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THE HARDEST HIT

The impact of the protests of 22 October was disappointing. Although disabled people, their families and friends took to the streets in some 14 towns and cities, media interest was largely conspicuous by its absence. Disabled people, alas, are not only the hardest hit but the softest target. The government line is that the current benefit system is not always reaching those who need help most and that their proposed reforms are aimed at ensuring that disabled people get the right level of support. Campaigners are not convinced; they see benefit reforms and reduced local services as part of a cost-cutting exercise. Experience has already shown that many people are being found 'fit for work' who have no realistic opportunity of finding rewarding employment in today's economic climate. Steve Winyard, head of policy and campaigns at the RNIB, has sadly reflected that "the one single achievement of disability minister Maria Miller is that she has united the disability movement. The proposed cuts have brought together disability charities and disabled people's organisations into a single united force where previously we've had a difficult relationship with difficulties on policy and ideology. The government has united the sector."

The evidence, to my mind, indicates that government thinking is locked into its priority aim of reducing expenditure rather than asking what more can be done to help the most vulnerable in our society. We cannot, unfortunately, bring Alf Morris back to his old job, but it would be good to recover his philosophy.

Reporting has been limited, but some coverage can be found at www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-15413935 and www.disabilityalliance.org/hardesthit.htm.

SIGNS OF THE TIMES

A new report from the Children's Society finds that 40 per cent (4 in 10) of disabled children in the UK are living in poverty: some 320,000, of whom nearly a third experience severe poverty. The report makes key recommendations to government ministers on how families can be lifted out of poverty, not least by ensuring that all families with disabled children are made aware of, and are able to take up, their full benefit entitlement. Whereas, the Society points out, welfare reforms, unless rethought [and reconstructed], will result in more than 100,000 disabled children losing up to £27 a week. The Society's website – www.childrensociety.org.uk – has the full report and allows access to a petition 'Don't let disabled children pay the price of welfare reform'.

It is also reported elsewhere (*Guardian*, 8 October) that Barnardo's has lost 9 per cent of its statutory funding from local authorities, with two-thirds of the money vanishing from family support services.

But poverty, of course, is not confined to disabled children. New figures released by the food charity FareShare show that charities it serves are reporting a steep rise in demand for food relief, and many such charities are having to slash food budgets in an effort to stay afloat. FareShare is helping to take some of the strain by providing surplus, good quality food from the food industry to a network of grassroots community organisations supporting homeless and vulnerable people all over the UK. This food is now reaching 35,000 people a day, up from 29,000 last year – following the largest ever yearly increase in the number of charities desperate for FareShare supplies: up from 600 to 700. More at www.fareshare.org.uk.

With thousands of people losing their jobs, rising levels of unemployment – especially among the young – and disabled people demonstrating on the streets it is difficult to see this government as compassionate.

A DROP-IN SERVICE ON EMPLOYMENT LAW FOR DISABLED PEOPLE

The Disability Law Service is a national charity providing high quality information and advice to disabled and Deaf people. It covers five areas of law: disability discrimination, goods and services, community care, employment, and welfare benefits.

In addition to its well-known advisory functions, DLS has now set up a drop-in service where disabled people on low incomes and certain state benefits can find out if they are entitled to free legal advice and representation. The new service is available on Monday and Wednesday afternoons, 2pm-5pm.

Contact: Disability Law Service, 39-45 Cavell Street, London E1 2BP; helpline: 020 7791 9800 (voice); 020 7791 9801 (text); e.mail: advice@dls.org.uk; website: www.dls.org.uk

CHANGES IN DRIVING LICENCE REGULATIONS THAT MAY AFFECT PEOPLE WITH DIABETES MELLITUS

In September 2010 the European Union issued a Directive which changed the medical conditions for driving licences. In the case of Group 1 (cars and motor cycles) it ruled that driving licences “shall not be issued to, nor renewed for, applicants or drivers who have recurrent severe hypoglycaemia [a deficiency of glucose in the bloodstream which causes muscular weakness and incoordination, mental confusion, sweating and in severe cases coma] or/and impaired awareness of hypoglycaemia.”

Following a period of consultation the UK's Driving and Vehicle Licensing Authority has announced regulatory changes that affect anyone taking insulin or medications that may cause hypoglycaemia. These require that applicants for the grant or renewal of Group 1 licences:

- must not have had more than one episode of severe hypoglycaemia within the previous twelve months
- must not have impaired awareness of hypoglycaemia which has been defined by the Diabetes Panel for Group 1 vehicles as an “inability to detect the onset of hypoglycaemia because of a total absence of warning signals.”

It has been estimated (*Daily Mail*) that the changes may affect some one million drivers. Go to www.dft.gov.uk/dvla/medical.aspx

UNIFICATION OF DISABILITY ORGANISATIONS

Independently, the newsletter of the National Centre for Independent Living, reports on progress towards its unification with Disability Alliance and RADAR. The new organisation will be called Disability Rights UK (DRUK) and will be the largest UK pan-impairment charity controlled by disabled people. At least 75 per cent of its board of management will be people with “a personal lived experience of disability or health conditions”, and only disabled members will be allowed to vote at meetings of the organisation.

DRUK's objectives will be:

- to mobilise disabled people's leadership and control

- to achieve independent living
- to break the link between disability and poverty
- to put disability equality and human rights into practice across society.

It is envisaged, among other things, that this will create a mechanism through which disabled people can communicate with government and will give them a stronger voice in the face of potential cuts in services, benefits and the quality of life. Conversely, through DRUK, government will have a main channel of communication with over 800 member organisations on all pan-impairment issues.

Following the closure of Skill, the National Bureau for Students with Disabilities, earlier this year, the new organisation has already taken on much of its work. Its mission going forward is “to strengthen the voice of disabled people to make our rights real, through being an effective national organisation led by people with every type of impairment or health condition”.

UK DISABILITY HISTORY MONTH (UKDHM)

UKDHM is an annual event designed to focus on the history of disabled people’s struggle for equality and human rights. The second such celebration will take place between 22 November and 22 December. It is seen as particularly relevant following the ‘March of the Hardest Hit’ in May 2011, the protests of 22 October and recent attacks on the rights, dignity and standards of living of disabled people in the UK.

A website at <http://ukdisabilityhistorymonth.squarespace.com> provides a place to find out what events are planned and how to get involved, access resources and, hopefully, prompt action to organise further appropriate events.

The chosen month includes HIV/AIDS Day (1 December), International Day of People with Disabilities (3 December) and International Human Rights Day (8 December).

Coordinator: Richard Rieser, Unit 4X Leroy House, 436 Essex Road, London N1 3QP; 020 7359 2855; rrieser@gmail.com

LIVABILITY ENTERPRISE

Livability is the UK’s biggest Christian disability charity. It works to give disabled and disadvantaged people independence and opportunities for real choice about how they live their lives. It was formed (or more properly reformed) in 2007 with the merger of John Grooms and the Shaftesbury Society.

Livability has now introduced a new service, the Livability Enterprise Agency, designed to inspire and support disabled and disadvantaged people into self-employment. It provides one-off workshops as well as longer training courses covering core entrepreneurial skills, such as business planning, book-keeping and marketing, along with advice on the benefits and other financial help available while making the transition to self-employment. Once a client’s business has been set up, the agency can also provide 18 months of mentoring.

Although this service is new in name, the team providing it has many years of experience and has helped to launch over 150 businesses. It works in partnership with the government’s New Enterprise Allowance in the London boroughs of Hackney, Barnet, Haringey, Camden, Islington, City of Westminster, Kensington and Chelsea and City of London.

Enquiries to: 50 Scrutton Street, London EC2A 4XQ; tel: 020 7452 7067; e.mail: enterprise@livability.org.uk; website: www.livability.org.uk

LETTERS

Responding to the riots

Your few words on the riots make sense.

Yet time and time again, I hear calls on the radio for prison to become harsh, irredeemably so for some, so that

“they” do not want to go back.

These calls are from those in employment or with nice pensions. People with education and confidence. Most unlikely to go to prison themselves - unless a rare insider dealing conviction. Will these people be prepared to give released prisoners a job? One employer on the radio does CRB checks when not required to do so. The inference to be drawn is that he will not employ anybody with a conviction.

These calls also fail to recognise the prisoner population - less literacy, more mental health and drink problems than the general public. Most goes untreated in prison. Two friends who are prison officers say they merely warehouse people these days in their type of prison.

Let's train prisoners for a trade? This was also criticised (by a retired police officer), as they then compete with tradespeople with no convictions! You cannot win.

Peter Salter, London

The seventh age

I applaud your piece. The tone is one of compassion and of love, although with a hint of anger which is very honest and moving. There is a very general and I think ignorant assumption that human life 'must' be preserved if at all possible, whatever the quality of that life, to the very bitter end and that anyone who ventures to doubt this is somehow inhuman. I find this bizarre. I know I can be extreme. Much of the time, I follow Camus's view that, human life is quite unbearably absurd and often quite pointless (putting aside the fact that there are just far too many of us gobbling up the planet ...) I know that many would be shocked by this, but to me it is a central question: how does one live with this?

Coincidentally, I have just finished reading a book about death. It is 'Nothing to be Frightened of' by Julian Barnes. His starting point is his terror of his own death - and he kind of takes this as a given; He would put death off at all costs, it seems. Yet he lived through his own father's very slow decline and his mother's dementia. In neither case, however, was he a carer. Oddly he does not really seem to contemplate how it might be if this happened to him and that the real thing to be frightened of is, as you rightly say, decrepitude, not death. He quotes a lovely line from a French writer Jules Renard: "Paradise does not exist, yet we must nonetheless strive to be worthy of it"

There is another issue though about dementia in old age - or indeed at any age - which I venture to raise although it is more difficult. It is that we cannot really know how it is for the sufferer. Maybe the real pain is suffered by the carers and the loved ones of the person and not by the person themselves? Outside dementia we feel a horror of it, we plead that the kind thing is to allow people not to suffer from it, feeling from the outside the awful fear of it. But what is it like inside it? We just can't know. At the moment I feel that I'd rather 'go a bit loopy' than physically fall apart with all my marbles intact - but I think that now - how can I possibly know? And then again there is the half-way stage - going 'loopy' and knowing it - that is perhaps the most very frightening thing.

Ruth Milligan, Brussels

Occupy London

Canon Giles Fraser, who last week asked the police to allow campaigners to stay to continue their protest against the behaviour of the city and the banks, has resigned from his post St Paul's Cathedral. It must have been a difficult decision, but one which to me seems both principled and courageous.

On Monday, my partner Danny and I visited the protest camp. We found it a very moving experience. It was, of course, very peaceful, but also well-organised and well-informed. What we saw of the way the people involved were engaging with the public (many people were stopping and talking to them) was a shining example of calm reasoning and good communication. The camp did not seem in any way to be blocking access to the cathedral and we were told that there was a group of people negotiating with St Paul's to try to reach an agreement. They wanted to know precisely what were the health and safety 'issues' that necessitated closing the cathedral, because they were determined to change anything necessary in order to comply with any requests so that they

could stay in place.

Because I feel strongly about supporting both the protest and Giles Fraser's actions I have sent him a message of support. If you feel like doing the same, perhaps with a copy to the dean (deanspa@stpaulscathedral.org.uk), he can be contacted at chancellor@stpaulscathedral.org.uk

The website for the protesters is: <http://occupylsx.org/>

I realise that you may not agree with me about this, so please forgive me if you feel I am allowing my strong support for such causes to bubble over.

Lindy Williams. Long Preston (written, obviously, before the dean's resignation).

PENSIONS

It was reported (10 October) that the trade union Unison intended to ballot its 1.1 million members as to whether they willing to take strike action over proposed changes to public sector pensions. No doubt by now the die has been cast. The issue was said to concern unfair variations to pension schemes that would force millions of workers to pay more and work longer, and get less in benefits when they retire. But is there not a fallacy here? Workers may receive smaller periodic payments, but most of them – because we are living longer – will get the reduced amount over a greater period than was originally anticipated. They may well get more in total than they bargained for.

ROAD DEATHS

The autumn issue of *RoadPeace Newsletter* focuses on the rising annual toll of road deaths, currently 1.275 million and projected by the World Health Organisation to rise rapidly in the coming years. These are chilling statistics, made worse by the fact that for the most part the deaths are grossly premature, and are violent, sudden and preventable. And for every person killed in this way, another four suffer lifelong disabilities.

RoadPeace, a charity devoted to supporting crash victims and reducing road danger, campaigns ceaselessly to raise awareness of this obscene slaughter and, in particular, to press government to recognise and counter its causes and effects. Just now it has heightened concerns that some legislation may be moving in the opposite direction.

Sunday, 20 November will provide a special opportunity to remember road traffic victims by joining in a World Day of Remembrance. Services will be held in at least 24 churches, chapels and cathedrals throughout Great Britain. And, on 17 November, RoadPeace patron Professor Danny Dorling will be giving a talk, Remembering what harms us most, at the University of Bristol.

Further details from RoadPeace, Shakespeare Business Centre, 245a Coldharbour Lane, London SW9 8RR, tel: 020 7733 1603; e.mail: info@roadpeace.org; website: www.roadpeace.org; helpline: 0845 4500 355.

IN SEARCH OF PEACE

One of the organisations with which my partner Ann Darnbrough has been passionately involved is MAW: at the time of writing *The Movement for the Abolition of War*. However, I read in its autumn newsletter a recognition that although abolition of war and conflict will always remain the pacifist dream, there is no way that war can be taken out of the equation. Rather, it is suggested, the name of the organisation [and its aspiration?] could, without changing the acronym, be changed at a stroke by becoming *The Movement for the Alternative to War*.

The MAW AGM will be held at the Imperial War Museum, London on Remembrance Sunday, 13 November commencing, after a short service, at 11.15 am. In the afternoon, Sir Richard Jolly will give the Remembrance Day Lecture 'Development and Disarmament: the kindest cut of all'. Further details at www.abolishwar.org.uk.

WE HATE NO. 47: IDLENESS

"Forasmuch as man, being not born to ease or rest, but to labour and travail, is by corruption of nature

through sin so far degenerated and grown out of kind, that he taketh idleness to be no evil at all, but rather a commendable thing, seemly for those that be wealthy; and therefore is greedily imbraced of most part of men, as agreeable to their sensual affection, and all labour and travail is diligently avoided, as a thing painful and repugnant to the pleasure of the flesh; it is necessary to be declared unto you, that, by the ordinance of God which he hath in the nature of man, every one ought, in his lawful vocation and calling, to give himself to labour; and that idleness, being repugnant to the same ordinance, is a grievous sin. And also, for the great inconveniences and mischiefs which spring thereof, an intolerable evil.”

An Homily against Idleness (no.19 of the Second Book of Homilies, mainly written by Bishop John Jewel for the Church of England, 1571)

In declaring an aversion to idleness I am referring only to deep-rooted, habitual idleness. As an honoured friend reminded me, there are times when we are all happy to pull up the sheets and sleep a bit longer. Nor by hating idleness do I suggest that work is necessarily an unqualified virtue. Work can be exhausting, monotonous, demeaning, pointless and inadequately rewarded. Yet in recent years it has become fashionable in government circles to advocate work, without qualification, as a blessed antidote to dependency. I have said before that we are now seeing something of a return to Victorian values. Samuel Smiles in his 1859 treatise *Self-help* commended, unreservedly, labour, industry and perseverance as the healthiest training for every individual. And in revising the Poor Law in 1834 the authorities attributed the indigence of the out-of-work ‘able-bodied poor’ to defects of character rather than to the vagaries of unemployment, believing that most pauperism arose from fraud, indolence or improvidence. This, it was argued, should be countered by the utmost restriction of financial relief. If the only state provision on offer was to live and work in a grim institution – a workhouse – then those in need would surely find other alternatives, even gainful work. That would sort out the loafers and shirkers. Hence was developed the concept of ‘the undeserving poor’, seen as a class of people too lazy to work; and thus a crude reverence of the work ethic with a corresponding antipathy to any suspicion of idleness. This is an interpretation of social justice, conceived by people with rewarding jobs, less concerned with relieving the needs of those disadvantaged in life than with seeking to ensure that the state does not provide benefits to those whose only real disability is idleness.

The roots of this thinking can perhaps be traced back to the homily quoted at the beginning of this article, which was an expansion of a fragment from the Church of England’s 39 Articles. I have not gone religious, but this blast, replete with apposite scriptural references, ends with observations that have a remarkable affinity to current government policy:

“God in his mercy put it into the hearts and minds of all them that have the sword of punishment in their hands [the DWP?], or have families under their governance, to labour to redress this great enormity of all such as live idly and unprofitably in the commonweal, to the great dishonour of God and the grievous plague of his silly people! ... Let all officers therefore look strictly at their charge. Let all masters of households reform this abuse in their families. Let them use the authority that God hath given them. Let them not maintain vagabonds and idle persons, but deliver the realm and their households from such noisome loiterers; that idleness, the mother of all mischief, being clean taken away, Almighty God may turn his dreadful anger away from us ...”

Governments have a legitimate interest in discouraging exploitation of the benefits system. The trick is not to penalise the genuinely disadvantaged at the same time. But here I want to hate idleness in a different context, not least because in practice indolence is not confined to those in poverty. Traditionally, as the homily of 1571 notices, a degree of idleness has been seen as a virtue among the leisured aristocracy, who have been able to employ others to do life’s irksome work, conferring status and freeing them for the pursuit of pleasure. Reluctantly, I suggest that Smiles may have had a point when he observed that *“An easy or luxurious existence does not train men [sic] to effort or encounter with difficulty; nor does it awaken that consciousness of power which is so necessary for energetic and effective action in life.”* But I think there is now also a growing disaffection among the mass of working-age people in the so-called middle classes. Often ground down, frustrated and demoralised by relentless, boring slavery, it has become common to regard work as simply an unpleasant means to the end of earning a living. In this construct, the maximisation of leisure for pleasure becomes life’s objective, with early retirement as a cherished goal. Whereas, I think, the proper course should, wherever possible, be directed towards achievement, a sense of purpose and fulfilment. If that sounds pious,

consider the alternative: work only as a necessity, and leisure spent as a passive spectator – simply marking time to life's inevitable conclusion.

I am acutely aware that the late and great Bertrand Russell wrote an essay *In Praise of Idleness* (1932). It is a delightful and perceptive study, but surely concerned more with the oppressive nature and commonplace futility of work than absolute indolence. He thought that there was far too much work done in the world, and that “immense harm” was caused by the belief that work was virtuous. The practical reality, in his view, was that much human toil was devoted to objectives that failed in their purpose.

Russell suggested that work was of two kinds: the first unpleasant and ill-paid, the second devoted to telling others what to do. The latter kind of work extended to those who advised others as to what orders should be given. And usually beyond this there was advice given simultaneously by two organised bodies; this, said Russell, is called politics: “*The skill required for this kind of work is not knowledge of the subjects as to which advice is given, but knowledge of the art of persuasive speaking and writing.*” Unremitting toil, on the other hand, diminished opportunity for leisure, cutting off the person concerned from many of the best things in life. He was aware that, since the wise use of leisure requires civilisation and education, there was a counter argument that those who worked long hours all their lives would be bored should they suddenly become idle. While a little leisure could be seen as pleasant, it was being said that men would not know how to fill their days if their working hours were significantly reduced (as Russell proposed).

None of this, however, made a case for idleness. Russell conceded the importance of what he called ‘the leisure class’. But these were not idle people; rather those who cultivated the arts and discovered the sciences, wrote books, invented philosophies, and refined social relations. Without them, “mankind would never have emerged from barbarism”. Russell’s whole life, indeed, was surely a testament to his rejection of idleness.

The point here is to recognise the distinction between creative leisure activities and idleness. Floyd Dell remarked that idleness is not doing nothing; rather being free to do anything. The fact is that we cease to be idle when the opportunity to do something is taken up, and the state of idleness is properly defined as a consistent failure to make good use of our time. It is one thing to have ‘time off’; quite another to use that time constructively. The problem, perhaps, as Thomas Alva Edison put it, is that: “Opportunity is missed by most people because it is dressed in overalls and looks like work.”

Duff Cooper, in his famous autobiography *Old Men Forget* (1953), was, like Russell, sceptical of the value of long hours of work, convinced “that many people waste a great deal of time in their offices which might be more properly spent elsewhere”. He loved leisure, but hoped that he should never relapse into idleness: “for there are books that I want to write, and I enjoy writing.”

There have been many scholarly dissertations on the nature and purpose of work in its many guises. For anyone who is interested there is a splendid commentary in the introduction to *The Oxford Book of Work*. I would add a fragment from personal experience. My mind goes back fifty years to a visit to a textile factory where I found myself in a vast room full of weaving machines, all of them working at full tilt with not an operative in sight. I discovered that each machine was ‘instructed’ by some kind of computerised programme. All that was needed to keep the looms going was a single controller, who didn’t need to be in attendance all the time. It was an early example of the replacement of labour with technology; at the time an eerie experience and one, of course, that had already contributed to a reduction in the work force. People had been made idle, rather than choosing not to get up in the morning. A lack of meaningful work and low pay for most of the jobs that are available are central to our current malaise. It would be entirely unreasonable to conjecture that humankind in general instinctively prefers idleness to work, and is happy to be unemployed. Oscar Wilde is said to have joked that work is the curse of the drinking classes, but in truth it is enforced idleness that emerges as the more pernicious and destructive influence.