

# 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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## **ALL IN A GOOD CAUSE?**

On 19 December *The Spectator* ran an article by Ed Howker arguing that major charities are now sophisticated (actually the word he used was 'slick') operations, spending huge sums on running costs and marketing, and – worse – in many cases wedded to the government. The writer wondered how much of the money we donate actually reaches good causes. Perhaps Ann Darnbrough's reservations about the salaries of charity bosses and our recent questions about the Compact are well directed. The full article is at [www.spectator.co.uk/essays/5635978/all-in-a-good-cause.shtml](http://www.spectator.co.uk/essays/5635978/all-in-a-good-cause.shtml).

## **EQUAL ADVENTURE**

Equal Adventure is a registered charity that works to develop equipment, events, training, information and resources to make outdoor adventure, fieldwork and active lifestyles accessible regardless of disability. Its trading arm sells equipment to this end, operating as a 'social enterprise', developing products through sustainable manufacture, pricing and supply.

For further information contact: Equal Adventure, Soapstone Studios, Dulnain Bridge, Morayshire PH26 3NU, tel: 01479 861 200, e.mail: [hello@equaladventure.org](mailto:hello@equaladventure.org), website: [www.equaladventure.org](http://www.equaladventure.org).

## **ADVENTURE TOO FAR**

The Guide Dogs for the Blind Association is continuing to campaign against the development of 'shared streets'. These have been created in some town centres and high streets by removing the kerbs that traditionally separate pedestrian and vehicle space. The intention of designers is to reduce the dominance of vehicles so as to make the streets more 'people-friendly'. The idea is that drivers will be encouraged to be more cautious as they negotiate the shared space. Neither pedestrians, motorists, nor cyclists will have automatic priority, but will have to watch out for safe passage.

Guide Dogs ask, however, how people can feel safe if they don't know where the road begins and the pavement ends. They point out that the concept puts blind and partially sighted people at serious risk in that they can no longer use the kerb as a navigational aid. Inevitably their confidence and the independence of their mobility is undermined.

Over thirty charities already support the campaign, and the Guide Dogs website ([www.guidedogs.org.uk/sharedstreets/index.php](http://www.guidedogs.org.uk/sharedstreets/index.php)) offers an opportunity to support an inclusive streetscapes statement. This calls for a

moratorium on all shared surface street schemes until guidance is available on how the shared space concept can be applied without recourse to shared surfaces.

*Access by Design*, the magazine of the Centre for Accessible Environments (Winter 2009) now reports that Guide Dogs has called for a judicial review against the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, challenging the legality of that council's plans for a shared surface street in London's Exhibition Road.

## **CONTAMINATED BLOOD (SUPPORT FOR INFECTED AND BEREAVED PERSONS) BILL**

We have a special interest in this Bill, having reported on its first reading in News Briefing no.16 and set out many of the relevant facts in Derek's biography of Lord Morris of Manchester.

On 11 December 2009 the Bill was read for a second time and committed to a Committee of the Whole House after an impassioned debate that lasted for over two hours. Lady Thornton, for the Government, concluded that many of the provisions in the Bill were already in place, or were being put in place, even if they "might not always be as far reaching as some noble Lords wish they would be". She felt the need continually to strive to improve services for haemophilia patients and others affected by the tragedy, and ended by restating on behalf of the Government, her deepest sympathy for those affected by this tragedy and its continuing efforts on their behalf. She believed, however, that there was no need for recourse to legislation on this issue. The full debate can be found at [www.publications.parliament.uk](http://www.publications.parliament.uk).

On 5 January an Early Day Motion (no.538) was tabled by Eddie O'Hara MP welcoming the Bill and calling on the Government and members "to ensure this humane Bill's passage into law in this session of Parliament". At the time of writing, according to the website of The Haemophilia Society, 101 MPs have signed up, and on 7 January Lord Morris successfully steered the Bill through Committee in the Lords.

## **NEW FACES AT THE EHRC**

Following the recent spate of high profile resignations, ten new commissioners have been appointed to the Equality and Rights Commission, three of them with a disability remit. Details at [www.equalityhumanrights.com](http://www.equalityhumanrights.com).

## **PLANNING FOR PEOPLE**

We hope that members will forgive a London-centric piece. It could serve as a model for other parts of the country.

Following a consultation in 2008, the Mayor of London has brought out in draft a new replacement London Plan, rather than amending the earlier version. The opportunity for comment closed on 12 January 2010, but the Plan will be subject to an 'Examination in Public' later this year. The Secretary of State then has an opportunity to decide if any changes are necessary. Publication of the final Plan is expected in late 2011. The draft plan is at [www.london.gov.uk/shaping-london/london-plan/strategy/](http://www.london.gov.uk/shaping-london/london-plan/strategy/)

Of particular interest is a chapter titled 'London's People', which sets out the proposed policy on the quality and design of housing developments (Policy 3.5). This includes a policy that the design of all new housing developments "should enhance the quality of local places, taking into account physical context, local character, density, tenure and land use mix, and relationships with, and provision of public, communal and open spaces, taking particular account of the needs of children and older people".

A key element is identified as the relative size of all new houses, taking into account, among other things, spaces needed for moving around. Policy 3.8 looks to boroughs working with the Mayor and local communities to, among other things, ensure that all new housing is built to 'Lifetime Homes' standards and that 10 per cent of new housing is designed to be wheelchair accessible.

## **OPEN BRITAIN**

A new website, [www.openbritain.net](http://www.openbritain.net), offers information on accessible tourism and leisure venues. The site combines the resources of a number of leading charities for people with disabilities, with support from national tourist boards and a wide range of corporate and charitable bodies, including the Regional Development Agencies, the National Trust, English Heritage, the Automobile Association, British Hospitality Association and the Historic Houses Association.

We have to say that the website left us in some doubt as to quite where this excellent initiative is coming from. On the same home page Open Britain is described as a joint project between RADAR and Tourism for All UK, while the headline lead speaks of a groundbreaking alliance with DisabledGo.

The website is supplemented by a print guide, costing £9.99 plus £4.99 p & p (it must be very heavy?).

## **ACCESS TO TAXIS**

Following a query regarding the failure to implement sections 32-36 of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, we have received the following response from the Department of Transport:

“The Department will take the opportunity presented by the passage of the Equality Bill to ensure there are regulation-making provisions to allow duties to be imposed on drivers of taxis and private hire vehicles designated as accessible by the local authority, to assist wheelchair passengers and carry them in safety and comfort. This largely replicates the duties contained in what was section 36 of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, which has been carried across into the Equality Bill.

“The Department will also be undertaking demonstration schemes in three licensing authority areas, to research the needs of disabled people when using taxis and private hire vehicles, how to tailor the fleet to demand and use patterns and how driver training can assist disabled passengers. The demonstration schemes will provide the basis on which the Department will be able to issue comprehensive guidance to licensing authorities to assist them with improving the availability of taxis and private hire vehicles for disabled passengers.

“The Department is also considering the wider legislative framework governing taxis and private hire vehicles to see whether there are any changes which could be made with the objective of enhancing provision for disabled people.”

This advice confirms a written statement by Rt. Hon. Sadiq Khan, Minister of State for Transport, on 28 October 2009. The Department has also confirmed to us that the intention is to commence the duties of s.36 of the DDA.

## **REASONABLENESS AND THE DISABILITY DISCRIMINATION ACT**

We reported the view of the Office for Disability Issues on this subject in News Briefing no.16. The concept has since been explored in greater detail in the Centre for Accessible Environments' *Access*

by *Design* (Winter 2009) in an article by Vivien King, a consultant to law firm Bond Pearce LLP.

## **POWER2010**

The campaigning organisation Power2010, directed by Pam Giddy, a former director of Charter 88, has for some time been inviting grass roots ideas on the changes people would like to see in the way our country is run. At the time of writing (mid-January) the top six ideas are:

- Introduce a proportional voting system
- Scrap proposed ID cards and cut back on databases that threaten civil rights
- Bring in fixed term parliaments with a pre-determined date for the next election
- Adopt a written constitution
- Forbid Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish MP voting on matters affecting only England
- Replace the House of Lords with a chamber elected directly by the people

When voting is complete the top five ideas will form the Power2010 pledge. Go to [www.power2010.org.uk](http://www.power2010.org.uk) for more.

## **PROGRAMME TO PROVIDE LOW-INCOME FAMILIES WITH FREE COMPUTER AND INTERNET ACCESS**

The Home Access programme is being rolled out nationally after successful pilots in Suffolk and Oldham. 270,000 families on low incomes with children in the age-band three to nine will be able to apply for grants to buy laptops and broadband connections from approved suppliers.

For more go to [www.number10.gov.uk/Page22100](http://www.number10.gov.uk/Page22100) and [www.homeaccess.org.uk](http://www.homeaccess.org.uk).

## **SURE START LESS THAN SURE**

According to Rachel Williams in *The Guardian*, the National Audit Office (NAO) has reported to a Select Committee that Sure Start children's centres have been failing to reach the most disadvantaged families. The NAO claims that in spite of increased funding to help outreach to parents and children most in need, a low level of such work is taking place.

For the full article go to [www.guardian.co.uk/education/2010/jan/13/sure-start-fails-poorest](http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2010/jan/13/sure-start-fails-poorest).

## **COMPREHENSIVE AREA ASSESSMENT (CAA)**

Have we mentioned the CAA facility 'Oneplace' (<http://oneplace.direct.gov.uk>)? This website provides an independent overview of local public services in England. You can search by area or for a specific organisation. Six public bodies – The Audit Commission, the Care Quality Commission, Ofsted and the Inspectorates of Constabulary, Prisons and Probation – are working together to provide information on how public services are performing, using evidence gathered by each of these bodies.

The site provides an overview of each area, an overall assessment, green and red flags, assessment of specific local public services, performance indicators and details of inspections. We tried our own area – Peckham – and were surprised to find that the name was not recognised. However, a postcode search succeeded in finding Lewisham and Southwark (of which Peckham is part). We learned that three quarters of pupils in Southwark's schools are from BME backgrounds and that a "very high" proportion of the borough's people live in social rented housing. Their health is below average for England, though improving. Life expectancy is "substantially" lower for people living in more deprived parts of the borough, especially males. The area won a green flag (exceptional performance or innovation that others can learn from) for the involvement of local people and the voluntary and community sector in enhancing community cohesion. But a red flag (significant concerns, action needed) for delivering decent homes.

This will be of little interest to those of you who don't live in Southwark, except that it may whet your appetite to explore the site for your own locality. Despite an encouraging amount of

information, anyone who knows their local area well will realise that it is far from comprehensive and that the measures are fairly crude. Nevertheless we found them intensely interesting.

### **FUNDS WASTED ON THE PRIVATE FINANCE INITIATIVE**

A recent missive from the NHS Support Federation ([www.nhscampaign.org](http://www.nhscampaign.org)) argues that billions are being wasted in a host of bad deals with the private sector. Commercialisation is said to be damaging the NHS and threatening its services. The NHS has been ordered to find £15 billion of savings, but for many NHS trusts a large part of their funding is “already lost in the exorbitant fees being paid for hospitals built under the Private Finance Initiative”. *The Daily Telegraph* is cited as reporting that from 2011 this will cost £4.18 billions a year and “stack up to £60bn in total, five times the actual building cost!”.

But it isn't just about money. The Federation claims that the quality and safety of private treatment centres is in doubt and that many NHS staff organisations are actively campaigning against commercialisation. This, we suggest, is a vital debate, and a crucial election issue.

You can contact the Federation at Community Base, 113 Queens Road, Brighton BN1 3XG, tel: 01273 234822, e.mail: [info@nhscampaign.org](mailto:info@nhscampaign.org).

### **INEQUALITY REIGNS**

Lester Maddox, in an article for the *New York Times Magazine* in 1966, asserted that discrimination was part of America's greatness: “Yes, sir. Inequality, I think, breeds freedom and gives a man opportunity”. The message seems to have caught on. A report from the National Equality Panel, *An Anatomy of Economic Inequality in the UK*, published in January, traces a growth in income inequality in the 1980s that has narrowed only slightly over the last ten years. There is a helpful summary which notes that deep-seated and systematic differences in economic outcomes remain between social groups across all of the dimensions examined. Significant differences remain in employment rates and relative pay, notwithstanding a reduction in qualification variation. The report finds that the inequality growth of the last forty years is mostly attributable to growing gaps within much more than between social groups. Moreover, it is said that many of the inequalities examined by the panel accumulate across the life cycle, especially those related to socio-economic background.

Broadly (and we simplify here) there is a divergence between the top and bottom 10% of the whole population of at least over four times in respect of income (with 1% getting over £2,000 a week) and at least nearly 100 times in respect of total wealth (with 1% being worth over 2.6 million).

The full report and summary are at [www.equalities.gov.uk/national\\_equality\\_panel.aspx](http://www.equalities.gov.uk/national_equality_panel.aspx).

### **ALCOHOL ALERT**

A briefing, *Too Much of the Hard Stuff: What Alcohol Costs the NHS*, was published in January by the NHS Confederation in association with the Royal College of Physicians. It finds that the consumption of alcohol in the UK has risen significantly in recent years and is now higher than any other European country (more sorrows to drown?). Over ten million adults in England drink above sensible limits and over one million have a level of alcohol addiction. This, of course, can be disastrous for the individual but no less as regards the cost of providing alcohol-related services, which, the Federation says, is rising to a level that will be unsustainable for the NHS if it continues.

A study for NHS North West found that:

- 50% of all violent assaults are alcohol-related
- 58% of rapists have drunk alcohol prior to rape

- 22% of accidental deaths and 30% of suicides are alcohol-related
- Alcohol is a key factor in child/elder abuse
- The use of alcohol is a key reason for Incapacity Benefit claims.

Hospital admissions are escalating and are a major burden on the NHS. In 2008, over 70% of the cost of alcohol harm was spent on hospital treatment. The federation argues that out-of-hospital services could provide more appropriate care, could be more effective and could save primary care trusts up to £650k annually.

The full briefing is at [www.nhsconfed.org/publications/documents/briefing 193](http://www.nhsconfed.org/publications/documents/briefing_193).

Our view: The situation is confused by the persistence of confusion over advice about safe limits. This has two strands. The first relates to measurement by ‘units’. This is felt to be necessary because the calculation of alcohol consumption is dependent on the strength and size of each drink. But we believe that the ‘unit’ is meaningless to most people. There is a calculation guide on the NHS Choices guide ‘Alcohol, Know Your Limits’, but we think that, in practice, few people will persist in translating this to their own habits. The second enigma is that of relating the safe limit to regular intake *per day* (3 to 4 units for men, 2 to 3 for women) which a BBC News report in August 2009 described as “meaningless and potentially harmful”. This is not just our opinion. A 2009 report by the Public Accounts Committee suggested that public confusion about safe drinking was fuelling problem drinking.

## **WE HATE NO.26: TRADITION**

**Derek Kinrade**

*“Hardened round us, encasing wholly every notion we form, is a wrappage of traditions, hearsays, mere words.”*

Thomas Carlyle: ‘On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History’ (1841)

Traditions have been defined as the handing down of opinion, belief or custom from one generation to another. They come with no guarantee of being true, right or valuable. Much less whether they are appropriate in changed circumstances; on the contrary it may sometimes be thought that failure to move on is to regress. As Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. put it “To rest upon a formula is a slumber that, prolonged, means death.”

Yet many people are hostile to change, save for reversion that restores the old order. In particular, there can be a desire to cling on to or bring back particular values that enshrine and protect privilege. In this construct, tradition is perceived as the conservation of certain inviolate principles, the sacrifice of which is to debase the social order. To this way of thinking, tradition is to be revered; respected as the benchmark of pedigree in which subordinate and ruling classes have their proper place.

Adherence to tradition is always tenacious; nowhere more so than in organised religions, where fundamental belief in supernatural events and primitive explanations remains unshakeable even in the face of indisputable scientific evidence (and the essentially random, indiscriminate horror of natural disasters). I will not spell out these traditional totems, for to do so is bound to give offence. Yet such commonplace reticence allows excesses of absurdity, arcane practices and discrimination to pass unchallenged through successive generations, reinforced by persuasive exponents, particularly in faith schools. As an antidote I do most heartily recommend Baron Paul Tiry D’Holbach’s *Ecce homo! An eighteenth century life of Jesus*, published anonymously in 1770 and now available in English in a splendid critical edition edited by Andrew Hunwick. Of the original publication, Diderot observed that it was “raining bombs within the House of the Lord”. And when

the first English translation by George Houston appeared in 1813 he was committed to Newgate for two years and fined £200! Traditional recourse to the miraculous still plays a major part in cementing the beliefs of a variety of faiths that share different but equally dubious foundations. But because the texts that advance these superstitions are said to have been divinely inspired they remain immutable in the minds of believers. These are the ultimate traditions, inhibiting, as one Guardian correspondent put it, the ability of young minds “to think clearly about social and ethical problems, and to reach reasoned judgments about the natural world”.

There are similar totems in our political arrangements. Policies may change, but there is a marked reluctance to reform constitutional practice. In particular, tradition rules in our electoral procedures, the two major parties having clung stubbornly to the ‘first past the post’ system, despite the fact that, among other things, successful candidates seldom command whole-hearted support. In 2005, only three of the MPs elected gained the votes of more than 40 per cent of their constituents. Thus the considerable number of votes cast for losing candidates counted for absolutely nothing, and the opinions of a large proportion of voters went unrepresented. There are signs now of the possibility of change. It cannot come too soon.

Then there is our traditional loyalty to an unelected monarchy, despite its chequered history. Strangely, the majority of our people acquiesce to the status of subjects, rather than citizens, and accept the enormous privilege accorded to the ‘royal’ family and the inherent class and financial inequality it enjoys. The debateable excuse is that governance lies with Parliament and that the head of state’s role, thought to be merely ceremonial, provides stability. Thus, again among other things, we sustain the tradition of the monarch’s speech (Her Majesty’s Most Gracious Speech) at the beginning of each session of Parliament, knowing that it imparts at second-hand the prepared priority intentions of the government of the day. On the one hand, among the ermine, crimson and gold of the House of Lords, it is the quintessential expression of tradition; but by a more rational judgement is an elaborate feudal charade, more of shadow than substance.

Another sad tradition is the advocacy of cruel sports. Just now there is pressure to repeal the Hunting Act, to overturn legislation that took eight decades to achieve, so that a minority of humankind can enjoy chasing other animals to a gruesome death. Traditional views may not always be entirely false, but as T.S.Eliot observed “a tradition without intelligence is not worth having”. Much less, a tradition without compassion.

But I will not be trashing my historical 78s. Let us continue to cherish what is estimable in our cultural heritage and in our national pride: free speech, magnificent cathedrals and churches (whether or not ‘God’ is a reality), Morris dancers, village greens, test matches (especially last wicket batsmen who know their onions), Britten and Elgar, Betjeman and Bennett, the Cup Final, the last night of the proms. Let us respect that which is good from the past; but also ruthless in committing to the scrapheap traditions that perpetuate irrationality, political manipulation, inequality, class elitism and bloodlust. Remember that inscribed beneath the bust of Mark Twain in the Hall of Fame for Great Americans are the words: “Loyalty to petrified opinion never yet broke a chain or freed a human soul”.

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**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. Earlier News Briefings are available on the Forum’s website: [www.nif.org.uk](http://www.nif.org.uk).**