

not the national information forum

But still working for the inclusion of disabled and other disadvantaged people
by encouraging better information provision

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RAPE

I am tempted to say a few words about rape, somewhat in support of Kenneth Clarke. Although rape is always a serious offence, it does seem to me fair to say that some rapes are more serious than others. Thus I think that gang rape is even more serious than one-on-one rape, anal rape of a woman even more serious than rape by vaginal penetration, violent rape of an adult even more serious than sexual intercourse welcomed by a minor (which is rape by virtue of the fact that the minor is rightly deemed incapable of giving consent).

What I do wonder is whether a discount for an early guilty plea might be turned on its head in favour of *increased* sentences for those found guilty after not making an early guilty plea (if only as a matter of presentation).

DK

PATHWAYS TO POVERTY

The Centre for Social Justice (CSJ), an independent think-tank set up in 2004, has published a report, *Building a Social Recovery?*, described as a first-year report card on the Coalition Government, of which the vital element is the question mark. In five key policy areas identified as the pathways to poverty CSJ has considered whether commitments made have been matched by effective implementation and delivery, awarding marks out of ten for each. Thus:

- family breakdown: 2/10
- economic dependency: 8/10
- educational failure: 6/10
- addiction: 7/10
- serious personal debt: 6/10.

There is, of course detailed analysis. The CSJ promises to publish this 'report card' annually to hold the Government to account. Go to www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk for press release or full report.

ANOTHER FAMOUS CHARITY CLOSES

Skill, the National Bureau for Students with Disabilities, has announced that following a period of financial difficulty its trustees have decided that it is no longer viable to keep the charity open. This despite the recent appointment of a new, "outstanding", CEO. Nevertheless, Skill's website (www.skill.org.uk) and information booklets remain available.

In Scotland, Skill's former staff is hoping to make arrangements to carry



on Skill's work – either by setting up a new Scottish charity or by having the core services delivered by an existing, sister charity.

These are sad days. Is the 'big society' a political myth; the reality rather that our independent third sector is shrinking?

ASSISTED DYING

We have previously voiced our support, subject to adequate safeguards, for a right, in extremis, to necessary assistance to end our lives. As widely reported, the issue has recently been the subject of a referendum in Zurich, where assisted dying has been legal for some time. What we now wish to emphasise is the scale of the result. 85% of the 278,000 votes cast opposed a ban on assisted dying, while 78% rejected the exclusion of foreigners from such help. Our own campaigning organisation Dignity in Dying thinks that dying Britons should not have to travel over 500 miles to a foreign country to access a dignified death, but welcomes the "brave decision" in Zurich: "The Swiss have refused to turn their backs on dying Britons who want the choice to end their suffering, nor should we."

TIME WELL SPENT

This new report from the Prison Reform Trust argues that opportunities for prisoners to take responsibility and volunteer to help others improves wellbeing and promotes "desistance" from crime. Encouraging active citizenship in prisons should play an important part in achieving the government's aims for a "rehabilitation revolution". Why then, we wonder, is the government so reluctant to extend the vote to prisoners?

The report describes five types of active citizenship:

- peer support
- charity work
- restorative justice
- prisoner representation duties
- arts and media

The study was based on survey responses from 82 prisons across England and Wales, and interviews with staff and prisoners in 12. Although the majority of prisons provide some opportunities for active citizenship, volunteering opportunities are open to very few prisoners.

For further details go to: www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk or contact the trust at 15 Northburgh Street, London EC1V 0JR; tel: 020 7251 5070.

INADEQUATE ACCESS TO HEALTH INFORMATION

The RNIB reports (NB, May 2011) that in a survey of blind and partially sighted patients across the UK 95% of respondents said that they were never asked about what format they preferred, or given confidential health information in formats they could read, leaving them with no option but to ask other people to read it for them. It appears that only one NHS Trust (Mid Yorkshire) has taken steps to provide health information in accessible formats, including large print, braille, audio and e.mail.

It may be worth reiterating the legal duty under s.20 of the Equalities Act 2010 which imposes a requirement on public sector providers (including hospitals and NHS trusts) that where a provision, criterion or practice puts a disabled person at a substantial disadvantage in comparison with people without a disability the provider must take such steps as it is reasonable to have to take to avoid the disadvantage (20/3). Such steps include action to ensure that in the circumstances concerned the information is provided in an accessible format (20/6). We think that the important words here are "in the circumstances concerned". It is not required or suggested that information to everybody is provided in alternative formats, but absolutely clear that reasonable steps should be taken to tailor alternative formats appropriately to people who need them.

Article 21 of the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities makes it equally clear that governments should take steps so that disabled people can access information on an equal basis to everyone

else, including measures to provide disabled people with information in accessible formats and technologies (at no extra cost and in a timely way).

Which prompts us to ask what use is legislation if it can be safely ignored?

ALL IN THIS TOGETHER?

What nonsense! As a caller to Radio 5 Live recently asked, has George Osborne had to ask his mother to lend him £20 to pay his gas bill? The question is particularly relevant to managerial pay in the NHS. We were told that steps would be taken to ensure that the generals as well as the troops took their fair share of cuts. But, according to *The Week* (7 May), some 600 NHS bosses earn more than the Prime Minister, including 46 who earned in excess of £200,000 last year. It would be reassuring to learn that something is being done about this, but we doubt it. On past evidence the drive to create yet more Foundation Trusts is likely to make matters even worse. Since managers within such trusts have a big say in how money is spent, downward change in their salaries seems unlikely. Meanwhile we have the unedifying spectacle of thousands of disabled people, labelling themselves 'The Hardest Hit', making their way as best they can to the precincts of Parliament. We thought that what Denis Skinner had to say at Prime Minister's Questions on 18 May was right on and that he didn't deserve to be labelled a dinosaur by David Cameron.

Please also see the ICM verdict that we are in danger of returning to disparities of earnings at the level of the Victorian era (243 news articles).

USER-LED ORGANISATIONS

The Department of Health says that it is leading on the delivery of recommendation 4.3 of the report *Improving the Life Chances of Disabled People*. We have always been slightly concerned that the ULO concept is unrealistic and smacks of them-and-us sectarian ideology, but the DH believes that local organisations, run and controlled by disabled people, will be a vital part of the approach to supported independent living.

In practice, another government body, the Department for Work and Pensions, appears to be less enthusiastic, in that very few ULOs (if any) have been selected for the new Work Programme.

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE BILL

In the run-up to the general election David Cameron said that there would be "no more pointless reorganisations" of the NHS. We presume that he now thinks that the massive proposals in the Health and Social Care Bill have a point. This is not a widely shared view; indeed the level of opposition to the present bill suggests that the period for review should be far longer than the two months conceded. We fear that the proposals are ideologically driven.

Christina McAnea, head of health at the public sector union Unison, has described the bill as "a demolition job [which is] fundamentally flawed and should be dumped". Ed Miliband agrees. He argues that "the answer to a bad bill is not to slow it down but...to junk it."

The BMA likewise feels that the bill should be scrapped, contending that it "brings into stark relief a number of grave concerns about the way the government wants to change the NHS". It believes that "significant" amendment would be required to prevent these concerns becoming reality". The Royal College of Physicians, while not entirely dismissive and not automatically opposed to reform, has weighed in with a lengthy analysis of the need for clarification and change. It identifies no fewer than nine key areas where it feels that changes must be made if the principles of the NHS are to be preserved, and makes 24 recommendations.

The Royal College of Nursing, at its Liverpool Congress, was more forthright. Almost 99% of the 497 delegates backed a vote of no confidence in the health secretary, Andrew Lansley. It warned that the proposals could undermine the NHS. Most recently, according to *The Guardian* (14 May), Professor Steve Field, chair of the government's review, has dismissed the coalition's health reforms as unworkable and destabilising, warning that key services could be destroyed.

We hope that the ‘listening and consultation’ exercise will bear fruit, but fear that the Tory wing of the coalition is already committed to root and branch change, not least to further private sector involvement.

HOOKED ON THE HOOKAH?

The RNIB magazine NB (May 2011) picks up on an out-of-the-way piece from the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, reporting a study which rejects the idea that hookah smoking is a harmless alternative to cigarettes. On the contrary it finds that people leaving hookah cafés had levels of carbon monoxide more than three times higher than people leaving traditional bars.

Hookah smoking, as the RNIB explains, involves tobacco-laden air passing through water before it is inhaled. This does not appear to diminish its effects, although the high levels of carbon monoxide are partly attributable to the fact that users tend to smoke continuously for long periods of time. We would add (having spent a good deal of time going up and down London’s Edgware Road) apparently in a state of blissful repose. But, as lead researcher Dr Tracey Barnett warns: “There is no safe way to use tobacco”.

CHILD CARE

The Daycare Trust is the national childcare charity. It campaigns for quality, accessible, affordable childcare for all and raising the voices of children, parents and carers. This can be a difficult area, and parents can access information (including how to find help with childcare costs) through the website (www.daycaretrust.org.uk) or by contacting 0845 872 6251 (weekdays 10-1, 2-5, except Wednesday 2-5). Fact sheets and guides (including one for parents of disabled children) are available.

2nd floor, Novas Contemporary Urban Centre, 73-81 Southwark Bridge Road, London SE1 0NQ; e.mail: info@daycaretrust.org.uk.

EDUCATION

The Department for Education has published a Green Paper consultation on proposals to reform the arrangements for the education of children who are identified as having special educational needs (SEN) or who are disabled. The consultation, which will close on 30 June, is the subject of an eight-page executive summary and a general article at www.education.gov.uk (go to ‘Children and Young People’, and ‘SEN and disability’).

The proposals include:

- a new approach to identifying SEN through a single categorisation
- a new single assessment process and education, health and care plan (by 2014)
- a local offer of all services available
- the option of a personal budget for all families of children with a statement of SEN or a new education, health and care plan (by 2014)
- a real choice of either a mainstream or special school
- the introduction of greater independence to the assessment process.

A SIMPLE TEST FOR DEMENTIA

A new, free, 15-minute cognitive function test has been developed by a team at Oxford University. It is said to help diagnose the most common form of dementia perhaps earlier than it might otherwise be spotted. Emeritus Professor David Smith said: “It is time we woke up to the fact that Alzheimer’s is a preventable disease, not an inevitable part of ageing”.

Go to www.foodforthebrain.org and find the section headed ‘Be part of the solution’.

WE HATE NO.42: SECTARIANISM

Derek Kinrade

Fanatics have their dreams, wherewith they weave a paradise for a sect.

John Keats: The Fall of Hyperion

The sectarian thinks that he has the sea ladled into his private pond.

Rabindranath Tagore: Fireflies

Soon after my teens I acquired *Heresies Ancient and Modern*, a book, as I recall, that poured scorn on a number of deviant religious sects, seen as heretical because they had strayed from Christian orthodoxy. My feeling, then as now, was to wonder whether the orthodoxy itself could be trusted; whether the parent and its heretical offsprings were in fact all fanciful, and that the make-believe of their various aberrations was simply a matter of degree.

Diversity, of course, is entirely natural and healthy. There will always be differences of culture, taste, political opinion and so on. What is at issue here is the formation of groupings around religious beliefs for which there is no real evidence, indeed in the face of such inconsistencies as do exist, commonly based on the writings of people who had not yet grasped that the earth moved around the sun. There is, we accept, a treasury (though far from unique and somewhat flawed) of moral philosophy in such writings, but they are palpably short on informed scientific analysis and historical accuracy. Unfortunately, however, believers who regard these fables and imaginings as divinely inspired often fiercely accept them as an irrefutable basis for their faiths.

So we have a multiplicity of world religions, according to differing prime sources. On top of this diversity there has also been a good deal of elbow room for differences of interpretation, emphasis, doctrine and practice, most strikingly in relation to women and homosexuals. Tensions have arisen between those who attempt to reconcile traditional teaching with the modern world and those who promote a strict, fundamentalist – and sometimes extreme – approach. Thus many faiths, already disparate, have become sub-divided. A lot of this fundamental divergence has been the outcome of dissent. An obvious example, within the Christian persuasion, is the non-conformist movement; yet even within this broad grouping an astonishing number of denominations have emerged, each with its own distinct message. Alongside these deviations, notoriously, many unconventional cults have sprung up under the spell of charismatic leaders, all too often with their own agenda and motivation. Followers tend to be infinitely credulous, and each grouping is relentlessly and passionately attached to a belief that its particular ideology is the way to salvation, commonly combined with an excess of zeal in seeking to win over converts.

This patchwork, though quaint, would be relatively harmless was it not for the fact that throughout history, into our own times, discord has been marked by extremes of enmity, erupting from time to time in horrific bloodlettings. It can be argued that such violent schisms, driven by fundamentalist fanatics, are primarily motivated by political ends, but we think that religious intolerance is seldom far below the surface. Historically, we recall the Crusades, the Inquisition, repeated massacres of Jews, the persecution of the Huguenots, and in our own country the suppression of Catholicism under Henry VIII. Bitter divisions persist into our own times: the Balkans conflicts; persistent hostility between Palestine and Israel; the remnant of Catholic/Protestant violence in Northern Ireland (and, though on a lesser scale, more recently in Glasgow); Shias versus Sunnis in Iraq; the Taliban; Muslims versus Christians in Sudan; Al-Qu'ida and the atrocities of other extreme Islamic sects. Just now the general Western rejoicing over the so-called Arab Spring may overlook the possibility that it could simply give rise to yet more underlying sectarianism. On such evidence, religion has a terrible track record. How odd that Cardinal Keith O'Brien should warn of the threat from "aggressive secularism"!

Of course, this is not the whole story. Different churches generally live in peace and harmony, seeking out ecumenical accord. Some extremist groups appear not to have any religious affiliation and in the case of those that have a nominal connection it would be unfair to ascribe the worst excesses, with its suicide bombers and explosive devices, to genuine religious belief. For in the depravity of terrorism we are afflicted by tutors whose perverted thinking is the antithesis of religion, prepared as they are to indoctrinate simple minds to sacrifice their own lives to slaughter innocent people in pursuit of dark, satanic goals. Those of us, religious or not, who regard the idea of a holy war as an oxymoron unite in abhorring such violence.

Yet we take the view that sectarian divides - characterised by closed minds, fixed creeds and limited reading – can be a rich breeding ground for extremism and conflict. In this context we cannot resist repeating the joke from an unknown source that appeared in issue no 6 (December 2008):

I was walking across a bridge one day, and I saw a man standing on the edge, about to jump off. I immediately ran over and said “Stop! Don’t do it!”

“Why shouldn’t I?” he said.

I said, “Well, there’s so much to live for!”

“Like what?”

“Well ... are you religious or atheist?”

“Religious.”

“Me too! Are you Christian or Jewish?”

“Christian.”

“Me too! Are you Catholic or Protestant?”

“Protestant.”

“Me too! Are you Episcopalian or Baptist?”

“Baptist.”

“Wow! Me too! Are you Baptist Church of God or Baptist Church of the Lord?”

“Baptist Church of God.”

“Me too! Are you Original Baptist Church of God, or are you Reformed Baptist Church of God?”

“Reformed Baptist Church of God.”

“Me too! Are you Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1879, or Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1915?”

“Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1915!”

To which I said, “Die, heretic scum!” and pushed him off.