

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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IN BRIEF: A NATION RUSHING HEADLONG TO DECLINE?

So much is happening in Britain today that one can feel overwhelmed and therefore disempowered by the sheer weight of change. The following information has been well publicised, but its impact can perhaps better be judged in condensed compilation.

5 December 2011: The National Literacy Trust published the results of a survey *The Gift of Reading in 2011*. Among other things it found that of 18,000 children questioned almost one in three did not own a book of their own. This compared to one in ten in 2005. With only one in six people in the UK having the literacy level expected of an 11-year-old, this was a finding of great concern.

13 December 2011: the King's Fund argued that government plans to pass control of NHS budgets to GPs will create a leadership vacuum and put lives at risk.

21 December 2011: In a letter to members, Clare Gerada, Chair of the Royal College of General Practitioners, said that fundamental concerns about the Health and Social Care Bill remained, and the NHS faced "an uncertain, potentially very unstable future". She predicted that 'commissioning support' to Clinical Commissioning Groups will be dominated by a small number of large commercial providers.

28 December 2011: The health secretary, Andrew Lansley, was said to be aiming to increase the level of funds that foundation trusts can raise from private work to 49%, prompting fears of a two-tier health service. It was also reported that ministers also intend, as far as possible, that all hospitals will be run by foundation trusts by 2014.

29 December 2011: Frank Field MP was reported as condemning bureaucratic cuts in mortgage interest payments which will prevent some disabled benefits claimants from moving into modern purpose-built homes. On the same day, the director of Age UK, Michelle Mitchell, was reported as saying that increasing numbers of older people with considerable care needs were getting absolutely no support at all or poor quality and limited support as a result of cuts to local authority provision.

2 January 2012: the Chartered Institute of Housing voiced concern that welfare cuts would put 800,000 homes out of the reach of housing benefit claimants, and that people in poverty will migrate to "benefit ghettos".

3 January 2012: Mencap accused the NHS of causing or contributing to the deaths of at least 74 learning disabled patients over the last decade through inadequate care. The charity found enduring "institutional discrimination" among doctors and nurses.

5 January 2012: In an *Evening Standard* article, the Prime Minister declared



that one of the coalition's new year resolutions is to "kill off" the health and safety culture for good. He said that he wanted 2012 to go down in history as the year "we banished a lot of this pointless time-wasting from the economy and British life once and for all."

7 January 2012: Sir Christopher Kelly, chair of the Committee on Standards in Public Life, was reported as saying that people were right to be suspicious of the motives of anyone who donates more than £100,000 to a political party. He repeated an earlier call for an annual cap at that level. On the same day *The Guardian* revealed that Boris Johnson, the Mayor of London, had responded to a consultation on planned changes to disability living allowance to the effect that, while some reform may be necessary, he was concerned that if its focus was solely efficiency driven government may fail to ensure that the needs of disabled people are adequately met. The changes could "potentially condemn the parents of disabled children and young people, and the children themselves, to a life of financial hardship rather than financial assistance".

8 January 2012: Death of Charles Morris, elder brother of Alf (now Lord Morris of Manchester). In 1969, as the government's deputy chief whip, Charles was ineligible for the annual ballot for private members' bills, but at Alf's request entered his brother's name. Alf Morris (away in India) came top and used the opportunity to put forward the Chronically Sick and Disabled Person's Bill.

9 January 2012: A report, *Responsible Reform*, on proposed changes to the Disability Living Allowance published. Written by disabled people and based on an analysis of 500 responses to the government's consultation, the report contends that the proposed reforms lack both support and credibility.

11 January 2012: The coalition government suffered three defeats to parts of its Welfare Reform Bill during the report stage in the House of Lords. Lord Patel, a former president of the Royal College of Obstetricians, spoke of an immoral attack on the sick, the vulnerable and the poor: "If we are going to rob the poor to pay the rich, then we enter into a different form of morality." Nevertheless, the Commons is likely to reverse these votes. In a *Guardian* article Mark Sparrow commented that many disabled people are simply too busy coping with pain and sickness to be able to fight their own corner. The proposed benefit cuts would strip the last shred of dignity from people who have already lost a great deal in life and who may already feel a burden on those who care for them. Disabled people, he argued, are a relatively small part of the population and many don't get out to vote. "It's easier to pick on a marginalised group in order to find savings instead of squaring up to a more vocal and better-organised section of society."

17 January 2012: Papworth Trust, Action on Hearing Loss and 16 other charities call on the government to "pause" the welfare reform bill and carefully consider its reform of the Disability Living Allowance.

18 January 2012: Unemployment in the UK in the three months to November 2011 rose to 2.69 million. The number of young people seeking work reached a new record of 1.043 million.

19 January 2012: The Royal College of Nursing joins other professional bodies in concern over proposed health reforms. Peter Carter, the RCN General Secretary, signals that the College "must move to a position of outright opposition to the bill." Its position is "that the bill should be scrapped, for the benefit of staff and patients across England." Meanwhile, evidence mounts of a growing problem of patients waiting excessive time for treatment.

23 January 2012: In the House of Lords an amendment to exempt child benefits from the £26,000 benefits cap secured a majority of 15 votes. Despite the fact that Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg had signalled his support for the cap, 26 Liberal Democrat peers were among those who voted for the amendment. The government indicated, however, that it intends to proceed with its plans.

24 January 2012: It was revealed that for the first time government debt now exceeds £1 trillion. Fears have been raised that another recession in Britain or Europe might set-back hopes of a deficit reduction.

The National Audit Office published a report which highlighted a significant risk that the DWP forecast of people that the Work Programme will get back into employment had been over-optimistic. The NAO analysis of likely performance of the largest group of participants is that 26 per cent will get jobs for which providers will be paid. This compares to the DWP estimate of 40 per cent.

The Commons Select Committee on health and social care published a review of the likely impact of planned reforms on public expenditure. Its conclusions included concern that at a time when all NHS bodies are being required to make efficiencies and need to plan strategically to reshape services it is unhelpful for the Department of Health to require them to make bids for capital funding to short deadlines and without adequate preparation. And that there appears to be evidence that NHS organisations are according the highest priority to achieving short-term savings at the expense of planning service changes that would allow them to meet their financial and quality objectives in later years.

25 January 2012: The government suffered a further defeat in the House of Lords, this time by a majority of 142. Peers rejected a proposal to charge single parents for using the child support agency. Official figures for the last quarter of 2011 showed a fall of 0.2% in Gross Domestic Product.

A NEW QUALITY HEALTHCARE COMMUNICATION MARK (QHCM)

I think that the Department of Health's initiative, developed about two years ago, to accredit health information, was killed off in the economic downturn. However, a new partnership between DNV Healthcare and the Plain English Campaign is planning to provide an accreditation mark for healthcare information designed to help patients make the right choices about their treatment.

To achieve the QHCM, organisations providing healthcare information will have to go through a review process to ensure that it is written by healthcare experts with the intended audience in mind.

The mark will be based on DNV's established expertise in managing risk in the healthcare sector, and the Plain English Campaign's recognition of the need for crystal-clear language. It is felt that the accreditation will boost patient safety and reassure patients. Fundamental requirements are that health information should:

- point out the main risks, benefits and alternatives in a way that will allow patients easily to identify them
- have content that is clear and based on widely accepted facts, and
- provide information that is easily understood and written in plain English.

The partnership is looking for healthcare organisations to take part in a pilot of the review process. To find out more please contact info@plainenglish.co.uk.

FAILING BRAINS

Research by the Centre for Research in Epidemiology and Population Health in France and University College London, published in the *British Medical Journal*, suggests that the brain's capacity for memory, reasoning and comprehension skills begin to slow down far sooner than has hitherto been commonly supposed: as early as age 45. Deterioration simply speeds up in later life.

Commenting in *The Guardian* (6 January), John Grace argues that he can't help feeling that he is now a lot less brain-dead than in his teens and 20s. At the age of 82, I would echo that. Far be it from me to decry the wisdom of learned scientists, but could it be that research based on 7,390 civil servants may not be entirely representative? With some exceptions, public servants are not noted for free thinking. They are generally required to be conformist and to follow instructions. If you are still up to it there is more at www.bmj.com. Search for Archana Singh-Manoux (who led the research).

LET'S BE CLEAR ABOUT BOWEL CANCER

The Department of Health is seeking to raise awareness of the symptoms of bowel cancer. Cancer is the second biggest killer in England, and our five year survival rates are lower than the European average. Late diagnosis is one of the major reasons for our poor survival outcomes, and it follows that diagnosing cancer earlier is a key priority. In the case of bowel cancer, England's second most common cancer and second biggest killer, typical tell-tale signs include:

- blood in your motions for three weeks or more
- looser motions
- a pain or lump in your stomach
- feeling more tired than usual for some time
- losing weight for no obvious reason.

Some of such symptoms may have other causes, such as haemorrhoids, but it's wise to see your doctor and have any problems checked out. If it's not serious your mind will be put at rest. But if bowel cancer is confirmed, early diagnosis can make a big difference. Over 90% of those diagnosed with early stage bowel cancer are successfully treated.

Four out of every five people diagnosed with bowel cancer are over 50, and those with a family history of

the condition are more at risk. People aged 60-69 (in some parts of the country up to age 75) will be sent a screening kit every two years. Those aged 70 or over can request a kit by phoning 0800 707 60 60. It's important to use the kits, as they can help detect bowel cancer early, even before symptoms appear. They can also detect polyps, which can easily be removed. They aren't malignant, but in some cases can develop into cancer.

You can also reduce your chances of getting bowel cancer by maintaining a healthy lifestyle:

- eat healthily (more vegetables, fruit, fish and wholegrain foods)
- cut down on alcohol
- keep active
- stop smoking.

THE OLYMPIC GAMES

May I speak up for those of us who are not excited by the Games, who are glad not to have been involved in the remarkable ticket stampede, and who regard it all as a triumphalist international contest: a showcase not only for the elevation of the greatest athletes, but also to glorify the countries they represent. And all at a huge unwarranted expense when we are supposed to be cutting back. Originally, if I remember aright, the projected cost was £2.3 billion.

IT'S ONLY A SOAP

Remarkably, the BBC's *Holby City* anticipated a scandal involving defective breast implants. Now that *Holby* has gained foundation status may we expect that Henrik Hanssen and his managerial colleagues will get massive pay rises?

ASSISTED DYING

I have previously written in support of sensible proposals to legalise assisted dying in extreme circumstances and subject to suitable safeguards. I think that the objections and fears of opponents are exaggerated, and that neither our present law nor the need for recourse to the Swiss clinic Dignitas is defensible. It is therefore of great interest that a group commissioned by the campaigning organisation Dignity in Dying has come out in favour of a limited change in the relevant law. Its findings have been well publicised and I need not repeat them here. Given its origins, and the fact that funding has come from Terry Pratchett, there have inevitably been some doubts about the independence of the review, but as well as respecting Lord Falconer's assurance that he and the members of his team were clear that they would take part only if entirely independent, and having regard to the composition of the 11-strong panel, I think we should examine the findings on their merits. For me they do not go far enough, but I see them as a step in the right direction.

Details at www.dignityindying.org.uk.

LIBRARY CLOSURES RULED UNLAWFUL

In an action for judicial review of a decision by Gloucestershire and Somerset County Councils to close libraries and transfer others to community groups it was ruled that the authorities had acted unlawfully. The judge found that while the councils were within their rights to reduce funding to libraries, the processes by which they had reached their decision did not fully comply with equality legislation. The Equality and Human Rights Commission is now working with the councils to review their decision-making systems.

WE HATE NO. 50: REDUNDANCY

I find it iniquitous that people's lives can be devastated by the whim of some boss or other - the whole system of work we live with is so barbaric; it steals our time, our energy, our lives and then throws us out when it finds it no longer needs us. And this is civilisation!

Ruth Milligan

Each job loss is a family tragedy, full of bitter personal humiliation as well as hardship.

Polly Toynbee, *The Guardian*, 30 December 2011

The classic definition of redundancy (sometimes called layoff) is that of being superfluous to requirements. At times it is a misfortune occasioned by the decline or reconstruction of a company or organisation that simply cannot be avoided. But, all too often, redundancy is simply a means of cutting costs at the expense of the services that the employees provide. As such it is called downsizing. It is a strategy that mostly results in both grievous consequences for the people laid off and a diminution of efficient provision. Graham Smith in his history of the Excise, *Something to Declare* (1980), gives an early example. Over the winter of 1772/73, Thomas Paine, then an excise officer, led a campaign to seek an increase in pay, encouraged it has been said (though not Graham Smith) by one of the Excise Commissioners. Salary levels had been frozen for the best part of a hundred years, but a substantial case for better pay failed to move the Treasury, and Paine was dismissed: not for making the case, but for absenting himself without leave to promote it. Nevertheless, in a service renowned for its efficiency and able administration, discontent persisted, until sixteen years later the Board of Excise came up with a solution: a proposal to make 760 officers redundant (nearly a quarter of the staff then working in the collections), thus allowing the salaries of the remaining officers to be increased from the savings. This scheme was welcomed by the Treasury. It extended the responsibilities of the survivors and added an average £5 to their annual salary of £50!

Today we face a similar, and massive, impending cull across most of the public services. The objective is to reduce the national deficit, and in purely economic terms there are obviously prospective cost savings in cutting the salary bill. The process appears to require departments and local authorities to achieve specified spending reductions, as a result of which public services will be allowed to contract and redundancies will inevitably follow. By this cost-cutting strategy the redundant workers, notwithstanding previous loyalty, will be cast upon a metaphorical scrap heap and transformed from productive, tax-paying consumers to potential claimants of welfare benefits.

Unlike the generous contractual severance pay enjoyed by top bankers, the minimum statutory redundancy payment is meagre. The calculation is reasonably straightforward. By way of example the DirectGov website gives the case of an employee who, at the point of redundancy, is aged 45, earns £400 a week before tax (there is an upper limit of £430) and has completed 15 years full service. This gives an entitlement of £6,800, roughly a third of annual salary.

Most employees seem to accept redundancy as a fact of life, but I think that the morality of this kind of pruning is decidedly questionable. It takes no account of the *human* cost of rejection and the demeaning transition from gainful employment to the miserable lot of the 'job seeker'. Given present levels of unemployment, finding a suitable and comparably rewarded job is not easy and the prospects are slim. Whereas income falls dramatically, costs such as mortgage payments and day-to-day living expenses continue unabated. Those who have enjoyed the use of a company car find themselves without wheels. Any savings they may have are quickly diminished. It is a crippling, stressful and depressing experience not of the victim's making and not shared by those who order such things. I hate it, and believe that there are richer citizens, tax dodgers and extravagant projects better fitted to balancing our books.