

national information forum

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

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In This
Issue

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

• EDITORIAL

• COALITION PROGRAMME FOR GOVERNMENT

• SIR PETER BALDWIN

• CRUCIAL NEED TO HELP DISABLED CHILDREN

• DIGITAL BOOKS FOR PRINT-DISABLED PEOPLE

• JOHN VINCENT'S NETWORK E BULLETINS

• OBSERVATIONS ON THE LOST ART OF ORATORY

Ron Aldridge

• GETTING IT RIGHT

• WORKING LONGER

• WE HATE NO. 31: GUTTER JOURNALISM

EDITORIAL

Rather than dwell on the Coalition cutbacks and tax increases, we begin by recommending a book by freelance journalist Sarah Wise. *The Italian Boy* (Jonathan Cape, 2004) may be thought to have structural defects, but even its occasional digressions are fascinating. It tells the story of 19th century grave robbers who turned to murder, and is brilliantly successful in vividly and forensically illuminating the fate of London's poor in the 1830s. It should serve to remind the reader of the remarkable progress that we have made in social welfare, lest we are ever tempted to dismantle the welfare state.



Reflecting on the nominations for the Labour leadership do you feel that when it comes to the vote provision should be made for 'none of the above'?



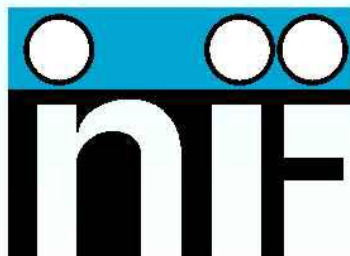
And when you read of the massive minimum prison sentences [rightly] passed on particularly vile criminals does the thought ever cross your mind that your tax will be used to keep these monsters throughout their incarceration?



What are we to make of the proposed 20/1 formula between the highest and the lowest paid? From 1 October 2010 the minimum wage will be £5.93 an hour. Based on a 40 hour week, this would imply that the lowest pay in any full-time employment would be £12,334. Twenty times that figure is £246,680, which seems to allow plenty of scope for excessive pay at the top. Or are we missing something?



How do we distinguish between information and propaganda? When we first sent troops into Afghanistan in 2001 it was, as we understand it, to locate and destroy Al-Qaeda strongholds. Now the mission seems to have evolved into



a wider campaign against the Taliban and a problematic attempt to establish democracy. We are told from above that the deployment is vital to Britain's security and that progress is being made, but it is difficult not to think that the war is stoking up even greater resentment and that such political change as we have achieved may yet prove to be ephemeral. And all at such a growing and painful cost in Coalition and Afghan lives. Scepticism is also growing, and the sudden departure of Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles and the sacking of General Stanley McChrystal do not inspire confidence.

COALITION PROGRAMME FOR GOVERNMENT

Attention is drawn to the Coalition Government's 'Programme for Government' (www.programmeforgovernment.hmg.gov.uk). The section on the NHS includes a guarantee to increase health spending in each year of the parliament, cut administration costs by a third (diverting funds to front-line services), reduce the number of health quangos, introduce a right to choose a GP regardless of where you live, help elderly people to live at home for longer, and prioritise dementia research within the health research and development budget. But why is this information copyright?

SIR PETER BALDWIN

We regret the passing of Sir Peter on 9 May. He was an inveterate friend to the Forum as to many disability charities. A career civil servant, he retired as Permanent Secretary in the Department of Transport in 1982, but continued to espouse the cause of accessible public transport. A self-effacing man, he brought reason and wisdom to give practical expression to the enthusiasm of disability campaigners.

CRUCIAL NEED TO HELP DISABLED CHILDREN

In the drive to control spending it is important not to lose sight of genuine and imperative needs. The June issue of the RNIB's magazine *NB* highlights a research article from the open-access journal *BMC Pediatrics* on the prevalence of childhood disability and the characteristics and circumstances of disabled children in the UK. The article is based on an analysis of the Family Resources Survey.

These are familiar findings, showing that disabled children, particularly those from black/minority ethnic/mixed parentage groups and lone-parents households, experience higher levels of poverty and personal and social disadvantage than other children. Enthusiasm for cost-cutting and for the withdrawal of benefits from people who don't really need them must surely be balanced by a zeal adequately to address the needs of those who desperately need help.

There is an abstract at www.biomedcentral.com/1471-2431/10/21/abstract.

DIGITAL BOOKS FOR PRINT-DISABLED PEOPLE

Benetech is a California-based, non-profit-making organisation that builds software and provides technology for disabled people. It was founded and is led by Jim Fruchterman, a technology entrepreneur and former rocket scientist. Through a project called Bookshare it aims to give people with print disabilities equal and timely access to books and other print materials.

Bookshare, operating from the USA, already offers more than 70,000 digital books and other digitised reading. This material is provided in compressed, encrypted files that can be read using various forms of adaptive technology. Membership is restricted to people who can prove appropriate disability and organisations that serve such people. The intention is to ensure that only qualified individuals can use the service.

Membership is free to qualifying US students (currently funded by the Office of Special Education Programmes of the US Department of Education). Otherwise, members pay a one-off set-up fee of

\$25 and an annual fee of \$50.

A growing list of ‘partnering publishers’ are collaborating in the project, the latest being Cambridge University Press (academic and scholarly books) and Simon and Schuster.

More at www.bookshare.org.

JOHN VINCENT’S NETWORK E BULLETINS

We are forwarding separately the latest issue of this invaluable (but free) bulletin. In future, rather than sending it to you automatically, we invite you to contact John if you wish to be added to his mailing list.

OBSERVATIONS ON THE LOST ART OF ORATORY

Ron Aldridge

I don’t know how many of you caught the recent fascinating BBC documentary *Yes We Can - The Lost Art of Oratory*, but I thought I’d just pass on a few thoughts I had after watching it.

The programme focused around the inauguration ceremony of Barack Obama. It prompted Dianne Abbot, MP, to say that with President Obama, ‘oratory had been re-introduced to politics.’

Here was a highly intelligent man who spoke with clarity, purpose and conviction. It may not be enough to save the world, we’ll have to wait and see, but this ability to speak so well and so convincingly has truly captured the world’s imagination.

I think this is because most of the political ‘speaking’ of the last few years has had a depressing preoccupation with ‘spin’, and as we know, ‘spin’, by its very nature, is not authentic. We associate oratory with authenticity. We need to believe in the speaker.

Gore Vidal likened the preparations of great orators to those of great actors. Churchill’s commitment to his speech was like Olivier tackling Hamlet. Great orators, like great actors, are great performers.

Like great actors, great leaders create and sell us on an alternative vision of the world – a better world of which we are an essential part.

Churchill idealised his countrymen with such intensity that in the end they approached his ideal. Ghandi, it has been said, made India proud of itself. Washington also had that great leader’s gift of making people believe they could be part – that they were part – of a great nation. Martin Luther King, a rhetorician of rare power, had that same genius.

When you consider such towering and theatrical leaders, you come to realise that leadership is not just a performing art, it may well be the greatest performing art of all – the only one that creates institutions of lasting value that can endure long after the stars who envisioned them have left the theatre. And oratory – great oratory – is the externalising and expressing of these leadership qualities – the presence of *presence*.

Presence comes from within. It begins with an inner state, which leads to a series of external behaviours. You can put on the behaviours, but by themselves they’ll lack something essential. They’ll be hollow noise and nothing else.

We've all heard politicians say, "I feel your pain," when we know they're simply saying what they think we want to hear. Compare that to Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech, which obviously sprang from his deeply held beliefs and motivated a generation to overturn four hundred years of assumptions and behaviours.

Think about the last time you were really moved by an actor in a live theatrical performance, or in a T.V. drama, or in a film. Really moved to feel something deeply, to understand something more completely, to think about something from a new perspective, or even, perhaps, to change your mind about something.

Now think about the last time you were truly moved in the same way by a presentation made by a leader in your organisation. I'm not saying moved to tears, but moved to understand a different point of view, be excited about a new possibility, or to be motivated to adapt and grow with changing times.

The goal of the actor or the leader in these instances is the same – to connect with the audience in some fundamental way. Unfortunately most people will say that this experience is much rarer in the office than it is at the cinema.

Which is exactly the point. The skills of oratory that actors use to move, convince, inspire or entertain have direct and powerful applications in the worlds of business, politics, education and organisations in general. They are not only useful for leadership, they are essential. Great leaders, like great actors, must be confident, energetic, empathetic, inspirational, credible and authentic.

That leaders and actors share some skills and characteristics should come as no surprise. Actors and leaders face a common challenge. They must form connections, communicate effectively, and work with others as a team. They must be prepared to play different roles, as the situation requires. They must be prepared to influence and move people every day. Just as actors play a variety of roles, we all play roles, as people and as leaders.

Ex President Clinton reminded us that people remember very little of what you say, they won't remember your exact words, but what they will never, ever forget, is the way that you made them feel. And if you want your audience to feel something, then you must 'feel' it too.

GETTING IT RIGHT

Actually all the signs are that when it comes to people with a learning disability, the NHS is getting it wrong. Mencap marked Learning Disability Week (21-28 June) by publishing a survey which found that 46% of doctors and 37% of nurses admitted that people with a learning disability have received a poorer standard of healthcare than the rest of the population. Mencap's 'Getting it Right' charter, which focuses on the adjustments that healthcare professionals need to make, can be downloaded at www.mencap.org.uk/ldw, where there is also a campaign film. The campaign has the support of the Royal College of Nursing and the General Medical Council.

WORKING LONGER

A survey conducted by Research Plus (for Prudential UK) among 1,001 adults aged 45+ has found that nearly three out of five people planning to retire in 2010 would be willing to work on in order to enjoy a higher income on eventual retirement. A quarter would be happy to work for five years more, with 7% of these people willing to put in another 10 years.

The findings indicate that it is those already over 65 who are most willing to keep working, more than 62% saying they would stay in employment to boost their retirement savings.

Vince Smith-Hughes, head of retirement income at Prudential, cautions the importance of considering retirement many years ahead, and making sure you get financial advice to help you plan retirement.

Nothing here, unfortunately, about work for its own sake.

WE HATE NO. 31: GUTTER JOURNALISM

Marry, sir, they have committed false report; moreover, they have spoken untruths, secondarily, they are slanders; sixth and lastly, they have belied a lady; thirdly, they have verified unjust things; and, to conclude, they are lying knaves.

William Shakespeare: 'Much Ado About Nothing', Act V, scene 1.

In approaching this subject, we are acutely aware of the need to avoid intellectual snobbery. If we should speak of 'quality' newspapers, there is an implication that there are others that lack quality. This may not be so. They may simply be different as 'pop' differs from 'classical' music. A range of publications cater for a disparate audience of varying literary abilities.

Nor should 'tabloid' necessarily be seen as a pejorative term. There is no good reason why fine journalism should not appear in tabloid format. Equally it is apparent that extreme views are by no means confined to the tabloid press. They commonly feature in the broadsheets, as for example Simon Jenkins' recent article in *The Guardian* in which he argued that the entire defence budget should be cut. "We are safer," he said, "than at any time since the Norman conquest. Yet £45bn is spent defending Britain against fantasy enemies." There is nothing wrong with honestly and rationally opposing the status quo. As will be apparent to readers of our News Briefings, we personally are antagonistic to all religious institutions, would like to see the dismantling of the monarchy, and favour assisted dying.

By 'gutter journalism' we mean rather those elements of the popular press which, instead of reporting fairly on the broad highway of news and arguing from a rational base, have their nose in the detritus of human activity. Their focus is on gossip and scandal. It is not that journalists who follow this path cannot write well (though they may be locked in their own ethos), rather that they choose to appeal to the baser instincts of society. In taking this direction, in pursuing an intrusive and prurient interest in the transgressions of celebrities and human fallibility, sometimes dishonestly, they know that they are in tune with an unhealthy appetite for sensation among large swathes of the British public. They are prepared to be casual with the truth or manipulate it selectively so as to suggest culpability. They also, from time to time, demonstrate a partiality for a range of prevailing prejudices. As such they have a disproportionate and dangerous capacity to influence political opinion.

What is really troubling in gutter journalism is a tendency to demonise minorities. We recall that when we published our guide for refugees and asylum seekers, *How to Make a New Life in the UK*, one daily newspaper criticised it for referring immigrants to sources of advice on their legal rights!

Back in 1957, Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* explored a fear that the growth of mass communications could be exploited to debase standards and bring about a greater trivialisation in productions for a majority readership. Even at that time a massive increase in, and the extraordinarily low level of, new-style popular papers was seen by Hoggart as posing an ominous threat of cultural debasement and vulgarity, stimulated by the need for papers to achieve a viable circulation. Recent developments suggest that his concerns were well-founded. Self regulation has had limited success. The Press Council, founded in 1953, was widely seen as ineffective, and in

1991, following the Calcutt inquiry, was replaced by the Press Complaints Commission, reinforced by a code of practice. Despite this, the number of complaints received has steadily increased, raising concerns around declining ethical standards of sections of the press. In a YouGov poll in 2008, journalists were rated the least trusted of 23 professions, the overall level of trust having fallen most of all groups. Similarly, in research commissioned by the Media Standards Trust, 70 per cent of all respondents disagreed with the statement ‘We can trust newspaper editors to ensure that their journalists act in the public interest’.

It was the sometimes reckless reporting surrounding the disappearance of Madeleine McCann that finally brought matters to a head, prompting a House of Commons inquiry on press standards, privacy and libel, under the auspices of a committee of the Department of Culture, Media and Sport. The second DCMS report, published on 24 February 2010, makes disturbing reading. While recognising the importance of the freedom of the press to report and comment on events, public figures and institutions, to be critical of them and provide a platform for dissenting views, it notices that “there have been times when events have led the public and politicians to question the integrity of the methods used by the press, and the competence of the PCC as an industry regulator”. It notices that, like its predecessor, this body has been seen as lacking teeth, too closely allied to the press industry and insufficiently proactive in upholding standards.

The report’s consideration of press standards was mainly based on the McCann case and *The Guardian’s* revelations regarding phone-hacking and blagging – the practice of obtaining information through deception. It presents a dismal picture. In respect of the McCanns it speaks of “an inexcusable lowering of standards” and “inaccurate, defamatory reporting”, concluding that self-regulation had signally failed. The verdict on illegal phone-hacking at the *News of the World* is even more disturbing. The committee reports: “Throughout we have repeatedly encountered an unwillingness to provide the detailed information that we sought, claims of ignorance or lack of recall, and deliberate obfuscation”. This behaviour, the report concludes, reinforces the widely held impression that the press generally regard themselves as unaccountable and that News International in particular has sought to conceal the truth about what really occurred.

And so, we contend, our hatred of gutter journalism is well made. There is much more that could have been said in relation to individual cases: those of Michael Todd and Stephen Gately for instance. This is not the place to comment on the DCMS’s recommendations for reform, beyond noticing that there continues to be no enthusiasm for statutory regulation. Rather we prefer to go back to Richard Hoggart, who observed that the freedom from official interference that we enjoy, coupled with the tolerance we are happy to show, seem to allow “cultural developments as dangerous in their own way as those we are shocked at in totalitarian societies.”

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 and the ‘We Hate’ series are available on the Forum’s website: www.nif.org.uk.