

not the national information forum

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

News Briefing No. 47. July 2012

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A Digest of Current Social Information

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SINGING IN THE RAIN

I took the view, well in advance of the Diamond Jubilee, that Republic would do well not to campaign for the abolition of the monarchy during the celebration. Whatever the merits of its case might be, it could not hope to compete with the resources and stage management of the royal PR machine, with its appeal to heritage and tradition. Indeed, protest in such circumstances was likely to be counter-productive: seen as miserable party-pooping. Surely, I thought, it would be legitimate to celebrate sixty years devoted service in the same job.

And so it proved. For me the iconic moments of the extravaganza came at the end of the river pageant, when members of the London Philharmonic Orchestra and the Royal College of Music Chamber Choir provided a musical finale. There was a spirited performance of the Sailor's Hornpipe, evoking memories of Eli Hudson's famous recording (it should be reissued), followed by enthusiastic renditions of Arne's *Rule Britannia* and Elgar's *Land of Hope and Glory*, sung in pouring rain atop a barge and open to the elements. This summed up the appeal of the monarchy: despite the outdated words, and against the odds, the stirring music and passionate delivery evoked a spirit of patriotism. Though Britain may be in a mess, one could be persuaded that all is well in the comic-opera land of Titipu.

SAFER MEDICINES

The charity Safer Medicines is devoted to protecting human health by promoting *human-specific* medical research (my italics). As such it has the support of such respected personalities as Tony Benn and Dr. Caroline Lucas MP. Right now they are campaigning for the modernisation of drug safety testing, having attracted 160 signatures to an early day motion: for the third time rated among the top one per cent of EDMs.

A new leaflet asserts that every year in Britain adverse drug reactions result in around a million people being hospitalised and are one of the leading causes of death. "Of course medicines help many people, but for others their side effects can be worse than the disease they were designed to treat." The charity argues that nine out of ten drugs that pass testing on animals prove unsafe or ineffective in human trials. Regulations have not kept up with scientific advances that could – and should – be making our medicines safer. "Yet government inaction is blocking the modernisation of safety testing that market forces would otherwise deliver." Professor Sir Ian Wilmot, chair of the Scottish Centre for Regenerative Medicine at the University of Edinburgh, says that new technologies now allow us to study the correct species – humans – without



risk to real people.

More details, with the chance to sign a petition, are available at www.SaferMedicines.org

TOWARDS THE END OF DISCRIMINATION

This from a Zimbabwean (very black) friend of webmaster Chris Bazeley:

When U Black, U Black
When I was born, I was BLACK,
When I grew up, I was BLACK,
When I go in the sun, I stay BLACK,
When I get cold, I am BLACK,
When I am scared, I am BLACK,
When I am sick, I am BLACK,
And when I die, I'll still be BLACK.

NOW, you 'white' folks....
When you're born, you're PINK,
When you grow-up, you're WHITE,
When you go in the sun, you go RED,
When you're cold, you turn BLUE,
When you're scared, you're YELLOW,
When you get sick, you're GREEN,
When you bruise, you turn PURPLE,
And when you die, you look GRAY.
So who y'all be callin' COLOURED folks ?

E.MAIL MESSAGES (RESPONDING TO ISSUE 46)

"Thank you for another extremely interesting newsletter. There is an endless supply of concerning issues created by this ruthless government. I don't think any of them have any idea of reality."

Cathy Mason

"Enjoyed it all and could find nothing to disagree with! In fact, lots of good sensible stuff. However, as a former commuter cyclist in the days when i-pods and similar apparatus did not exist I do wonder whether the wearing of such stuff dulls the senses and makes one less prepared. I would ban cyclists from wearing them! Also, I see cyclists ignoring the rules of the road to a much larger extent than I ever did."

Tom Berry

"Many thanks, as always - I particularly liked your hating hate crime piece."

John Vincent

"Hello Derek – I always find your News Briefings interesting and thought-provoking: congratulations on their continuance.

"I fully support your page one comment about cutting "unnecessary ... expenditure". Wherever I have lived in London since returning to the UK in 2000, I have wondered at the usefulness of local councils spending what must be thousands of pounds on so-called "free" newspapers. The costs of producing and distributing these must be enormous. The one we get at least twice a month at home in Plumstead goes (almost unread) back to "Royal" Greenwich in the dry recyclable rubbish wheelie bin!

"The same council is now spending money on gradually replacing perfectly good street name signs with ones bearing their fancy new logo and the "Royal Borough of Greenwich" by-line – how do they make these spending decisions?

"I have a very minor 'disability' in that I use one crutch to make walking easier and am pleased to say I have so far not received any abuse because of it. On the contrary, I am on 90% of journeys offered a seat on

a bus or train, by people of all genders, ages, races, etc and many bus drivers even watch in their mirror to see that I have sat down before starting to move the vehicle. Since moving to SE18, I have also noticed a nice custom that is again gender/age/race neutral, of people thanking the driver when they get off the bus. It's not all bad out there!"

Richard Hornsby

"Thanks for NewsBrief 46: excellent, as always.

"Like you, I also went to a Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau concert in the '50s. Like the man who was surprised to learn that he had been speaking prose all his life, I was surprised to discover that, when we were singing songs in our German lessons at school, we were actually singing Lieder!

"I was particularly fond of Heine's 'Die Lorelei', and still attempt it - when on my own. Years ago, when still in my bachelor days, I stopped off in Paris *en route* to Barcelona. For the day or so in Paris I teamed up, by chance, with a charming Dutch nurse. After lunch, while we were sitting on the right bank of the Seine, she took out a comb, so I started on '..sie kammt ihr goldenes Haar...', and to my delight she continued with the song. Great stuff."

Maurice Glassman

LOVE BUGS ON THE RISE

Figures released by the Health Protection Agency show that new sexually transmitted infection diagnoses rose by two per cent in England in 2011, with nearly 427,000 new cases. Young heterosexual adults (15-24 years) and men who have sex with men remain at the highest risk.

The steepest rise from 2010 levels was seen in the latter group, with gonorrhoea up by 61 per cent, chlamydia by 48 per cent, and syphilis by 28 per cent. Advice remains firmly that a condom should be used when having intercourse with casual or new partners.

Full details at www.hpa.org.uk

NHS DOWNGRADED

According to the British Social Attitudes Survey, although the vast majority of people are happy with the treatment they receive, public satisfaction with the running of the NHS fell from 70 per cent in 2010 to 58 per cent in 2011. Alongside this finding the latest quarterly monitoring report on NHS performance, published by the King's Fund, shows that the proportion of patients waiting more than four hours in A&E departments has increased by more than 25 per cent over the last year, reaching its highest level since 2004.

Details at www.kingsfund.org.uk

TIME TO CHANGE

Time to Change is a campaign being run by Mind and Rethink Mental Illness aimed at ending the stigma and discrimination that faces people with mental health problems. It points out that mental health problems are a commonplace experience. Roughly one in four of us will experience mental health problems at some period in our lives. If we do, we are very likely to face discrimination from other people.

The campaign has been particularly encouraged by the contributions of two MPs to a debate on 14 June who spoke movingly about their personal experience of mental illness. Sue Baker, the campaign director, said: "This will go down in the history books, as we have never before seen our political leaders and parliamentarians feel able to discuss their mental health problems openly without fear of discrimination. We want people from all walks of life to be able to do the same and it's great to see politicians making a stand."

This prompts me to say that I too have gone through a period of overwhelming depression. It's a long time ago now, but what I felt then was that of being cast into a pit of dark despair. I lost confidence, cried a lot – even at work – and couldn't keep my hands steady. But I didn't experience discrimination; rather a fear of discrimination. I found that counselling didn't help: it seemed no more than seeking to paper over the cracks. I came out of it only when a friendly solicitor frankly pointed out that my depression was well-founded. Not everyone will be helped by facing facts, but it helped me.

LIBRARIES TRANSFORMING LIVES

When the National Information Forum went into voluntary dissolution we passed part of our assets to the Community Services Group of the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP).

Our reasoning was that the group had similar aims to our own. The money was restricted to functions of social benefit (as distinct from running expenses). Readers may therefore be interested to know that the group has recently merged with another CILIP group: one devoted to diversity. The new body is now known as the Community, Diversity, Equality Group (CDEG). The merged groups previously had shared values and common aims, and the collective name is felt to represent ethical principles at the heart of CILIP's work. That libraries have a key role in contributing to social justice is central to CILIP's vision and mission of 'a fair and prosperous society' and existing for the 'public good'. The profession's workforce, and specifically library, information and knowledge workers, must also reflect the diversity of our communities. The new group's vision and objectives are aimed at embedding social justice and embracing diversity in the profession. CDEG's objectives are set out in *CILIP Update*, June 2012, namely to:

- provide a forum for progressive, socially responsible views on library and information issues.
- support and advocate on behalf of library workers who believe that libraries are agents of social change, with the power to transform the lives of individuals and communities.
- develop partnerships and strategic alliances with voluntary and statutory organisations, nationally and internationally, engaged with libraries and the struggle for social justice.
- conduct campaigns and raise wider awareness of library and information activities that promote social justice.
- monitor, evaluate and challenge our professional values, with special emphasis on embedding diversity and equality across all aspects of CILIP's work.
- promote and work to improve freedom of access to information.
- promote and work to improve accessibility of information in all formats.

It is encouraging that CDEG has so quickly been able to enunciate its sense of direction, and I feel sure that the former trustees of the National Information Forum would gladly endorse its aims. I would simply add that it is unfortunate that government policy in forcing the closure of so many public libraries is diminishing the very hub of the 'big society' that it purports to espouse.

ALL TOGETHER NOW!

Another beneficiary from the National Information Forum's demise was the superb disability newspaper *All Together Now!*. We are delighted to report that it continues its remarkable success, having doubled its circulation (115,000 copies, with an estimated 440,000 readers) and voted 'Magazine of the Year' in the 'How Do' regional media awards. The paper was also singled out in the niche publication category of the national Newspaper Awards.

Shadow Education Secretary Stephen Twigg, who recently visited the *All Together Now!* offices, said: "This newspaper is absolutely brilliant and deserves every bit of help. Not only is it helping and inspiring the huge numbers of people affected by disability and ill-health, it is also raising much-needed awareness about health in general – and about having a good time. It's the only paper of its kind in the country. And it's amazing to think that despite the general downward trend in newspaper circulations, *All Together Now!* goes from strength to strength...The fact that it is free is also a massive boost for those families who are finding it hard to make ends meet. It's a great community paper, one which needs and deserves every ounce of support."

AGE DISCRIMINATION TO BE OUTLAWED IN THE NHS

Paul Burstow, Minister for Health (Care Services), announced on 12 June that from October there will be a complete proscription of age discrimination within the NHS, except when it can be objectively justified. Staff will be banned from denying or providing lesser treatment to elderly patients. The proposals are intended to prevent doctors from failing to consider the well-being or dignity of older people. There will be a right to sue for both patients and relatives.

The new powers, which will apply in England, Wales and Scotland, derive from the Equality Act 2010 and will extend the measures already in force in relation to age discrimination in the workplace. But it is difficult to see how these principles can be achieved in the context of finite resources, budgetary cuts and overall insatiable demand.

DISTURBING TRENDS

According to statistics released by the Department for Communities and Local Government (13 June) in the 2011/12 financial year 50,290 households were accepted as homeless, an increase of 14 per cent on the previous year. And on 31 March 2012, over 50,000 households were living in temporary accommodation, five per cent up on the same date last year.

On 18 June, a study commissioned by *The Guardian* was reported as finding that almost seven million working-age adults are living in extreme financial stress, “one small push from penury, despite being in employment and largely independent of state support”, challenging the ‘better off in work’ dogma. Meanwhile, top executives are enjoying ever-higher rewards, tax cuts, and widespread tax avoidance.

For detailed comment see www.guardian.co.uk/society, 14 and 18 June. I say that there is a world of difference between troubled families and disruptive families.

NO GO BRITAIN?

The question mark is mine. As Richard Hornsby comments above about his transport experience, “It’s not all bad out there!” But TV’s Channel 4 has been investigating how accessible our public transport system really is. It started with a fact-finding project to test grandiose claims about travel for disabled people ahead of the Olympic and Paralympic Games. Soon it became apparent that all was not well, as disabled viewers told of their frustration and dissatisfaction with the present service. So the broadcaster launched a news series, ‘No Go Britain’, which has included a website for comments and stories, alongside discussion groups on Facebook and Twitter. Some of the contributions, like Richard’s, have been good, but some have been dreadful. Across the country, travellers say that they are being let down because they are disabled.

Channel 4 has been following the story with investigative films, in-depth interviews and a 24-hour Twitter project. ‘No Go Britain’ has engaged not only with public transport users but also disability charities and transport companies. The inquiry has begun to build a picture of the state of access to public transport, but still wants to continue to look at the UK’s transport network through the experiences of its disabled users. You can tell your story on Facebook at www.facebook.com/nogobritain, or on Twitter at twitter.com/nogobritain.

Based on an article by Katie Razzall in RNIB’s magazine NB, June 2012.

NO SNOOPERS’ CHARTER

Liberty, the National Council for Civil Liberties, is dismayed at Government proposals to enhance the collection and storage of our online and telephone calls, regardless of whether we are under suspicion of any offence. And this despite a 2010 Coalition pledge to “end the storage of internet and email records without good reason.” “How low,” its Policy Officer Sophie Farthing asks in the summer issue of its magazine, “will the Government stoop and how far will it snoop?” Existing powers are “already problematic”, but now the Government wants to go even further, requiring records of billions more communications to be stockpiled by Communication Service Providers, including data generated by providers outside the UK.

Liberty sees the projected powers as “a huge shift from targeted surveillance to indiscriminate stockpiling of private data available to public agencies for a future unspecified use.” The Government has said that there is no intention of reading the content of communications, merely to keep a record of them, but this does not mollify the guardian of our civil liberties. Experts, Liberty points out, “have warned that the technical infrastructure required...will amount to mass interception, a highly intrusive form of surveillance currently requiring a Home Secretary’s warrant to be issued on the basis of a suspicion of crime.”

It is accepted that “proportionate surveillance” can help in the prevention and detection of serious crime and terrorism, but keeping track of everyone’s communications is a very different matter. Liberty’s Director, Shami Chakrabarti, asks everyone to join a campaign saying no to the “Snoopers’ Charter” and to remind our MPs that we are a nation of citizens, not suspects.

More at www.liberty-human-rights.org.uk

WHO CARES?

We flagged up concerns about the Care Quality Commission (CQC) in issues 38, 40 and 41. It is only fair, therefore, to notice that regulation now appears to be moving in the right direction. As widely reported, following the scandal at Winterbourne View hospital the CQC has carried out 150 unannounced inspections to institutions providing care for people with learning disabilities. 145 of the visits were used for the

purposes of analysis: 66 in the NHS, 45 in the independent healthcare sector and 32 providing adult social care services. Most of the centres were for assessment and treatment, or rehabilitation. While nothing was found of the kind revealed at Winterbourne View, the CQC Chair, Dame Jo Williams, reports that almost half were not meeting the essential standards of quality and safety that people should expect.

She remarks on “a significant shortfall between policy and practice”. One of the most significant findings of the report is “that in too many cases care was not person-centred; people were fitted into services rather than the service being designed and delivered around them”. The inspections showed that services for learning disabled people “still need to improve, and that this requires a whole system response and approach from policy makers, providers, commissioners and regulators”. But it is important to observe that in respect of the institutions visited improvement has been forthcoming.

More at www.cqc.org.uk, with key findings.

REPORT FROM THE JOINT INQUIRY INTO CHILDREN WHO GO MISSING FROM CARE

Just in case you haven't seen the report that caused much media interest last week - see: http://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/tcs/u32/joint_appg_inquiry_-_report...pdf.

As the Foreword states:

There is a scandal going on in England involving children missing from care – and until recent cases of child sexual exploitation in Rochdale and other places put the spotlight on this issue – it was going on pretty much unnoticed.

Going missing is a key indicator that a child might be in great danger. When children go missing, they are at very serious risk of physical abuse, sexual exploitation and sometimes so desperate they will rob or steal to survive.

Until recently protecting these children has not been at the top of anyone's priority list. As a consequence, we do not know for sure how many children go missing from care, where they go missing or what happens to them when they are gone.

In fact, even though police data shows that there are an estimated 10,000 individual children going missing in a year from care, the government's official data only recorded 930 children going missing from care last year. This is a huge and worrying discrepancy.”

From John Vincent's “The Network - tackling social exclusion in libraries, museums, archives and galleries” - see www.seapn.org.uk

OPTING OUT

Kinrade's view of sensible suicide is steadily gaining ground. The latest (unexpected) ally is none other than BBC war correspondent John Simpson, who at the age of 67 is reported as saying that he would prefer to resort to euthanasia than slide into an infirm and undignified old age.

A BROADSIDE FROM BLUNKETT

The June issue of the RNIB magazine, *NB*, has an exclusive interview with David Blunkett. Free of “the shackles of front line politics” he expresses his passionate opposition to the new Personal Independence Payments:

“The Coalition's plan to scrap Disability Living Allowance is criminal. I don't think many members of parliament have clocked to the seriousness of what Maria Miller, the minister for the disabled, is proposing. What she is saying to partially sighted and blind people is that once you can show that you can deal with sight loss, you should lose the help that makes it possible for you to live independently. If, however, you demonstrate your incapability, you'll carry on receiving the payment. The outcome of the criteria is to encourage people to ‘display’ their incapacity – or risk losing their support.

“I received substantial support to do my job as an MP. But imagine if once I had demonstrated that I could work on equal terms alongside my peers, I lost the very help that made it possible to do my job.

“The DLA is not an income-based provision – it is an automatic entitlement to people who had a disability. This entitlement is crucial to modern society. Without it you are forcing people to demonstrate they are incapable.

“The criteria of PIP [are] still open to change. People have not appreciated that what sounds to be

a very sensible proposal actually makes no sense at all. It's a reversal of logic. The bottom line is – you can't lead a normal, equal life unless you get the resources needed to do so and that help must stay in place.”

Included by permission of the RNIB.

WE HATE NO. 55: FORCED MARRIAGE

“Forced marriage is abhorrent and little more than slavery. To force anyone into marriage against their will is simply wrong.”

David Cameron

Just for once the government is ahead of me in hating the persistence of forced marriages. The practice is already proscribed in Scotland (Forced Marriage etc. (Protection and Jurisdiction) (Scotland) Act 2011), and legislation is now promised in England and Wales.

Marriage, in any event, is a hazardous affair. Coleridge saw it as a trap. Quoted by biographer Richard Holmes, the poet compared a man who marries for love with a frog who leaps into a well: “he has plenty of water, but he cannot get out again”. Many women might say much the same thing when romantic love is succeeded by disaffection, disappointment and loneliness. For those it affects, incompatibility has a slow but deadly fuse. If this sounds doom laden just take a look at the latest divorce statistics.

Indigenous British culture has itself shifted with time. There has been a greater recognition of the status of women, and the concept of individual rights has been enshrined in European law. But there are, even now, subtle persuasions in commending marriage and a measure of conditioning in favour of wedlock. We have come to accept the tribulations of marriage as tolerable so long as freely chosen. Yet there remain the remnants of the historical tradition which ‘encouraged’ young women to find an advantageous match, assisted by the provision of a generous dowry. Today’s parents generally hope that their daughters will find a prosperous partner, or at least someone with expectations, but accept the need for love, and draw the line against compulsion: marriage without ‘free and full consent’. Civilised society baulks at the idea of coercion or duress. So much so that even in advance of specific legislation we have a Forced Marriage Unit (FMU), providing confidential advice, information and support to actual or potential victims of forced marriage and professionals working in this field.

In 2011, the FMU provided advice or support in nearly 1,500 cases, of which 78% were female. It accepts, however, that many more cases go unreported, perhaps as many as eight thousand in England alone. On 12 December 2011, the unit launched a consultation on the merits of new legislation. 80 per cent of respondents felt that current civil remedies and criminal sanctions were not being used effectively, but only 54 per cent favoured the creation of a new offence. There were concerns that the practice would be further driven underground, and that prohibitive legislation would be difficult to enforce. The reality is that victims often feel that their family’s ‘honour’ is paramount and are reluctant to bring family members into disrepute.

Nevertheless, the government has concluded that new legislation, planned for the 2013/14 parliamentary session, is justified. At the very least it will send a clear signal that forced marriage is regarded as criminal and unacceptable. There are, of course, sensitivities in taking this route. It may be that those who seek to impose a partner on their children believe that they are better equipped to make a suitable choice. Some thinking of this kind is entrenched and difficult to challenge, because to do so is likely to be seen as an attack upon cultural values which ‘outsiders’ fail to understand or respect. Thus the FMU, while denouncing forced marriage as a form of violence and a violation of human rights, is cautious to say that the new law will apply to all communities, in order not to stigmatise particular cultures or religions. But this, to my mind, is political correctness. Forced marriage is clearly linked to particular communities and I believe that its offensiveness is made more sinister when it persists alongside an abhorrence of divorce. What is also hopefully true, however, is that it is not typical of any community or faith.

While detesting forced marriage, my feeling is that minds, at least on any significant scale, can be changed only from within the communities where archaic thinking persists. One such initiative has been led by the charity, Karma Nirvana (Peace and Enlightenment). Founded in 1993 by Jasvinder Sanghera, herself a survivor of forced marriage and honour-based abuse, it provides a helpline in Arabic, Urdu, Hindi and Bengali that offers confidential listening support, options and guidance (0800 5999 247). Many of Jasvinder’s team have personal experience of forced marriage and issues related to honour-based abuse, and a key principle is that they will never talk to or engage with victims’ families. On the charity’s website (www.karmanirvana.org).

uk), Jasvinder says that many victims are “rendered voiceless by cultural and language barriers; they are the men and women society forgot...a secret stain on the conscience of a nation which otherwise prides itself on much-lauded values of liberty, equality and opportunity for all.” Following the death of her sister by self-immolation, Jasvinder has dedicated her life to making sure that the scandal of forced marriage and honour-based violence is brought out into the open. “These perverse attitudes,” she declares, “have no place in the UK or in the 21st century.”