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They've killed off marriage - and our hopes of a happy life

This is Peter Hitchens' Mail on Sunday column

Marriage died last week after a long illness. There will still be weddings, of course. But they won't mean anything any more. They'll be like those certificates saying you are 'Lord of the Manor' which gullible Americans buy.

The whole point of marriage was that it was binding for life – 'for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, till death us do part'.

That is what made it such a fortress against other influences. The State couldn't break into it. It was a small, private place where we were sovereign over our own lives.

Either you like this or you don't. I believe that raising children as well as we can is the central purpose of our lives. I also think that lifelong marriage is the best way of doing it, and of ensuring that we do not run away from it, as many of us are inclined to do.

I also think the greatest test of character most of us will face will come when a husband or wife falls ill and becomes dependent on us. Marriage, by leaving us no choice in this, actually makes it easier.

But in the late 1960s, Britain and most other Western countries introduced divorce laws that hollowed out the marriage oath.

Since then, if either spouse wishes to break the solemn marriage promise, the State and the law actively take that spouse's side.

If the other half of the marriage wishes to stay married, he or she can in the end be removed from the home by force, with the threat of prison.

I am still amazed that this totalitarian change came about with so little protest.

Now the very sharp and influential Sir James Munby, senior judge in the English family courts, has said that couples should be able to end a marriage simply by signing a form at a register office, with no need for lawyers or judges.

And, being smart, he has also urged the next obvious step – that cohabiting couples should be treated as if they are officially married once they have stayed together for a couple of years.

After all, why not? There's no important difference any more. Official forms long ago stopped referring to 'husband' or 'wife', and those who cling to these archaic terms are frequently told by bureaucrats that they are now in fact 'partners'.

I think Sir James will get his wish. And everyone will be happy, happy, happy – except the growing multitude of children who have never known domestic security and now never will, and the lonely, confused old men and women with nowhere to turn but the doubtful comforts of the care home, where their lives can dribble away in a medicated haze, perhaps punctuated by slaps and insults.



Another BBC series that needs subtitles (but this time they have a good excuse)

Since even home-made BBC productions need subtitles these days, I am surprised the Corporation hasn't been making more of its powerful new German-made mini-series on the Second World War as experienced by 'normal' Germans.

By the time you read this, you'll probably have already missed two episodes of Generation War but it's well worth catching up on iPlayer, or perhaps they could repeat it soon. It convulsed Germany when it was shown there last year.

It also infuriated Poles, who reasonably thought that it wasn't for the Germans, of all people, to remind them that quite a lot of Poles had been anti-Semites.

But it's worth seeing for lots of reasons. First, it is simply good TV, never boring, full of incident, some of it horrible, some of it deeply unlikely, but all of it interesting.

If you think modern Germans have fully confronted the horrors of the Hitler era, this drama will show you how very wrong you are. They've barely begun.

This helps to explain Berlin's continuing desire to advance coyly behind the smokescreen of the European Union rather than under its own flag. You might also notice that the film completely ignores the first two years of the war, and only begins with the invasion of, er, Ukraine.

One simple question will tell us all we need to know about drugs

I see that even the slow learners in the media are at last picking up on the mountains of reputable research which show that 'antidepressants' are vastly over-prescribed even on their own terms, often have unpleasant side effects, and may not actually be any more effective against 'depression' than sugar pills.

Others all eventually follow where this column has led for years, though, of course, they never admit it.

So here's a new challenge for the slow learners. I cannot see how anyone can oppose it. Can we please now have a simple rule for all coroners, magistrates and judges?

Wherever someone has taken his own life, or wherever someone is accused of taking someone else's life, or of an act of dangerous violence, the police, doctors and pathologists involved should be required to discover whether that person has ever been a user of mind-altering drugs, whether legally prescribed, or illegal.

I believe that if this question is asked, it will become plain that there is a frightening correlation between such drugs and such acts. Then, at last, we can do something.

Have you noticed how the BBC discusses UKIP as if it is a problem rather than a legitimate party? Have you observed the pathetic attempts of Tory spin-doctors (who can think of nothing to say in favour of their own organisation) to smear UKIP from morn till night?

Have you also noticed the slavish obedience of political journalists, who have spent the past ten years ignoring the biggest issues in British politics – the EU and immigration – but now recycle these trivial slanders in the hope that they can save the old, dying parties which have spoon-fed them all their stories?

This sort of ganging up has not worked on the Scots, who understandably grow fonder of independence with every stupid threat and falsehood. I have a feeling it's not going to work on the English either – and in case you hadn't noticed by now, Nigel Farage is in fact England's answer to Alex Salmond.

If anyone is charged, tried and convicted for the murder of Jean McConville during the Irish Troubles, what will happen to that person? If I have correctly understood the 1998 Northern Ireland (Sentences) Act, my belief is that he or she would serve a maximum prison sentence of two years. When I asked the Northern Ireland Office if I was right, they issued a panicky refusal to comment.

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