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by encouraging better information provision

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A Digest of Current Social Information

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A FEW WORDS ON THE RIOTS

Where I live, the burning and looting has prompted calls for greater social cohesion, for neighbours to interact and for the community to work together. I recall that the 1940 blitz had the same effect, and to a lesser extent the threat of the channel tunnel rail link being driven through the heart of our town. Such solidarity is admirable, but in the present malaise it does not address the roots of the problem. We have in our midst gravely irresponsible, obnoxious people, mostly male and mostly young, who are antagonistic to our social well-being and in particular to those charged with upholding law and order. Many of them will have 'previous'. They appear to have failed to make a mark by the conventional measures of success and remain like a cancer in our neighbourhood, as elsewhere. They are simply not interested in seeking stronger communities.

Action to apprehend and punish recognisable offenders has been swift and draconian; some would say politically driven and in some cases inappropriate. What is certainly obvious is that unless offenders can be 'caught in the act' (which is difficult when faced with mob violence) only a proportion of the rioters has been or can be identified. Their threat remains with us, ready to lay waste at will. My view is that except in the worst cases conventional imprisonment is no answer. Our prisons are full and neither deter nor rehabilitate. Historically, brutal punishments – which used to be imposed for quite trivial offences – have been found not to work either. To make matters worse, our police force faces severe cut backs. Perhaps our only hope lies in the fact that the disposition of the delinquents is such that left to themselves they will inevitably commit further offences. The proper response, I believe, lies in programmes to make young offenders face up to their self-destructive lifestyles, alongside the greater use of community service orders. **But if such sentences are to command public confidence and not be seen as a soft option the work needs to be well organised, demanding, closely monitored and designed to serve a genuine purpose:** projects like that described by Peter Osborne in the introduction to Make Justice Work's report *Community or Custody* (makejusticework.org.uk).

This is not to ignore the link between crime and social disadvantage, unemployment, bad parenting, drugs and lack of amenities; but irrespective of cause we face a dangerous enemy within. Our society is far from broken, but a more determined effort is needed if we are to begin to turn around the lives of the minority of disaffected young people and make Britain a safer place.

THE CONTROVERSIAL HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE BILL

If you watched Prime Minister's Questions on 7 September you would have heard David Cameron say that the Royal College of General Practitioners (among others) supported the government's health reforms. Whereas, according to the BBC website, the College has said that it is "extremely worried" about some aspects of the bill. In similar vein, Dr Peter Carter of the Royal College of Nurses still has "very serious concerns about where these reforms leave a health service already facing an unprecedented financial challenge". Nevertheless, on the same day, the bill cleared its third reading in the Commons and will next be considered in the House of Lords.

On 12 September it was reported that the NHS Consultant's Association has co-ordinated a response in which more than 150 health professionals have written to the royal medical colleges with a view to demanding the withdrawal of the bill, urging them not to co-operate with the reforms. Go to www.nhsca.org.uk and click on STOP PRESS for details.

HARASSMENT OF DISABLED PEOPLE

A Disability Harassment Inquiry undertaken by the Equality and Human Rights Commission has revealed "systemic institutional failure to tackle the harassment of disabled people." It finds that "hundreds of thousands of disabled people regularly experience violence and bullying, much of which is going unrecognised by public authorities." Go to www.equalityhumanrights.com for the full report.

INADEQUATE REGULATION OF HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Failure of regulation is a familiar story. It was a feature of the scandal at Stafford Hospital and has again hit the headlines following the revelations at Winterbourne View. In News Briefing no.35 (July 2011) we commented on the failure to spot horrific abuse at the Bristol care home, where on-site inspections were said to have been reduced to almost zero. The regulator, the Care Quality Commission, has since been strongly criticised by a health select committee. At a recent Prime Minister's Questions David Cameron said "I think it is important that it [the CQC] focuses on inspections and making sure that standards are high, rather than simply on the process of registration and bureaucracy." Delegates at the National Care Homes Congress went even further, voting 'no confidence' in the Commission.

Go to www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-14902565 for more. **Question: Who regulates the regulators and what happens to those who have presided over failure?**

PROPOSED WITHDRAWAL OF MOBILITY COMPONENT OF DLA FOR PEOPLE LIVING IN CARE HOMES

The autumn issue of *Pensioner* has drawn my attention to a written answer by the Minister for Disabled People, Maria Miller MP, on 13 June. This in response to a question from Alun Michael MP:

"We announced that we would not remove the DLA mobility component from people in residential care from October 2012 and that we would review the existing evidence and gather more to determine the extent to which there are overlaps in provision for mobility needs of [such people]. When the work is complete we will make a decision on the way forward. Any changes will be rolled into the introduction of personal independence payment from April 2013."

The Pensioner goes on to say that the DWP will carry out this study, but that the government has no plans to publish findings of this work. **Question: If true, what has become of transparency?**

ANIMAL WELFARE

The autumn issue of *Outrage*, the magazine of Animal Aid, is packed with disturbing information about the continued cruel abuse of animals in medical research, described in a report *Victims of Charity* as "scientifically invalid". The cover has a picture of Joan Court, with her emphatic declaration: "I have heart disease, but I won't support the British Heart Foundation until it stops funding animal experiments." Inside, an article by Andrew Tyler asserts that the major charities that fund medical research involving vivisection have been shaken by Animal Aid's call – widely covered in newspapers – for a financial boycott. As well as the BHF, Cancer Research UK, the Alzheimer's Society and Parkinson's UK are criticised for acting "as though they are above normal scrutiny and intellectual challenge". Government statistics show that far from decreasing, there was a

rise of 3 per cent in animal experimentation in 2010; and this despite a pledge from the coalition to reduce the total. Some 3.7 m ‘procedures’ were started last year – an increase of 37 per cent since 2000.

In another article, headed ‘Defra’s disgrace’, the magazine also focuses on its latest undercover slaughterhouse investigation. Secret filming at an abattoir in Essex showed appalling abuse of pigs on the way to their deaths. But the government department responsible for upholding animal welfare, Defra, is not prepared to initiate prosecution proceedings because the allegations are based on footage gained without the consent of the slaughterhouse.

Questions:

- **Does Defra accept the integrity of Animal Aid?**
- **Does Defra accept that Animal Aid’s footage is authentic and that abuse has taken place?**
- **Does Defra think that evidence of abuse could be filmed with prior consent?**
- **Has Defra’s huge expenditure revealed any abuse in slaughterhouses and have there been any successful prosecutions?**
- **Is Defra determined to stamp out abuse?**

Finally, we return to a subject featured in our ‘We Hate’, no.41: the use of the whip in horse racing. *Outrage* reviews Animal Aid’s campaign calling for a ban on the use of a whip other than where safety is genuinely an issue. An article, ‘Striking blows against the whip’, reveals that at the RSPCA’s AGM the following motion was passed by 110 votes to one: “the whip should only be used for safety purposes in the backhand position, and that the penalty for contravening the above rule should be the forfeiture of the race and purse by the jockey, the owner and the trainer ...”. The motion is said to be binding on the RSPCA’s governing council.

We have been able to give only a flavour of this remarkable magazine, but a free, monthly e-newsletter is available from info@animalaid.org.uk. Donations are, of course, welcome and needed.

PS: Another admirable magazine, *Alternative News*, published by the Dr Hadwen Trust for Humane Research, reports that after eight years of discussion and debate EU Directive 2010/63/EU, on the protection of animals used in scientific procedures, has come into force across the European Union. It replaces 86/609/EEC which has been in place for the previous 25 years. Member states now have until November 2012 to bring it into their national systems of legislation for full implementation in January 2013. In an explanatory statement the new Directive makes clear that “the ultimate goal should be to replace the use of animal experiments altogether.” It goes on to state that “in addition to animal welfare benefits, alternative methods also have the potential to provide robust information through quality-controlled, state-of-the-art tests which could be faster and less cost-intensive than classical animal-based tests.” **Question: Will the government take appropriate action?**

The Trust can be contacted at Suite 8, Portmill Lane, Hitchin, Hertfordshire SG5 1DJ, tel:01462 436 819; e.mail: info@drhadwentrust.org.

SELWYN GOLDSMITH

Selwyn died on 3 April, and several national publications have included obituary notices. But perhaps the most perceptive is featured in the Centre for Accessible Environment’s *Access by Design* (Summer 2011). Access, after all, was at the heart of his life’s work. In 1956, soon after completing his architectural studies, he contracted polio, which effectively left him with hemiplegia, a disability that inspired his interest in accessible design. His *Designing for the Disabled*, started in 1961 and published in 1963, broke new ground. A revised edition appeared in the 70s and Ann and I reviewed it in the first edition of our *Directory for the Disabled* (1977). We said that the author saw the new edition as “a consultancy service at the side of architect’s drawing board ... from anthropometrics and wheelchair circulation spaces, through ramps, doors, lifts, kitchens, bathrooms and WCs, to provision in public buildings ... and on to the planning of housing, residential homes and hospital accommodation.” We described Selwyn as “one of this country’s leading authorities on the subject”, but we should have said the leading authority. Later, he went on from this pioneering initiative to extol the benefits of *universal* design: the idea of access for all. In so doing he believed that special-for-the-disabled design was “socially exclusive and offensively discriminatory” (*Architects’ Journal*, 15 March 2001).

The splendid journal *Access by Design* observes that he “was fiercely opposed to the Disability Discrimination Act, which he felt promoted a victim culture and minority rule”. Following the same course, he wrote of the Disability Rights Commission as “an oligarchal agency controlled by disability activists”. Perhaps he had a point; we might have said in our piece on sectarianism that there is a danger in disability politics of regarding disabled people as a distinct species. Be that as it may, we have been left richer by the life of Selwyn Goldsmith.

Access by Design is available from CAE, 70 South Lambeth Road, London SW8 1RL; tel: 020 7840 0125; e.mail:info@cae.org.uk; website: www.cae.org.uk.

CHILDREN’S READING HABITS

The National Literacy Trust has published the findings of a survey of 18,141 young people aged 8 to 17 which explored their attitudes to reading. It looked at how much they enjoy reading, how good they think they are, how often they read and for how long, what types of materials they read when not in class, how many books they read, how many books they have at home, and how they feel about reading. Go to www.literacytrust.org.uk and search for ‘Setting the Baseline’.

PREHEATING IN COOKING

In these days of rising energy costs does it make sense to have to preheat empty cooking appliances before cooking begins? It may be necessary in the case of certain bakery products, but generally the justification seems to be a convention that the cooking times given in recipes are based on the premise of starting from a given temperature. It would be good to have an authoritative view from the Food Standards Agency. There may be scope for massive energy savings across the UK.

A DESPONDENT SOCIETY

None of our current political leaders is a great orator. It is as though Peter Pears had been asked to sing Verdi’s *Otello*. But then Clement Attlee was no great shakes as a speaker. And look what his government achieved. I was reminded of this when I watched the BBC programme on the 1951 Festival of Britain. Here was a nation virtually on its uppers, much of its cities reduced to rubble, its citizens existing on bare rations. Then came a great initiative that we could not afford: a fusion of creative genius that lifted the mood of the people and gave us hope. To say nothing of the creation of the NHS and the Welfare State. Today, society is not so much broken as cast down. We need to recapture a spirit of adventure in the face of austerity.

IMPROVING OPENNESS AND TRANSPARENCY IN PUBLIC SERVICES

The government has launched a consultation on Open Data and Transparency. It sees transparency as the goal and openness as the tool. Views are invited on:

- How the government might enhance a ‘right to data’, establishing stronger rights for individuals, businesses and other “actors” to obtain data from public bodies and about public services;
- How to set transparency standards that enforce this right to data;
- How public bodies and providers of public services might be held to account for delivering open data;
- How the government might ensure collection and publication of the most useful data;
- How the internal workings of government and the public sector might be made more open [in this regard see my comment in the above piece on the mobility component of DLA];
- How far there is a role for government to stimulate enterprise and market making in the use of open data.

Go to www.data.gov.uk/opendataconsultation for further details. The deadline for responses is 27 October.

CHILD ASYLUM-SEEKERS DEPORTED AFTER YEARS OF PROTECTION

Actress Emma Thompson has spoken out against Britain’s policy of deporting lone child refugees as soon as they turn 18, after having enjoyed years of protection. Report at www.independent.co.uk, search for child asylum-seekers.

OFFICE OF FAIR TRADING CAMPAIGNS

The OFT has announced a package of measures for the mobility aids sector. It warns that people may be paying

too much for aids such as mobility scooters and stair-lifts, and that elderly and disabled people can experience high pressure and misleading sales practices when buying this equipment at home.

During the course of a market study into mobility aids the OFT has launched consumer protection investigations into two national mobility aids traders, one in relation to suspected unfair doorstep sales practices and the other over its terms and conditions and service delivery. It is investigating other similar behaviour that may result in further consumer protection actions, and has started action which could lead to the removal of the credit licences from a number of sellers of mobility aids. Local Trading Standards Services are also actively engaged in enforcement action relating to similar unfair sales practices in this sector.

The OFT has launched a national consumer awareness campaign providing consumers with practical tips and informing them of their rights when buying mobility aids on the doorstep. Its report identifies other areas of concern including:

- evidence that around half of consumers are not shopping around so could be paying too much for mobility aids. The OFT has found there can be a wide disparity in the price of identical products; for example the price of one brand and model of scooter varied by as much as £3,000. Around half of trader websites and advertising material that were checked did not quote any prices.
- the public sector's fragmented purchasing structure and some of its buying patterns can make it difficult to procure the best value wheelchairs.

The OFT has identified remedies to help consumers and healthcare organisations get better deals for mobility aids products, including:

- supporting local trading standards services in targeting firms suspected of engaging in unfair sales practices. The OFT will host an enforcement summit later this year and will produce guidance for enforcers.
- calling for businesses to display actual prices or price ranges so that consumers can shop around more easily and find competitive quotes. The OFT has secured agreement from the trade association for mobility aid retailers, the British Healthcare Trades Association, to update its Code so that all members display such price information on their marketing materials and websites.
- a number of recommendations for public sector purchasing bodies to help them drive vigorous competition in the wheelchair sector and obtain better value for money.

In a press release issued on 29 September, Ann Pope, Director in the OFT Goods and Consumer Group, said: "Mobility aids are often an expensive purchase and we know that for many elderly or disabled people they can be an absolute necessity.

"While many purchasers are happy with their experience, we are concerned that some traders may take advantage of consumers when they visit them at home. We are already prioritising consumer enforcement activity in this sector and we are today issuing a warning to the industry that we will take further action where necessary.

"Many consumers may be surprised at the money they could save by shopping around. We want to encourage people to take the time to think about what they are buying so that they know they are getting the right product at a fair price."

Note: The OFT cannot provide advice to or resolve complaints from individual consumers. Advice is available from Consumer Direct on 08454 04 05 06 or at www.direct.gov.uk/consumer.

VOTER REGISTRATION

I have received the following message from the campaigning organisation Unlock Democracy. It wants people to write to their Member of Parliament to express their concern. Go to www.unlockdemocracy.org.uk/voter-registration.

"At the moment, councils up and down the country are getting people to register to vote as part of their annual canvass. The way we register voters hasn't changed much in over 100 years but a new system of individual registration is being introduced in 2014.

"Individual voter registration is supported by all the main parties and will make it much easier to prevent voting fraud. Unfortunately, the way the government is planning to implement it is causing concern and could leave as many as 10m people without a vote.

“There are two big problems with the government’s plans, quietly published over the summer. They plan to drop the full annual canvass in 2014 as a cost-cutting exercise. The Electoral Commission warns that this alone could result in 2-3 million people unregistered.

“The government is also proposing to scrap the legal obligation for people to provide their local Electoral Registration Officer with information; essentially people will be able to drop off the electoral map.

“With only 65% of registered voters actually casting their vote in the last general election, this change in the law will inevitably make it harder for local authorities and political parties to engage with those groups who are already under-represented. Together with the scrapping of the canvass, this could lead to up to 10 million fewer people on the register, predominantly young people, people living in privately rented accommodation and members of ethnic minorities.

“Combine this with the controversial new system of boundary reviews and it becomes even more toxic; some of the most deprived and alienated voters will be left without proper representation at all. It would also adversely affect the jury system and impact on individuals’ credit ratings.

“The voting system leaves enough people out in the cold as it is without the registration system making things worse. We can’t let these proposals become law without significant changes.

“A number of MPs have already voiced their concerns; we’d like you to write to your MP and ask them to add their voice by writing to Cabinet Office Minister Mark Harper and by signing “Early Day Motion 2187: Impact of Individual Voter Registration” (an Early Day Motion is a type of petition that MPs can add their name to express an opinion about an issue).

“If we take swift action now, we can prevent these plans from being introduced. It only takes a couple of minutes to write using our online tool so make sure you do so today.”

WE HATE NO. 46: THE SEVENTH AGE

Derek Kinrade

*“Last scene of all,
That ends this strange eventful history,
Is second childishness and mere oblivion;
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans every thing.”*

William Shakespeare: As You Like It

I like a bit of controversy, the odd polemic, but I realise that I am on difficult ground here. There are great sensitivities around the subject of old age, and as lawyers put it, circumstances alter cases. But my argument is simple: that the fact that we are living longer, though generally seen as a good thing, can be a very mixed blessing. Whereas leading batsmen move to their centuries as a high point of achievement, in ordinary living the last lap is often a process of degeneration. As we slide into senility, life can be perfectly miserable, a dotage of dismay, and for the more affluent a costly one to boot. As Benjamin Disraeli put it: “Youth is a blunder; manhood a struggle; old age a regret.”

I summon to my aid the recollections of Alan Bennett in his family memoir *Untold Stories* (thanks Tina). He recalls Kathleen, a warm hearted, garrulous aunt who over many years “kept up with a vast network of friends and correspondents, [and wrote] innumerable letters”. Belatedly she married, and took up globetrotting with her Australian husband. But after a time “something began to happen in her head”. Her address book went missing and the intensely sociable Kathleen began to drift aimlessly. She still indulged in “torrents of speech”, but without “sequence or sense”. Her discourse became “wayward ... garbled and impossible to follow”. It was “futile to tell Aunty Kathleen anything and expect her to remember it for more than a moment”. Dementia was diagnosed and Kathleen [this being the early 70s] was soon committed to a mental hospital by her apparently less than devoted partner.

Bennett paints a bleak picture of the hospital and goes on to say something of Kathleen's half-life in the "demented barracks", surrounded by "the senile and by the wrecks of women as hopelessly, though differently demented". Fate, however, shortened her incarceration. In late August 1974 she wandered off in her summer frock and could not be found. Six days later Bennett himself discovered her body in a field close by the M6. And here I come to the point, for Bennett writes of an unspoken recognition that if such pathetic creatures wander off "then the death that they die, of exposure, hypothermia or heart failure, is better than the one they would otherwise have died: sitting vacantly in a chair year after year, fed by hand, soiling themselves, waiting without thought or feeling until the decay of the body catches up with the decay of the mind and they can cross the finishing line together. No, to die at the foot of a wall by the verge of the motorway is a better death than that."

A Commons debate called by Stephen Lloyd MP on 7 June focused on our current care services for older people. Stephen is on two all-party parliamentary groups: an officer on that for ageing and a member on that for dementia. And, significantly, he is the MP for Eastbourne and Willingdon. He spoke following a BBC Panorama programme (*Undercover Care: the abuse exposed*, 31 May 2011), and contended that "the current system of care for older people is in crisis." He said that there are 291,000 people in residential and nursing homes in the UK, and some 6 million more cared for in their own homes. Stephen's priority concern is for people with dementia. One in six over the age of 80 suffers from the illness, and according to the Alzheimer's Society only 40% of people with dementia have been formally diagnosed. It is estimated that at present some 750,000 people in the UK suffer from the condition and the number is set to rise to over one million in the next 15 years. One in three of us will die with dementia, and at any one time up to a quarter of hospital beds are taken up by dementia sufferers. For tens of thousands there is no provision whatever.

This is both a national and global challenge. A report commissioned by Alzheimer's Disease International said that the worldwide cost of dementia would total £388 billion in 2010 and commented that dementia will be "the most significant health and social crisis of the 21st century". Another report for the Alzheimer's Research Trust suggested that the cost to the UK economy was some £23 billion a year.

It may be argued that the government is now making strenuous efforts to improve matters, that hospitals, care homes and hospices are generally better, and that many seriously old people enjoy a good quality of life and happiness. I have nothing but respect for the work of Amanda Waring in seeking to ensure that elderly people are treated with respect and compassion. Of course; but a line has to be drawn. It seems to me that the scale of need is such that a perfect, affordable solution is unlikely. We have an escalating problem, but finite resources. And the fact will remain that for many poor souls meaningful and rewarding life is effectively over. And equally a fact is that many in such situations increasingly become a burden either on their own resources or the national economy as they peter out into the superannuated abyss of the 'seventh age'. The population of over-90s is predicted to almost treble over the next 20 years, and the DWP predicts that a baby born in 2011 is nearly eight times more likely to reach 100 than one born in 1931. By the year 2066, according to the DWP's own analysis, at least half a million UK citizens will be aged 100 years or over.

As well as the words he gave Jaques in 'As You Like It', Shakespeare had Hamlet muse on the sleep of death as "a consummation devoutly to be wish'd" were it not for "the dread of something after death – the undiscover'd country from whose bourn no traveller returns". Yet for me that is a fictional dread. I'm with Stephen Hawking, who in an exclusive interview with *The Guardian* was recently quoted as saying: "There is no heaven or afterlife ... that is a fairy story for people afraid of the dark". If you think otherwise then why should you be so afraid of going?

Article 2 of the Human Rights Act 1998 quite properly confers a right to have one's life protected by law. But I believe there should be an equal and opposite right, without stigma: a voluntary opt-out if and when people feel they have had enough and before what Richard Dorment has called "the indignity of decrepitude". One correspondent to *The Guardian* (Richard Stainton, 25 August) has suggested that "when the struggle becomes too much to bear, a stigma-free word like dignicide would give recognition to the conscious and courageous decision being taken and would lessen for loved ones the sense of failure suicide often prompts."

This briefing has been compiled by Derek Kinrade (although I often speak of ‘we’ from habit). Not only is it no longer from the National Information Forum, but Ann Darnbrough bears no responsibility for its content. I say this lest any of my more extreme comments should reflect on her.