

national information forum

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

News Briefing No. 19. March 2010

In This
Issue

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

- ASSISTED DYING
- CAREERS IN SOCIAL CARE
- FREEDOMS OF PEOPLE WITH MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS
- BREAKTHROUGH
- SPEAKER'S CONFERENCE ON PARLIAMENTARY REPRESENTATION
- A SENSE OF PERSPECTIVE
- SAILABILITY
- ROYAL BANK OF SCOTLAND
- FROM JOHN VINCENT'S E. NEWSLETTER 43
- TRADITION
- ETHNIC MINORITIES
- HUMAN RIGHTS
- WE'VE HEARD IT ALL BEFORE
- SO THERE
- A STRATEGY FOR AUTISM
- TAKING STOCK
- SPECIALIST NURSES
- THE LAMB REPORT:
- WE HATE NO.27: WAR

ASSISTED DYING

In a letter to *The Daily Telegraph*, Richard Page points out that, having been introduced as applying to only a few people, divorce and abortion are now "on demand". He argues that if we are going to have a debate about assisted suicide, we should decide whether we want it to be the normal way to end life, since that is what it will end up as. He could be right, and we think that this could be no bad thing (excluding compulsion and encouragement), in order that we should have a rational choice about when we wish to go, rather than simply petering out.

The new guidelines are a step in the right direction, but as Dr. Ann McPherson GP says in *The Guardian* on 26 February: "I think the law is inhuman as it stands and I think that the public is ahead of lawmakers on this... Why can't people have a rational discussion about assisted dying?"

CAREERS IN SOCIAL CARE

The Department of Health has launched a social care recruitment campaign aimed at encouraging more people to consider working in social care as a rewarding career. A booklet *Thinking About a Career in Social Care?* (SC) is for general recruitment, and another *Helping People, Changing Lives* (SC 18-24) is aimed at 18-24 year olds. To order copies go to: www.socialcarecareers.co.uk/booklets, e.mail swcc@postroom.com, or phone 0300 123 1100 quoting title and reference number.

DEFENDING THE FREEDOMS OF PEOPLE WITH MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

We call attention to an article in *Liberty* (Winter 2009) which readers may have missed. Amy Whitelock, Policy and Campaigns Officer of MIND, vigorously stands up for the Human Rights Act in its application to people with mental health problems.

BREAKTHROUGH

As we have often said before, we are against models of any kind in that they smack of dogma and inhibit freethinking. But it is good to read Andy Rickell in *Disability Now* (October 2009), while standing by the 'social model', accept that "even if equality and inclusion and independent living were achieved, there would remain a residual disadvantage to some individuals associated with impairment – issues of pain, issues of related health conditions, the possibility of strategies that would mitigate impairments and conditions, possibly even cures". Progress, surely.



SPEAKER'S CONFERENCE ON PARLIAMENTARY REPRESENTATION

The Conference published its final report on 11 January. It is a lengthy document with some 71 conclusions and recommendations for widening representation, and here we touch on only those concerning disabled people.

The report highlights the importance of political parties as the mechanism by which people of any background can become involved in the political process and in government, but regrets increasing public detachment and the contempt and indifference felt towards them. It argues that each national party needs to develop a systematic plan of action to support the development of local parties, including action to promote diversity (such as meeting in accessible venues). It further recommends that parties should appoint national and/or regional champions to represent the interests of under-represented groups and help to change the prevailing culture.

The report expresses a belief that all political parties should make it easier for disabled people to play a full part in activities, initially by setting out a clear policy on access. It recognises that at present financial restraints are a significant barrier to disabled people seeking elected office, and argues for ring-fenced funding to support disabled parliamentary candidates.

Part of the action required is needed within Parliament itself. The house should explicitly accept its responsibility to support disabled members to do their job, and provide information on all available facilities and assistance.

For the full report go to: www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/spconf/spconf.htm

A SENSE OF PERSPECTIVE

In a letter to *The Guardian* (10 February), Imran Hussain of the Child Poverty Action Group points out that benefit fraud is at an all-time low, below one per cent of the amount claimed and costing £1.1 billion annually. This compares to overpayments of £1.9 billion a year and underpayments of £1.2 billion. Hussain argues that the complexity of the system means that £16 billion goes unclaimed. The Government must “improve benefit decision-making, improve take-up, and take a lead in challenging myths about people who rely on the welfare system”.

For our part, while not condoning benefit fraud, we cringe at the DWP's advertisements.

SAILABILITY

Disabled yachtsman Geoff Holt, a founder trustee of RYA Sailability, accompanied by his carer Susana, has become the first quadriplegic to sail across the Atlantic. Reported in *All Together Now*, Geoff is quoted as saying “disability need not be a barrier to achieving your dream. It's about believing in yourself and being prepared to fail on the journey”. Debbie Blachford, manager of RYA Sailability, described Geoff as “truly an inspiration” who had shown that disabled people can live a challenging life, and with hard work and determination can hope to achieve their dream.

ROYAL BANK OF SCOTLAND

The RBS has had a bad press of late, with condemnation of generous bonus payments despite a loss of at least £3.6 billion last year. The RNIB rubs salt into the wounds with a report of a recent Court of Appeal decision which confirmed that RBS breached the Disability Discrimination Act by failing to provide access for wheelchair users to its Sheffield branch.

“The original decision of the County Court was the first time that an injunction had been granted ordering work to be carried out on business premises to make a building accessible. Mr Allen [the appellant] was also awarded £6,500, the highest amount of compensation ever awarded in a case

under the Disability Discrimination Act.

“Mr Allen had brought the case against RBS alleging that he had been discriminated against because the bank was not wheelchair accessible. He had been forced to discuss personal details of his bank account with RBS staff on the street in full public view. He was also advised to use the nearest accessible RBS branch, even though it was ten miles away and amounted to a two-hour round trip by bus.

“The bank must now undertake the building work at an estimated cost of £200,000.”

RNIB magazine *NB*, February 2010.

FROM JOHN VINCENT’S E. NEWSLETTER 43

Tackling social exclusion – Government, Government Agencies and Local Government

Tackling race inequality: a statement on race

<http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/communities/pdf/1432344.pdf>

Important strategy statement by the Government, which assesses progress towards racial equality, taking as its starting point the Macpherson Report of 1999 and the effect that this has had on race issues to date. You can follow further discussions and developments on the CLG social networking site: <http://www.be-utd.org/>.

“Skills for Life”

<http://www.esrc.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/PO/releases/2009/november/literacy.aspx>

You may have seen media coverage of the ESRC-funded report which has been critical of the “Skills for Life” programme – a summary is at the above weblink.

“Help homeless people register for the General Election”

<http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/news-and-media/news-releases/electoral-commission-media-centre/news-releases-campaigns/help-homeless-people-register-for-the-general-election>
(Source: email from Kevin Harris to lis-pub-lis)

Just in case you didn’t see this, the Electoral Commission is “reminding people living in temporary accommodation that they don’t need a permanent address to have a say at the next general election.” The Commission has produced posters and information leaflets, and is asking accommodation managers to help encourage homeless people to vote – there could be a role for libraries, archives, museums and cultural & heritage organisations here.

Tackling social exclusion – Other Agencies

“Get Digital: Delivering digital inclusion in sheltered housing”

<http://digitalunite.com/products-services/get-digital/>

(Source: email from Digital Unite)

“Digital Unite and NIACE are delighted to announce a new, far reaching digital inclusion programme, ‘Get Digital’.

‘Get Digital’ will work with residents, scheme staff, RSLs [Registered Social Landlords] and the wider community to promote, deliver and sustain digital literacy skills for older residents in sheltered housing.

‘Get Digital’ will also engage with a range of stakeholders from the wider housing, digital inclusion and older people’s fields to raise awareness of the opportunities to promote and support older people’s digital literacy in housing and other social and community environments.”

TRADITION

In response to our last 'We Hate' piece, John Campbell, Chair of Republic, writes: "traditions are sometimes just bad habits that have gone on for far too long; a comfort blanket for the intellectually bereft." It's nice to have approval, but we are always equally open to dissent.

ETHNIC MINORITIES: CLAIMANT COUNT NOVEMBER 2009

The figures quoted below are the actual count and have not been adjusted to take into account seasonality. The headline statistics that are quoted publicly are seasonally adjusted so may differ from these. These figures are produced so that a comparison can be made between ethnic minorities and Great Britain (GB) as a whole and also against the position one year ago. In November 2009:

- The ethnic minority claimant count was 213,300, up 67,600 (46.4%) over the last 12 months.
- The total GB claimant count was 1,511,200, up 491,700 (48.2%) over the last 12 months.
- The claimant count for ethnic minorities made up 4.9% of the ethnic minority working age population compared to 4.1% for GB as a whole.
- Over the last year, the greatest proportional increases in claimants were for black Caribbean males (up by 4.0 percentage points), and also mixed and black Caribbean females (up by 1.6 and 1.5 percentage points respectively).
- At 15.1%, black Caribbean men had the most claimants as a proportion of their working age. For women, black Caribbean (4.5%), mixed (4.2%) and 'black African & other black' (4.3%) had the highest proportions.
- The lowest year on year increases in claimant count were seen in Chinese men (0.7 percentage points) and Chinese and other Asian women (0.8 and 0.7 percentage points respectively).
- Chinese men and women, at 1.8% and 1.4% respectively, also had the lowest rate of claimants as a proportion of their working ages.

Duration

- In November 2009, ethnic minorities were [marginally] more likely to have been in long-term unemployment. 13.3% of ethnic minority claimants had been claiming for more than 12 months compared to 12.7% for GB overall.
- Black Caribbeans were the most likely to be long-term unemployed (17.6% of claimants), with Indians the least likely (9.7% of claimants).

Headline points extracted from a DWP report.

HUMAN RIGHTS

The Human Rights Act 1998 seems to have attracted many myths and misconceptions. Liberty is now asking the question 'what's not to love' about the legislation. It is making available a poster that spells out the benefits of the Act in an effort to broaden respect and understanding for human rights. Specifically:

- the right to life
- the right to respect for private life
- the prohibition of torture or degrading treatment
- protection against slavery
- the right to liberty and freedom
- the right to a fair trial
- freedom of thought, religion and belief
- freedom of assembly
- free speech
- the right to marry

- no discrimination
- protection of property
- the right to free elections
- the right to an education
- no punishment without law.

More at www.love.commonvalues.org.uk

WE'VE HEARD IT ALL BEFORE

In 1807 Samuel Whitbread II introduced a Poor Laws Bill seeking, among other things, to alleviate poverty. By chance we came across a long response in a letter to him from Rev.T.R.Malthus, famous for his views on the dangers of population growth. This is an extract:

“the increasing proportion of the dependent poor, appears to me to be a subject so truly alarming as in some degree to threaten the extinction of all honourable feeling and spirit among the lower ranks of society, and to degrade and depress the condition of a very large and most important part of the community.”

He went on to express his belief that a greater degree of freedom and higher wages would result from the abolition of poor relief, notwithstanding that a few in distress would have no other resource than voluntary charity. Of course, on the Winterton scale they wouldn't be able to travel even by standard class.

SO THERE

The Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals has called on the Prime Minister to make school libraries with qualified librarians a statutory requirement. The Government responded: “The provision of school libraries is not a statutory requirement, and we have no plans to change the current legislation to make it so.”

From CILIP's *Library and Information Gazette*, Feb/March.

A STRATEGY FOR AUTISM

The Autism Bill, a private member's measure sponsored by Cheryl Gillan MP and Baroness Pitkeathley, received the Royal Assent on 12 November 2009. It requires the Secretary of State for Health to publish an adult autism strategy and to issue statutory guidance. It also places local authorities and NHS bodies to act under the guidance. The strategy is expected to be published in April. Meanwhile, the National Autistic Society is campaigning for the strategy to be as strong as it can be. **Go to www.nas.org.uk for further information.**

TAKING STOCK

Whatever may be held against the present government as an election draws nigh, it can hardly be accused of ignoring the claims of disabled people. With the Equality Bill and Personal Care at Home Bill making their way through Parliament, a Right to Control scheme being piloted, and moves to adopt a new approach to funding care in later life through a National Care Service, there is hope for a new deal. It is certainly needed. As things stand, older people with any significant resources stand to lose everything they have built up; while disabled people remain – as the Spinal Injuries Association points out in the February issue of *Forward* – one of the most disadvantaged sectors of our society. The Manifesto *Tackling Disability Poverty*, adopted by 16 leading disability organisations, draws attention to some dramatic statistics:

- disabled people are twice as likely to live in poverty as other citizens
- a third of disabled adults of working age live in poverty
- half of disabled adults of working age are not in paid work.

SPECIALIST NURSES

The Royal College of Nursing is keen to publicise the crucial importance of and need for specialist nurses. It has produced a video focusing on the vital role of these nurses to patients with long-term conditions. They provide enormous savings for the NHS through reduced complications, fewer hospital re-admissions and expert management of health. The video is at <http://generalelection.rcn.org.uk/SpecialistVideo>.

THE LAMB REPORT:

SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS AND PARENTAL CONFIDENCE

Brian Lamb OBE, asked by Ed Balls, Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families, to consider how parental confidence in the Special Educational Needs (SEN) system could be improved, has submitted his final report. He notices that “educational achievement for children with SEN is too low and the gap with their peers too wide”, the hangover of a system and society that failed to place enough value on achieving good outcomes for disabled children and children with SEN. It, says Lamb, continues to be too often the case that the best teachers are focused on those children with the highest abilities. This, he argues, needs to change.

The report makes 51 recommendations, broadly categorised as:

- a clearer focus on outcomes
- a stronger voice for parents
- a more strategic local approach
- a more accountable system
- the national framework.

Given the National Information Forum’s focus on information, we take particular note of recommendation 18 that the Department for Children, Schools and Families re-launches parent partnership services to provide parents with expert, high-quality advice, and recommendation 20 that the Department commissions and promotes a dedicated independent advice line for parents of disabled children and children with SEN.

The Secretary of State has welcomed the report and its key recommendations and has produced an implementation plan announcing that work will begin immediately on establishing a national helpline and strengthening the parent partnership services. Brian Lamb has been invited to continue his involvement in taking the agenda forward and monitoring progress, reporting again in April 2010.

The full report and the Government’s response and implementation plan are available at www.dcsf.gov.uk/lambinquiry (see related documents).

WE HATE NO.27: WAR

“War involves in its progress such a train of unforeseen and unsuspected circumstances that no human wisdom can calculate the end. It has but one thing certain, and that is to increase taxes.
Thomas Paine: Prospects on the Rubicon (1787)

We approach this particular animosity with some circumspection. Most people are against war and will concede that, at best, it is a strategy of last resort. But when our armed forces are in current combat it simply isn’t done to criticise. On the contrary, our troops are hailed as heroes and their actions as courageous. The good people of Wootton Bassett turn out in all weathers to honour the dead, and the military – even royalty – encourage and support this sincere demonstration of sorrow and respect, draping the coffins in the Union Jack. This is an expression of solidarity and patriotism,

reinforced, as individual soldiers are killed, by all-party condolences at Prime Minister's Question Time. We are thus politically assured that the courage and sacrifice of those who have given their lives (of which there is no doubt) have contributed to making Britain a safer place by fighting terrorism in its heartlands.

But what if this view is entirely mistaken; if the war in Afghanistan actually has an opposite effect of stoking up animosity towards the West and increasing the threat of terrorist attacks? If not developed in Pakistan or Afghanistan then from other sympathetic countries? Might the show of allegiance then be seen as a veneer to vindicate a misconceived approach to ideological differences?

And can an *offensive* war ever really be justified? Is it desirable that young men and women should indulge in licensed killing and perhaps come to enjoy it? Shelley, in his poem *Queen Mab*, called war "the statesman's game" and in a note, drawing on one of William Godwin's essays, argued that whatever may become of the abstract question of the justifiableness of war, it seemed impossible that the soldier should not be a depraved and unnatural being. He wrote of the ridiculousness of the military character, whose "first constituent is obedience". Of course, in Shelley's day soldiers were "trepanned" into service, whereas they now volunteer. They are brave certainly, but it remains true that it is not the soldier's business to consider the justice or the wisdom of military action. We find it odd that there is such enthusiasm to serve, to risk death, severe disablement, or lingering traumatic stress disorder. And we certainly believe that the courage of our troops in action needs to be separated from the merits of them being required to be courageous.

Successive wars have taken a heavy toll and a temporary sense that they are best avoided. But politicians fail to learn from experience. Some conflicts are eventually settled by negotiation, a strategy that should, perhaps, have been the first resort. Some are unwinnable, some end in failure, having made a bad situation worse. And there are some people, of course, whose business is war and the provision and development of weapons of destruction, dressed up as defence. It is, we believe, a hateful rather than a glorious business.

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.