was not severe enough."

"Oh, crumbs! Oh, lor'!" Bunter's face became even more dismal as he saw his form master reaching for his cane.

"I am punishing you, Bunter, for your greed, for your untruthfulness, for purloining food, and for your unauthorized entry into this room. So you see, there are four reasons for caning you."

There were four whacks and four wild yells, and then the door of Quelch's study was opened.

"You may leave, and I advise you not to come back unless invited to do so by me."

● *Billy Bunter of Greyfriars School* by Frank Richards, edited by Kay King (Quiller Press, £4.95).

Anne Sofer

I'll read that again if you don't mind

There is a new style of decison making at the GLC. It might be called SNAP decision making – SNAP for Strictly No Advance Perusal.

The procedure is simple. The papers relating to an agenda item are placed before members minutes, or sometimes seconds, before a decison is to be made. It saves everybody a lot of time. Members don't have to read the papers, because they can't: officers don't have to answer any questions because most of the members know nothing about the subject. The vote is taken and we go on to the next item.

The practice is spreading like wildfire across GLC committees, particularly those that are in the grant-giving business. To make it easy for most members to know how to vote, agenda item titles tend to carry unmistakable code words. For instance, to take a random sample from a recent arts and recreation committee agenda, we considered in quick succession applications from the Acton Community Arts Workshop, the West London Women's Project, the Black Theatre Co-operative and the Chilean Cultural Committee. There are quite enough trigger words in all that to cause the voting hand reflexes of both Labour and Conservative members to jerk appropriately.

The representative of the SDP/Liberal Alliance is on these occasions the only member whose vote is not predetermined. I have adopted the practice of refusing to vote on items when I have not been given time to read the papers, and I ask for this to be recorded. "Mrs Sofer stated she would take no part in this item because of the late delivery of papers" has become a standard and recurring sentence in the official minutes. The County Hall word processor probably has it set up for easy insertion.

This ritual is often regarded with disparaging impatience by the chairman. What does it matter after all? Labour has seven members on most committees, the Conservatives three, and the Alliance one. Our single vote is usually immaterial to the result, and any time allowed to one person to acquaint himself or herself with the issue is merely wasted.

And yet all my experience in local government would indicate that this is false. Sometimes closer examination of the issue means that local knowledge or commonsense cuts across the normal political line-up. Often the discussion, though it may not affect the current decision, has an impact on later ones. Both automatic approval and unthinking anathema can be shaken by examination of particular circumstances. From what little I have been able to find out about the organizations that apply to the GLC for money, I would judge some to be very deserving indeed and others mere bandwaggons for ego-trippers. It is hard enough to tell them apart after reading the papers; impossible if you are deprived even of that.

Besides, on these occasions when we come to items where the papers have been pre-circulated, things often turn out to be not quite what they seem. Take, for instance, the Nepalese Dance Festival – a standard "ethnic arts" item, one might have thought. However, a perusal of the documents reveals that it is in honour of the Gurkhas and the patron is Prince Charles.

There is a confused moment while members on both sides change gear and go into reverse. Can one be in favour of ethnic arts and royalty, flavoured with a whiff of the South Atlantic, at the same time? (The Tories find that one easier than Labour). Another pre-circulated item which stimulated a vigorous half-hour debate was a proposal to commission a sculpture on the theme of boxing for Burgess Park. Would this be a celebration of working class culture (good) – or a glorification of male violence (bad)?

The law – such an ass in many matters in relation to local government – is sensible in its guidance about these decisions. On every item of expenditure coming before them, we are told (and ironically this advice is usually spelt out in the very documents we are precluded from reading) councillors are obliged to weigh up the benefit to Londoners against the cost to the ratepayers.

The present practice of the GLC is making this exercise impossible. Complaints to the Director-General, the Chairman of the Council, the Leader and the Chief Whip have produced no improvement. A recent query about the legality of the proceedings at a meeting of the arts and recreation committee which was taking a particularly rapid series of snap decisions elicited the following reply from its very snappy chairman: "The lawyers can do what they like, and so can you, Mrs Sofer. Next item."

It is not just out of cussedness that I am determined to stop this practice. There is no point in having locally-elected councils at all unless members take all the little decisions coming before committees seriously. At present political energies and attention are not on the nuts and bolts. County Hall suffers from being regarded as a convenient national platform and (for journalists) a fertile source of controversial copy.

The bar and lobby and restaurant are full of talk of Sinn Fein, housing association scandals, the Parliamentary selection in Brent, East, and the Bermondsey by-election. Meanwhile outside the glare of publicity an enormous number of decisions are hurtling along the committee conveyor belt virtually unchecked by backbench elected members.

Many Conservative and Labour councillors agree with our objections and say so publicly, and yet the abuse continues. The Alliance intends to move an amendment to Standing Orders which would enable any two members to veto consideration of any item for which the papers have not been circulated at least 24 hours in advance. It will be interesting to see what support we get.

The author is the SDP member of the GLC for St Pancras, N4

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Peter Nichols

Tuning up for Fanfani's Fifth

Rome

I have a painting by Amintore Fanfani which looks as if it represents a spiral of smoke in brightly merging colours and the least it ever does for me is to act as a reminder that he cured me of any further desire for cigarettes. When he was about to form his second government, I was rather nervously talking to him and lit the filter-end instead of the tobacco and filled my lungs with painfully acrid fumes.

He has just formed his fifth government and, as has often been the case with his other administrations, people are saying that he will not last long. His first government did in fact hold the record for many years as the shortest in Italy's history. It lasted a little more than three weeks. Many years passed before Fanfani's arch-rival, Giulio Andreotti, beat that record with a government which lasted 11 days.

But governmental longevity is obviously not the point when one bears in mind that Fanfani formed his first government in 1954, when Churchill was still in Downing Street and Malenkov was fitfully ruling the Soviet Union before being sent away to manage a power station. Fanfani's ministerial career goes back to 1947, when he took the Ministry of Labour. He has seldom since been out of the public eye.

He is much less abrasive now than when he was younger: when he was secretary of the Christian Democrats it was said that if colleagues arrived late for work he had their offices locked, and made them come to him to collect their keys and, presumably, explain themselves. At 74, now a life-senator, Fanfani has not lost his vigour but he no longer positively seeks to irritate. He is punctilious but far more relaxed. Almost incredibly, he can now actually make other politicians change their minds about him, whereas in his younger days he was able to inspire either total loyalty from the group he gathered around him, or dislike.

In a sense it seems that an active Italian politician needs the prime ministership at intervals, even if for comparatively brief intervals, to recharge his political powers. Since he was last prime minister, Fanfani has been secretary of his party and presiding officer of the Senate, a post which makes him constitutionally the second most important public figure after the head of state.

He is a good painter, and his tutor used to say that he would have produced remarkable work if he had had the time to concentrate on it. His second wife is highly sophisticated and has provided him with a much wider social circle. He treats her with admiration in a way one would never have expected of him a few years ago. She has the same sort of vigour that he does: she is a photographer rather than a painter but, touchingly, keeps his brushes clean. And, surely, keeps his political instincts equally ready for action.

President Pertini took a startling step when he called back Fanfani. His predecessor, Giovanni Spadolini, was not only large, expansive and widely popular but the first non-Christian Democrat since the war to become prime minister. Fanfani is a serious Catholic to the extent, for instance, that he led a disastrous campaign in 1974 to have the divorce law abrogated and lost not only the cause but the post of party secretary as well. He seemed then to have moved into perpetual disgrace as a politician. He suddenly looked desperately old-fashioned.

Yet he is back in circumstances which have some resemblance to those surrounding his third government, which he formed in July 1960, in the wake of riots. The troubles had been caused by protests against the previous prime minister's decision to look to the far right for support in Parliament. Fanfani formed a minority adminstration with broad outside support and prepared for the most weighty political move of his career. That was to bring the Christian Democrats into an alliance for the first time with the Socialists, who were thought of as little better than the Communists, who were seen as far worse than they are today. His fourth government, which he formed in 1962, made history by enjoying the unprecedented abstention instead of opposition of the Socialists, who later joined a coalition.

He claims to have been consistent throughout his extraordinarily long career. Some people would differ. A former British ambassador looked at a Fanfani painting which I have and said that the varying lines and merging colours summed up the painter's highly adaptable political behaviour.

Not much is expected of Fanfani's fifth government. It would be pleasant if this time the surprise was in reverse and he delivers more than the promise suggests.