

national information forum

Working for the inclusion of disabled and other disadvantaged people
by encouraging better information provision

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*A Digest of Current Social Information
For members of the National Information Forum*

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THE ARCHER INQUIRY: THE GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE

We reported the findings of Lord Archer's Inquiry in News Briefing no.9. Among other things the report indicated that by the mid-1970s the danger of contaminated blood and blood products was widely known in medical circles in the UK and the serious dangers attendant on importing US commercial products, often made from blood donated by drug addicts paid for donating, and using what they were paid to feed their addictions, were recognised. Nevertheless, the Department of Health felt that, despite the known risk, it was essential to continue taking American imports. Existing stocks of plasma also continued to be used.

But the Archer Report also revealed that in July 1979, the Medicines Inspectorate visited the UK's Blood Products Laboratory (BPL), following which they reported that the buildings were never designed for the scale of production envisaged. The Inspectorate commented that, if this were a commercial operation, they would have had no hesitation in recommending that manufacture should cease until the facility was upgraded to a minimum acceptable level. But, according to the report, "BPL was rescued by Crown Immunity", a loophole that allowed it to escape prosecution for continuing to use its products. Lord Morris of Manchester raised Lord Archer's finding in a debate in the House of Lords on 23 April. "Words have surely lost their meaning," he said, "if this does not mean that by the use of Crown Immunity, a relic of feudal England, the lives of countless haemophilia patients were put blatantly and gravely at risk." Referring to the Medicines Act 1968, he added: "There could be no clearer text than this for describing the enormity of the use by the BPL of Crown Immunity to dispense with all the requirements of that renowned and so vitally important statute."

We reiterate these findings to suggest that, although the Archer Inquiry was at pains not to apportion blame, in any commonsense judgment the Department of Health bore a heavy responsibility for the tragedy inflicted upon people with haemophilia. One might have expected therefore that there would be a yearning to redress the damage wrought on so many deeply vulnerable patients. Not so. People with haemophilia, or in many cases their bereaved families, have had to fight tooth and nail for even the most sparing payments. And the latest response to Lord Archer's findings continues that tradition. In a shameful Government response on 20 May, Dawn Primarolo, then a minister at the Department of Health, announced that, while there would be an increase for patients infected with HIV, there would be only a review in five years time for those infected with hepatitis C, and nothing



for widows and dependants. Ms Primarolo could offer only the Government's "deep regret" that these events – involving 1,981 deaths from contaminated blood products - occurred following NHS treatment.

Chris James, CEO of the Haemophilia Society, has been quoted that by claiming to accept the moral case for action but then not implementing Lord Archer's recommendations in full, the Government has shown its contempt for the victims of the worst-ever treatment disaster in the history of the NHS. Lord Morris – who set up the inquiry and appointed Lord Archer to head it – told the House of Lords in the debate that the Government's response left the afflicted and bereaved victims of this disaster in deep dismay and would be strongly contested in Parliament.

LORD MORRIS OF MANCHESTER AO QSO

Warm congratulations to our patron Lord (Alf) Morris on three outstanding honours. He has been a steadfast supporter of the Forum for nearly 30 years, and we are delighted that earlier this year he was made a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeon in Scotland for his lifelong work on behalf of disabled people. This is to now be followed by conferment of a Fellowship of the UK Royal College of Physicians 'honoris causa' that will be marked by a House of Lords reception on 7 July, in recognition of his "services of the highest distinction to disabled and other disadvantaged people". Even more memorable is the inclusion of the speech he made when moving the Second Reading of his Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons Bill on 5 December 1969 in *House of Commons Hansard: Centenary Volume 1909-2009 – Great Speeches from 100 years*, published this year and costing £35. This prestigious book details the forty speeches judged by a panel of experts to be the most historic of the century since Hansard began reporting. Alf's great speech follows David Lloyd George introducing his 'People's Budget' of 1909, sitting between Sir Winston Churchill on Britain's 'darkest hour' and Aneurin Bevan moving the Second Reading of the Bill that created the National Health Service.

We still have a few copies of my 500-page biography of Lord Morris. It covers scenes from a life beginning in a Manchester slum, through to his adoption as a parliamentary candidate in 1951 (when still an Oxford undergraduate), and a parliamentary career spanning (so far) 45 years devoted to raising the status and living standards of the afflicted. We can send it in response to a cheque for £10, including postage and packing. Profits will go to a charity of Alf's choosing.

OUTSIDERS FOR 30 YEARS

Tuppy Owens

Outsiders is a national self-help group for people with physical and social disabilities to find partners. It was set up in 1979, around the same time as SPOD, a charity to aid the sexual problems of disabled people. SPOD closed down in 2002 and Outsiders took over its helpline (now called the Sex and Disability Helpline). For the past 30 years, Outsiders has been run by volunteers, most of whom are disabled members. It finances its work by running a series of erotic events which include disabled people, an innovation in itself, commended by the Institute of Development Studies in their Gender and Sexuality Report 2007 (University of Sussex).

The reason for self-funding is that trying to obtain grants has been virtually impossible, the stigma attached to disabled people enjoying a personal life being so strong. NIF has always been positive about the work, but most charities have been too embarrassed. Nowadays, the real relationship problems faced by disabled people are at last being recognised: the *Disability Now* Survey 2005 revealed that finding a partner is the most difficult problem disabled people face. Work is now being done by Leonard Cheshire Disability and other groups, but they focus only on research into young people's needs, instead of actually facilitating services to address the obvious needs of the huge number of disabled people across the UK.

Outsiders is celebrating its 30th Anniversary with a glorious new website and events around the country called Great Expectations. These events invite isolated adults with social and physical disabilities to come along, network and enjoy themselves. It has been proven that peer support is the best means for disabled people to find ways to enjoy personal pleasures and this is the goal.

Outsiders has now set up the Sexual Health and Disability Alliance (SHADA) to encourage health and social care professionals, charities and the NHS to address the personal needs of disabled clients. SHADA is running a conference about training at the Royal Society of Medicine in London on 13th November.

Other Outsiders initiatives include a campaign for sex education in schools to provide sex education relevant to disability, a book, *Feeling You Feeling Me*, for blind people about sex, and the Free Speech Campaign to encourage people in society to become more patient and accepting of people with speech impairments.

For further information please contact: Outsiders Trust (registered charity No 283350 and SCO 3830), 4s Leroy House, 436 Essex Road, London N1 3QP; tel: 020 7354 8291; e.mail: info@outsiders.org.uk, website: www.outsiders.org.uk. Sex and Disability Helpline 11-7pm weekdays on 0707 499 3527; SHADA www.shada.org.uk

TACKLING INEQUALITY

The Equality Bill, introduced by Harriet Harman QC MP, has provoked some concern. Sir Bert Massie, writing in *Disability Now* (June 2009), finds the Bill “disappointing” and argues that it will dilute disabled people’s rights. Dan Scorer, in the RNIB’s magazine *NB* of the same date, reports that Dr Roger Berry MP asserted that, among other things, the distinctive aspects of the Disability Discrimination Acts must not be lost, “in particular the fundamental principle that equality for disabled people is emphatically not about equal treatment,” but “about different treatment to produce equal opportunity”.

Yet the Bill is largely a consolidating measure. Has it not been drafted by expert Government’s lawyers with their customary skill? Why then the high profile misgivings? We think, to put it simply, that the effect of merging the current equality provisions on disability, race and gender is comparable to cooking a hot-pot with varying ingredients. What emerges is a dish in which the distinctive character of the components is partly homogenised. It may make for neater legislation, but the overall effect, perhaps, is to attenuate the distinctive characteristics and impact of the separate equality issues.

And, of course, the devil is in the detail. We were particularly exercised by an entirely new provision contained in Clause 14. This provides a defence against a charge of discrimination against a disabled person if the alleged discriminator did not know, and could not reasonably have been expected to know, that the disabled person had a disability. The concept of “could not reasonably have been expected to know” is difficult, and the example given does not help. A restaurant owner ejects a person from a restaurant because she is eating in a messy way, which is an effect of her disability. The example says: “As the restaurant owner shows that he did not know, or could not reasonably be expected to know, that she was disabled, he has not subjected her to a detriment because of her disability”. But would not it not be reasonable to think, in such a case, that the customer’s abnormal eating was, or might be, a manifestation of disability, outwith her control?

It is also regrettable that the Bill largely replicates existing provisions allowing religious discrimination against non-religious people in employment, admission to ‘faith schools’ and compliance with the educational curriculum. And Scout and Guide groups will still be able to

require a promise to do duty to god as a condition of admission. Is this true equality? So far, the Bill lacks Conservative support which, given the likelihood of an early change of government, may prove significant. The committee stage began on 2 June. **Interleaved with explanatory notes and printed as a single publication, it can be accessed at <http://services.parliament.uk/bills/2008-09/equality.html>.**

DONOR TRANPLANTS

At the AGM of Liberty on 5 June a motion was proposed that the Government should bring in legislation to effect a system whereby, subject to a next of kin's right of veto, people are deemed to have consented to organ transplantation following death unless they have signed a declaration to the contrary. It was heavily defeated.

DESTITUTION ON BRITAIN'S STREETS

Research by the Asylum Support Partnership finds that many asylum seekers are continuing to face destitution, living literally on our streets, scraping a bare existence. This is particularly true of those who have been refused asylum. A 'destitution tally' carried out at various UK locations through October 2008 - the second undertaken by the Partnership – identified 1,178 failed asylum seekers who said they were destitute, with no housing or access to benefits. 731 of them had been refused asylum at least six months ago. Immigration Minister, Phil Woolas, was quoted on BBC News as saying: "If someone has no right to be here they must return home. I do not believe the taxpayer should be funding those with no grounds to stay in the UK."

The Asylum Support Partnership is a consortium of five agencies and is funded by the Home Office to deliver support services to asylum seekers with ongoing claims who require independent advice and support. *The Second Destitution Tally*, by Kate Smart, can be found at www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/Resources.

A BILL TO ELIMINATE CHILD POVERTY

As has been well reported, the Child Poverty Bill was introduced on 11 June. It reinforces previous commitments to slash child poverty by 2020 by placing a legal duty on government to meet four UK-wide poverty targets, to publish every three years a strategy towards meeting those targets, to evaluate progress and report annually. Local authorities and partners such as the police and jobcentres are required to co-operate to tackle child poverty in their areas, to assess the levels of such poverty in their area and prepare a joint local strategy. An independent advisory Child Poverty Commission will also be set up.

The Child Poverty Action Group has welcomed the Bill, but commented as recently as 7 May that "the Government's failure to make progress on child poverty for half a decade is deplorable". It must also be remembered that the commitment will probably have to survive a change of government. A new administration could, with majority parliamentary approval, repeal the legislation.

The detailed Bill is at www.parliament.uk.

A NEW 'EVERY CHILD MATTERS' WEBSITE

This Department for Children, Schools and Families website (www.dcsf.gov.uk/everychildmatters) has been revised. It links to Directgov for information on public services and is really easy to navigate, breaking down into 'Early Years and Childcare', 'Health and Well-being', 'Education', 'Training and Employment', 'Safeguarding and Social care', 'Youth', 'Research'. 'Resources and Publications', 'Strategy and Working Practice'.

ASSISTED DYING

In News Briefing no.8 we reported that an article in the February issue of *Disability Now* had asserted the right to choice in matters of life and death. We are now further encouraged that *BHA News*, the newsletter of the British Humanist Association, has taken up the issue. The May/June edition unequivocally expresses the belief that, with strict safeguards in place, terminally ill, mentally competent adults who feel that their suffering is unbearable should be able to choose to have an assisted death. And that while assisted dying remains illegal in the UK it is vital that for those who choose to travel abroad to have such assistance the law is changed so that their partners, family or friends who accompany them to be with them at the end of their lives do not face the threat of prosecution.

Note: Washington has become the second US state to vote to give mentally competent, terminally ill adults the option of a medically assisted death, within strict safeguards. The law, if brought into effect, will allow adults who have been diagnosed as having six months or less to live, to be prescribed life-ending medication, which would be self-administered. Washington now joins Oregon, Holland, Belgium, Luxembourg and Switzerland in giving people at the end of life greater choice. (Reported in *Dignity in Dying News*, Winter 2009 – somewhat ahead of itself!).

WHY PEOPLE FALL FOR SCAMS

The Office of Fair Trading has published a research report, *The Psychology of Scams: provoking and committing errors of judgement*, prepared by the University of Exeter's School of Psychology, to examine why people fall victim to scams. This is an important subject given that it is estimated that 3.2 million people in the UK are taken in by scams and lose more than £3.5 billion every year.

We felt some concern that this lengthy and detailed report apparently has nothing to say about the possibility of scams that play on the vulnerability of disabled people. It does refer to “visceral triggers”, scams that exploit basic human desires and needs, including the avoidance of physical pain. It also notices “an extra vulnerability in those who are socially isolated”. And in considering the implications for consumer education it recognises that the “likely existence of a subset of the population with enhanced vulnerability to scams is both a problem and an opportunity from a consumer education point of view”. It points out that if the more vulnerable group can be identified, educational material can be targeted at them. Older people are seen, for obvious reasons, as such a subset, but the report seems to have missed the particular risks faced by disabled people.

Disabled people are said to form about 10 per cent of the UK population. They are primarily vulnerable not because they are looking for a miracle cure (though some are) but because they often need assistive technology on an individual basis to help them live with their particular conditions. And that danger is greater because such technology is often expensive – not least specialised motor vehicles. This is not to say that the industry supplying special needs equipment is commonly exploitative, but to acknowledge that these consumers, eager for relief, are more likely than most to fall for scams, or to be open to persuasion to buy products not fully appropriate to their needs.

INFORMATION FOR DISABLED PEOPLE

The Office for Disability Issues has published a toolkit to help local authorities produce better information for disabled people. It encourages councils to involve disabled people, produce information in accessible formats, signpost services other than their own and have a ‘disability champion’.

See www.officefordisability.gov.uk/docs/wor/imp/toolkit.pdf

SEX EDUCATION

In News Briefing no.9 we unearthed our advocacy of sex education from our *Sex Directory* of 1988. We noticed that a small but vocal minority then reinforced the fears and prejudices which have so strongly characterised British society in the past and continued to stand in the way of enlightenment and progress.

In October 2008 the Government announced its intention to give 'Personal, Social, Health, and Economic' education statutory force and launched a review to consider how this might be achieved. The resulting report, by Sir Alasdair Macdonald, recommends that such education should form part of the National Curriculum in both primary and secondary education. Sadly, however, there is a recommendation in the report that governing bodies should retain the right to determine their school's approach to sexual and relationship education (SRE), so that it can be "delivered in line with the context, values and ethos of the school". In commenting on this development, *BHA News*, the newsletter of the British Humanist Association, expresses concern that "this will mean that children in 'faith' schools will miss out on good quality SRE". BHA also opposes the recommendation that parents should be able to withdraw their children from SRE. They feel that this will "lead to children most in need of good SRE missing out on it".

Quite so. It is deeply worrying that enlightened education should be censored, and the national curriculum tailored to accommodate belief in religious doctrines. Faith implies belief without evidence and the proliferation of different faiths surely undermines the validity of any one of them. According to a recent poll commissioned by the Accord Coalition, 57% of 2,083 adult respondents believe that state-funded faith schools undermine community cohesion. Only 19% 'disagreed or strongly disagreed'. The coalition wants the Equalities Bill to address exemptions for faith schools presently in the legislation. Go to www.qca.org.uk/qca_22514.aspx for the PSHE report, and www.accordcoalition.org.uk/index.php/2009/06/08/57-think-r for details of the Accord Coalition poll.

CUTTING BACK

To the neutral observer, the arguments between Labour and Conservative politicians about the extent of necessary retrenchment seem absurdly simplistic. Can we not agree at this time of national indigence to do everything we can, and without delay, to eliminate waste and needless expenditure? That is what an ordinary family would do. Yet we read (Wendy Savage, Guardian letters, 11 June) that at least 20% of NHS costs are administrative compared with 6% before the introduction of business practices in 1984. Here and elsewhere there appears to be an excess of overpaid accountancy and management. We have, for instance, previously commented on the huge pay hikes awarded to administrators in some foundation trusts.

We are also told in the same newspaper (Owen Bowcott, 5 June 2009) that management consultants are charging the NHS up to £1,000 a day for advice. A Commons Health Committee report reveals that more than £300 million was spent on outside advisers last year and probably £600 million in 2005-06. Not only is this at the expense of patient care; it suggests that civil servants are no longer capable of providing in-depth analysis.

All manner of wasteful initiatives have been undertaken in recent years. It is time to reverse the trend – and urgently.

"FIT NOTES"

In a news release worthy of Dickens's Circumlocution Office, the Department of Work and Pensions has announced that a new medical 'fit note' is to replace the current 'sick note'. The reality is that the Government intends to change the format and content of medical statements so that as well as indicating whether a patient is fit or not fit for work for benefit and sick pay purposes, the

form will allow doctors to record information to help inform discussions between individuals and their employers about whether there are any changes to the employee's work environment or job role which could help in securing an early/earlier return to work. The statement will include a new option to allow a doctor to provide an assessment of an individual's fitness for work. Doctors will be able to indicate where someone 'may be fit for some work now', backed up by general details of the functional effect of the patient's condition..

Subject to obligations under anti-discrimination legislation, employers will not be bound to implement suggestions by a doctor for workplace changes that would facilitate a return to work. Changes will be at the discretion of employers and with the agreement of the employee. If an appropriate change cannot be agreed, a doctor's statement assessing an individual as 'may be fit for some work now' should be construed as evidence that the patient should refrain from work for sick pay purposes.

The Government also proposes that doctors will be provided with an opportunity to indicate where, with the employer's agreement, their patient may benefit from workplace or job role changes such as a phased return to work, altered hours, amended duties and workplace adaptations. Subject to a 12-week consultation on its design, the new certificates will be rolled out across Great Britain in Spring, 2010. The DWP's aim is that they will be computer-generated in GPs' surgeries.

Key statistics

- The cost to the British economy of working age ill-health in terms of working days lost and worklessness is estimated at more than £100bn each year
- About 172 million working days were lost in 2007 due to sickness absence
- Absences that last more than four weeks make up around 40% of days lost to absence
- In 2007/8, 34 million days were lost to work-related illness
- 2.6 million people were on incapacity benefits in May 2008.

Kevin Maguire, in the *Daily Mirror*, judged the theory behind the switch "fine", but that in a recession, with unemployment soaring, "the fit chits won't be worth the paper they're written on".

WELFARE REFORM

Kate Green, the CEO of the Child Poverty Action Group, has welcomed the appointment of Yvette Cooper as Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (succeeding the late departed James Purnell). On the CPAG website (www.cpag.org.uk/press/2009/050609.htm) she contends that supporting the growing number of families struggling without work must be Ms Cooper's top priority. She writes: "The welfare reform plans she inherited were designed by a banker for a growing economy, not a recession. Despite the 'carrot, carrot, stick' promise from ministers, we have a welfare reform bill that is all sticks and no carrots. There is no entitlement to the high quality support people need to get into decent jobs, just a complex bureaucracy for giving people orders and punishments.

"Welfare reform must be about getting more people into decent jobs and adequate benefits so we can end child poverty for all families, whether they have work or not. The welfare reform bill before parliament fails on both tests, but Yvette Cooper still has time to make the changes needed."

Our view exactly. Ms. Cooper and her colleagues must be aware by now that public opinion is closing in on them.

DIGITAL EXCLUSION

Some 17 million people in the UK are without internet access or other digital technologies. This deficit is now recognised by the Government as a root cause of social exclusion. As part of efforts

to address the problem, Martha Lane Fox, co-founder of Lastminute.com, described as “one of the trailblazers of the internet age”, has been appointed as a government digital champion.

From Computer Weekly.com

WE HATE NO.19 BAD POLITICS

“As to the nature of government, we should say, its authority must be derived, not inherent – its object must be the good of the community, not of a class – its rule must be equitable, not partial. If [people] be naturally equal, no one of them can have a right to rule [their] fellows, otherwise than by their expressed consent.”

Washington Wilks, ‘Christian Republicanism’ (1848)

Just now there is a malodorous aroma around the Palace of Westminster. Some members (not all) have stretched their permitted allowances and expenses beyond even the absurdly generous and flexible rules of the fees office ‘Green Book’. Parliament has been brought into disrepute.

Yet this is something which can (and we are assured will) be cleaned up. The miscreants who have abused the public purse can be brought to book and the rules tightened up. Less amenable to change are wider concerns around constitutional theory and practice. The laxity surrounding remuneration has served to sharpen critical examination of our political systems, and has led to a widespread demand for root and branch parliamentary reform. There is a growing awareness that the machinery of democracy can be or become defective, open to corruption, unrepresentative and unaccountable; that those who hold the reins of power can oppress rather than serve the people, dominated by self-interest rather than a concern for the public good.

Sovereignty

What needs to be done? We must begin, we fear, with the monarchy. No matter how gracious, how popular our monarch (and we are old enough to remember the enthusiastic response to her marriage and coronation), the fact is that she is unelected. And the hereditary principle survives to ensure that the people have no say in their future heads of state. As Louise Christian put it on the Republic website: “someone who is mad, bad or a complete waste of taxpayers’ money can become queen or king”. It might be even more realistic to ask whether, given a free choice, you would opt for Charles Windsor as the next head of state.

This is no longer an extremist position. In a survey, published on 4 June, more than 5,000 Guardian readers gave their views on the big constitutional questions. 54% wanted to abolish the monarchy. Nor do we feel any sense of personal animosity. When Charles I was beheaded, he was portrayed as a tyrant. When Louis XVI went to the guillotine, he was roundly hated. The position in 21st century Britain is different. Many people have a profound affection for our Queen and respect the dedication she has invested in her lifetime of service. Nevertheless, the role of the monarch is a curious one: cast as head of state, yet denied any overt political influence. Thomas Paine put it thus: “At the Restoration, we were wise enough to shut and lock a door against absolute monarchy, but were foolish enough to put the crown in possession of the key.” The danger is that power can be exercised behind the scenes under cover of secrecy. But one of the consequences of this strange compromise is that now, with the wheels coming off the political machine, the head of state must appear to remain silent and to that extent ineffective.

Some people, apparently, enjoy the pomp, regalia and ceremony surrounding the crown and accept,

for example, the fact that the Queen's speech simply reproduces the Government's words. But is it not the case that such ceremonies, upheld as tradition, are really no more than feudal relics? We can, if we wish, continue to revere royalty, but has not the time come for a more modern form of national leadership; for an elected head of state, chosen by the people, equal under the law and with no special exemption from the Freedom of Information Act? Should we not also abandon the concept of the Crown in Parliament and Crown Immunity and consign the Privy (i.e. secret) Council to history? In a different context, Gordon Brown has said (10 June 2009): "No more can Westminster operate in ways reminiscent of the last century". Shouldn't this view extend to the role of the monarchy, which is reminiscent of even earlier centuries? Who knows, the royals may be glad to be set free.

Our unwritten rules

The second defect, we believe, is the lack of a written constitution. As yet, there is nothing to codify and enshrine the way in which we are governed, so that in practice the exercise of power is unconstrained, based only on custom and precedent and the so-called 'royal prerogative', which hands the Prime Minister enormous discretion. To his credit, Gordon Brown has initiated (in October 2007) a national consultation to draw up a bill of rights and establish a written constitution. "The character of our country," he said, "will be defined by how we write the next chapter of British liberty...we must never forget that the state and the people are not equivalent. The state is always the servant of the people...liberty belongs to the people and not governments". This is unfinished business and surely a priority. We have been reading the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* approved by the National Assembly of France on 26 August 1789 (www.constitution.org/fr/fr_drm.htm). And while the French Revolution hardly provides a blueprint for the future, there is much in this document, written with the help of Thomas Jefferson, which translates to our own times.

The pretence of representation

Next in our sights is the notion that we are 'represented' by members of parliament. In his *Du Contrat Social* (1762), Rousseau pointed out that the idea of representation is modern; it comes to us from feudal government. But the general will, he argued, does not admit of representation. The deputies of the people (in our context MPs) are not and cannot be its representatives: they are merely its stewards. "The people of England," he continued, "regards itself as free; but it is grossly mistaken; it is free only during the election of members of parliament. As soon as they are elected, slavery overtakes it, and it is nothing."¹ We think that there is a great deal of truth in this. It may be impracticable to change the system of assumed representation, but important to recognise its limitations. For the most part, candidates are nominated by party activists, the wider electorate having no say in their selection. Numerically, MPs are commonly elected by a minority of the electorate (22% in the case of the present incumbents). Even if well-intentioned, they cannot realistically hope to represent all shades of opinion within their constituencies. They generally rather represent their own views, or those of lobbyists, or donors, or those of the government, prompted by party whips. The unfortunate situation here is that, once elected, MPs are accountable to their electorate, usually years later, only at the next election. This has to change.

Electoral reform

Then there is the electoral system. When they are popular, the larger parties like 'first past the post' in that it gives them the possibility of a thumping majority. But proportional representation has the merit of more fairly reflecting the views of the whole electorate. David Steel has pointed out that at the 1983 general election Liberal/SDP got 25% of the popular vote and 20+ plus MPs, while Labour got 27% and 200+ MPs! It is argued that the present arrangements make for stable government, but consider what this means if the party in power loses its way. PR, we think, is more likely to provide desirable checks and balances, and the possibility of a few seats going to undesirable, fascist parties

is a small price to pay for democracy.

The House of Lords

We don't hate the House of Lords, but loathe and detest much that is associated with it. A second house plays a vital role in examining and, if necessary, challenging government legislation. But let's get rid of the pretension, the ermine and the concept of nobility. And let's have an elected house. The present practice of shoehorning non-MPs into the Lords so that they can be brought into government is profoundly undemocratic. While it would be unfortunate to lose the expertise and enthusiasm of some of the present members, let them put themselves up for election, subject to an undertaking of active participation.

Of course, reform is in the air. The danger is that politicians, left to themselves, will shy away from a radical agenda and steer the direction of change to their own benefit. The case for strong public involvement through a Citizens' Convention – an assembly of the people with recourse to referenda - is overwhelming.

These are, of course, personal views. You may not agree with them. But the need for change is beyond question and it is surely time for an open debate with nothing off limits. How we are governed is fundamental to the nation's social welfare.

¹Book III/15 in G.D.H.Cole's translation at www.constitution.org/jjr/socon.htm (in public domain).

This information sheet has been compiled by Ann Darnbrough and Derek Kinrade. The views expressed do not necessarily represent those of the National Information Forum.