

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 This
Issue

A Digest of Current Social Information

- LORD MORRIS
- TAX MATTERS
- 'I LOVE SPECIAL OLYMPICS'
- REFLECTIONS ON THE OTHER OLYMPICS
- THE WORK CAPABILITY ASSESSMENT (AGAIN)
- THE COST OF CARE
- A NATIONAL CARE SERVICE
- PERSONAL CARE BUDGETS
- A DETERIORATING QUALITY OF LIFE
- POLIO WEB LAUNCH
- THE TONY NICKLINSON CASE
- THERE'S AN AWFUL LOT OF READING IN BRAZIL
- THE DIGITAL DIVIDE
- STAYING IN WORK 'TO STAY YOUNG'
- WE HATE NO. 57: POVERTY PAY

LORD MORRIS

I circulated a personal obituary of Alf Morris separately. It has prompted many expressions of sadness, coupled with admiration for a politician who, along with Jack Ashley, holds a special place in the regard of socially aware people.

Cathy Mason wrote of his "immense achievements". She felt it be "incredible how much his determination had changed things for disabled and disadvantaged people".

Linda Clarke was especially interested in Alf's early life. "Such stories," she wrote, "are so important in understanding why we have developed the rights and entitlements we have. I fear they are being forgotten in our obsession with saving public money."

Frank Adams remembered Alf as "a gentle man with a sense of humour and a genuine interest in other people." He was also kind enough to say that his involvement in the National Information Forum, all of thirty years ago, had "transformed his life".

Chrissie Maher wrote to say that she really did admire Alf: "He was a lovely man, and I shall miss him".

Paul Alexander described him as "a truly extraordinary man".

Jean Cooper remembered him as "a real champion who will be greatly missed". She is "not sure if there is anyone around today in the political arena that would hold a candle to him".

Bob Hodgson (who printed my biography of Alf without charge) heard "the sad news" while driving to Glasgow.

Andrew Russell wrote: "We have lost an under-rated but incredibly important pioneer in disability legislation and rights".

Ken Carter and **Helen Lansdown** wrote to say they were "very saddened indeed to hear of the death of our beloved 'Alf' as he did such a lot for the Breakthrough (Deaf/Hearing) Integration Trust/deafPlus and many other organisations concerned with disability and for Deafax of which he was a distinguished Vice President."



Maurice Glassman wrote: “Chronically sick and disabled people have lost a great original thinker and persistent fighter, whose influence was worldwide. In the UK, his persuasive abilities overcame many ingrained prejudices, resulting in the introduction of invaluable developments including the introduction of special benefits such as invalidity pensions, care, and mobility allowances. On a more personal note, during my chairmanship of the National Information Forum, initiated by Ann Darnbrough, I found him to be an involved, supportive, active and encouraging Patron. He will be greatly missed, but his contribution continues.”

TAX MATTERS

It is becoming increasingly obvious (except to the Treasury) that the Government’s austerity measures are not working. Rather than cutting vital services, I think we need a massive and painful increase in direct taxation and some easement of indirect taxation (which discourages spending). While it was right to take low-paid workers out of tax, I believe it was a fundamental budgetary error to achieve this by raising the tax threshold, so benefiting not only those on low incomes, but everybody else earning up to £100,000.

I propose a revolutionary system change: to do away with tax thresholds and to set tax rates at zero for those earning, say, less than £10,000, but to tax the whole income of everyone else. At, say, 20% on the first £20,000; 30% on the next £10,000; 40% on the next £10,000; and 50% on earnings above that level (including those MPs with second jobs).

One can adjust the figures, but the principle seems fair to me.

‘I LOVE SPECIAL OLYMPICS’

I commended the work of Axess Film in Briefing 13 (September 2009) and am now delighted to report that one of its films was screened on the BBC TV 4 on 19 July. It tells the story of four athletes with learning difficulties as they prepared for the Special Olympics held in Leicester in 2009, namely:

- Hannah Dempsey, a dancer with Down’s Syndrome
- Oliver Everest, a judo fighter with autism
- Jonathan Prett, a ten-pin bowler with brain damage
- Tom Brownswood, a basketball player with Asperger’s Syndrome.

But as well as portraying their sporting achievements, the film has a lot to say – through the athletes themselves and their families – about the difficulties they have faced in their lives.

Extrovert Hannah has been supported by loving and lively parents. Her mother speaks frankly about their initial sense of shame and embarrassment, replaced over time by an unexpected recognition of their daughter’s talent. Hannah has become a Down’s Syndrome super star. She realises that she has achieved far more as a ‘disabled’ dancer than would have been possible in the wider professional world. Unfailingly ebullient, she tells the camera “I like everything about my life.”

Jonathan, far more reserved, reflects a long experience of more typical disabled living. His father, now deceased, found it difficult to accept that he had a disabled child. Jonathan went to a special school until the age of 19, and has since worked at a local Tesco. Despite being part of a big workforce, he has had no friends, male or female. Uncomfortable outside a structured, predictable environment, and at the time of filming still living with his mother at the age of 42, gentle Jonathan has found new confidence through his skill in bowling, culminating in the award of a Special Olympics Gold Medal. His mother makes a telling contribution to the film, stressing the importance of “letting go” and encouraging independence, against the day that parents will no longer be around. Jonathan now lives independently.

Oliver has a more difficult personality. Although his autism is at the lower end of the scale and he is disciplined both at school and in sport, Oliver admits to being disruptive at home. This is perhaps because he has been in foster care since the age of three. His biological father, an alcoholic, died early on, and his mother could not cope. According to his foster father, his behaviour has tended to be obsessive and their relationship “a bit fraught”. Nevertheless, judo has given Oliver a controlled outlet for his anger and aggression. Like Jonathan, he won a Gold Medal at the Special Olympics.

Tom Brownswood completes the picture. Displaying no sign of disability, he has nevertheless had to overcome significant behavioural difficulties and has found it difficult to mix in large groups. Aged 14 at the time of filming, Tom is demonstrably more withdrawn than the others. But in basketball he came into his own, and was rewarded with a Silver Medal.

The overall theme of the film is to assert the worth of people with learning difficulties, each of whom

has an individual potential to achieve and fulfil a measure of independence. The message is to look for ability rather than disability. It owes much to the sensitive interviews and narration of Thomas Leader. It presents the frank, honest views of parents, carers and the four 'stars', and comes after nearly three years of fundraising and work to achieve its production. Axess Film is a "not for profit" professional film company profiling the needs and ambitions of people with disabilities, and the only such company specialising in films where access, through disability, has been impaired. Producer Cathy McDermott comments: "During this Olympic year, the Special Olympics remains very much the 'Cinderella Olympics' with few people realising its value - so awareness and changing preconceptions is very much our intention."

For more information contact Axess at 71a & 71c High Street, Heathfield, East Sussex TN21 8HU; tel: 08000 283766; e.mail: info@axessfilm.com; website: www.axessfilm.com. 'I Love Special Olympics' is available as a DVD, price £9.99 plus postage and packing costs.

REFLECTIONS ON THE OTHER OLYMPICS

I'm sorry, but while I would not wish to detract from the wonderful personal achievements of successful competitors (some of whom were not from Great Britain) and the splendid organisation of the various events, I continue to feel that our hosting of the Games was a venture too far: an indictment of government priorities, particularly since the onset of economic blight. It was well done, but at such prodigious cost. I have survived 19 of these Olympiads (do any of my readers remember Emil Zátopek's three gold medals in 1952?). They seem to be set on a course of increasing extravagance, with little lasting benefit beyond the immediate thrill of competition. In the case of the 2012 Games that cost was not only a burden on our threadbare national resources, but extended to the diversion of Lottery funds from other important purposes. Sport has been elevated to Olympian heights, which in the final analysis only a few elite athletes are able to reach.

What I find more difficult is that while my head tells me that the whole show was steeped in naked chauvinism, my patriotic heart was moved whenever the union flag was raised. And, setting aside overuse of the words 'fantastic' and 'unbelievable', top marks to the BBC for its coverage.

A final thought: is there a case for awards to the successful horses in equestrian events?

THE WORK CAPABILITY ASSESSMENT (AGAIN)

Surprising to read that Atos has been awarded contracts worth £400 million.

THE COST OF CARE

Forward, the magazine of the Spinal Injuries Association, notices that a place in a residential home costs, on average, £26,000. If nursing is required this can rise to over £36,000 a year (Laing and Buisson *Care of Elderly People*, UK Market Survey 2010). In England and Northern Ireland, anyone with assets above £14,250 (including property) is expected to make a contribution, while anyone with assets of £23,250 or more is expected to pay for their care in full. You have been warned.

THE TIME IS RIGHT FOR A NATIONAL CARE SERVICE

In the latest issue of *'All Together Now!'*, Sir Bert Massie, former chair of the Disability Rights Commission sounds off about the need properly to address the care needs of disabled people. He favours the implementation of the Dilnot proposals, arguing that the Government's response, devoid of figures, "lacks substance". He believes that now is the time to create a National Care Service to meet the needs of the minority of disabled people who need expensive support and place disproportionate financial pressure on their local authorities. "Providing high quality social care for disabled people is a challenge from which the Government should not hide .. Let there be no more delay."

ASSESSMENT OF PERSONAL CARE BUDGETS

Personal care budgets were introduced in 2007. The RNIB magazine, *NB* (daft title; couldn't it identify itself as RNIB News?), reports findings of a Community Care survey (2012) which reveals that 82 per cent of professional respondents believe that personalisation of budgets has increased bureaucracy in their role, up from 72 per cent last year. There was also a fall in the number of face-to-face assessments with service users: down to 52 per cent from 64 per cent last year. 19 per cent of assessments were conducted over the phone,

up from 12 per cent last year. Only 38 per cent of consultations were carried out by social workers, 46 per cent fewer than last year. Signs of the times.

DISABLED PEOPLE IN BRITAIN FACE A DETERIORATING QUALITY OF LIFE

Funded by Scope, *Destination Unknown*, a study tracking the lives of disabled people through the austerity measures and welfare reforms, reveals alarming truths about the deteriorating quality of life disabled people in Britain are experiencing. By tracking the lives of six typical disabled families through the programme of cuts, Demos and Scope have been able to monitor the negative impact on their financial circumstances and emotional well-being.

Drop in income of £500 million

Since the Emergency Budget two years ago, disabled people and their carers have seen a drop in income of £500 million. But with the overall cuts to disability support predicted to come in at £9 billion by 2015, Demos and Scope warn that the struggle has only just begun.

By 2016, a further 500,000 disabled people are likely to have lost their Disability Living Allowance. By 2014, 36 per cent of existing Incapacity Benefit claimants will no longer be able to claim this support. The number of councils limiting funding support to only those with substantial or critical needs will have risen to 81 per cent.

The effect of Government cuts

The report criticises the Government for failing to look at the cumulative effect of cuts in impact assessments. Disabled people – as the report shows – rely on a package of support, and the study recommends that instead of looking at the aggregate impact of one cut, Government would do better to consider the impact of several cuts on a household.

Four major trends will dominate disabled families' lives over the next two years:

- **Struggle for survival:** Both statutory services and third sector services are being cut, leaving disabled people with nowhere else to turn. The concept of the safety net no longer resonates with people experiencing serious crises before help is provided.
- **Less civic and social engagement:** Households in the study are becoming more socially isolated, and reducing the amount of activities they engage in – from essentials such as work and medical appointments to perceived 'luxuries' such as volunteering and training. This is at odds with the Government's vision of stronger and active communities.
- **Declining mental health:** The study's households are increasingly experiencing anxiety, depression and fear for the future, with some relying on increased medication. Even Philip, a stoic supporter of the Government's deficit reduction plans, is now worried about his potential loss of benefits and work capability assessment.
- **More informal care:** Informal carers are taking the strain as the disabled people in the study are losing the financial support and services they once relied on. There is a clear physical and emotional toll on them.

From the Scope website, www.scope.org.uk/news/austerity, where you can read the full report.

POLIO WEB LAUNCH

The British Polio Fellowship has launched its new website (www.britishpolio.org.uk). The charity's chief executive, Ted Hill, said: "We want our website to become central to the UK's polio community. "We're still living with the legacy of this debilitating illness today and need the support of our members and partners to raise diagnosis rates and help treat those affected by it."

From 'All Together Now!' August/September 2012

THE TONY NICKLINSON CASE

The ruling of the High Court was legally sound, but cruel. It is indeed for Parliament to change the law on assisted dying, but it needs to happen without delay. Nicklinson powerfully argued that he was being denied the right to take his own life because he was physically handicapped, and that this flew in the face of the Human Rights Act. But the moral case is even stronger: the imperative to show compassion to those, like Tony, who of sound mind and their own volition, want to call time on their terrible suffering but need help to

do so. In saying this I accept that there must also be adequate safeguards against coerced euthanasia.

A substantial majority of the public want a change in the law, but Parliament has so far failed to respond. Polly Toynbee (*The Guardian*, 16 August) does not mince matters, pointing out that “every attempt at a right-to-die reform has been sabotaged by the large religious lobby, galvanised by Care not Killing. The red benches, heavily stacked with the religious, including 26 bishops, saw off the last bill.”

I find it perverse that religious people should think that a caring, compassionate God, at the core of their belief, is on their side on this issue. But then isn't this the religion that used to burn opponents at the stake – preferably slowly? Presumably because their perceived sins might be contagious.

(This was written before Mr Nicklinson's death, which does not prompt any amendment)

THERE'S AN AWFUL LOT OF READING IN BRAZIL

Brazil's penal authorities have come up with a novel idea to allow prisoners to reduce the length of their sentences and reduce overcrowding. Reading a book a month can see them cut their time behind bars by as much as 48 days a year. The offer is to discount sentences by four days for every book read. Not surprisingly, the convicts have to give proof to earn their rebate: they must write an essay on each completed book, making correct use of paragraphs, avoiding corrections, using margins and legible joined-up writing.

São Paulo lawyer Andre Kehdi said: “A person can leave prison more enlightened and with enlarged vision of the world. Without doubt they will leave a better person.” I wonder if they have the vote.

Based on an article spotted in CILIP's *Update*.

THE DIGITAL DIVIDE IS STILL WITH US

All Together Now! reports that more than eight million people in the UK are still not connected to the internet, and that half of them are people with a disability! This makes them, as Helen Milner, CEO of UK Online Centres (UKOC), points out, one of the hardest to reach groups. “The number of people who are offline is getting smaller, but not at the rate we'd hoped for.”

UKOC has launched a number of initiatives to help people get connected, and has set up a £1.1 million Community Hub programme, funding large scale projects that will harness technology to support community development.

More at www.ukonlinecentres.com

STAYING IN WORK 'TO STAY YOUNG'

Two in five people planning to retire this year would be happy to work past 65 if they had the chance.

Forty eight per cent of men and 32% of women coming up to retirement showed a desire to continue in employment after the standard retirement age.

That's according to Prudential's Class of 2012 study, which looks at the finances and expectations of those approaching retirement age.

The main motivation for more than two-thirds (69%) of those surveyed is a desire to remain physically healthy and mentally active, while 39% do not like the idea of just staying at home.

More than half (54%) claim that they enjoy working.

However, despite wanting to stay in work, only 13% would choose to continue to work full-time with their current employer.

More than one in 10 (11%) of entrepreneurial retirees would consider starting their own business to earn money from a hobby in order to keep working.

Five per cent would work as charity volunteers.

Vince Smith-Hughes, retirement expert at Prudential, said: “There is a new retirement reality taking shape across the UK, with thousands of people actively choosing to work past the traditional retirement age.

“The fact that so many of this year's retirees would keep working on a part-time basis is a strong indication that, for many, working is as much about staying young at heart as it is about funding retirement.

“Those retiring at 65 will face an average of 19 years in retirement which makes the financial and social benefits of working for longer an even bigger draw for a new generation of industrious retirees.”

From '*All Together Now!*' August/September 2012. This disability newspaper anticipates a readership of half a million. But this perceptive and informative article deserves an even wider circulation. I am delighted that the Forum was able to help financially.

WE HATE NO.57: POVERTY PAY

"The labourer is worthy of his hire"

Luke 10/7

"In every work a reward added makes the pleasure twice as great."

Euripides: Rhesus (tr. Richmond Latimore)

Among the tributes to Alf Morris I was particularly struck by a comment in Andrew Roth's Guardian obituary (15 August). It pointedly pointed out that in his first party conference speech in 1957, he attacked "a society which allows people to make millions of pounds in a day and other people to exist without even the price for coal". Despite Alf's best efforts, I fear that kind of society is still with us.

I have on several occasions inveighed against excessive rewards, and in the August issue wrote about the link between low pay and poverty. This time I want specifically to castigate low pay itself. It is, of course, a feature of capitalism, but I do not argue that capitalism, per se, is hateful: only when it involves the exploitation of labour for the unseemly generation of profit. It is common in third world countries, and was often so during our own industrial revolution: the workforce kept on near starvation pay while wealthy industrialists grew rich. I think that I see something of that malaise today.

The minimum wage was intended to combat poverty pay, but there are indications of a double flaw in the strategy: first, that the rates are too low, barely enough to cover rent and food; second, that in some occupations it has come to be seen as a maximum rather than a minimum. Employers in certain sectors of our economy are able to take advantage of current levels of unemployment to press down on both hourly rates and the length of the working day: take it or leave it, because if you don't like it you can easily be replaced. The BBC has revealed that some employers contrive to get away with paying below the minimum rate, exploiting the need of impoverished people to get some kind of work. Typically such employment offers no prospect of advancement; at the same time it guarantees unhappy and disgruntled employees.

We do have the independent Low Pay Commission (formerly the Low Pay Unit, which still has redundant presence on the web) but the organisation's focus seems to have changed from campaigning for a fair wage to one of seeking to ensure that minimum standards are maintained and advising the Government on the national minimum wage. In my Oxford Dictionary, commission is defined as a body of persons having authority. It has a pay and work rights helpline (0800 917 2368), but appears to have a primary concern with specialist research. Its 2012 report (the thirteenth) points out, among many other things, that the national minimum wage has increased by nearly 69% since its introduction – faster than both average earnings and prices. Its research leads to a conclusion that the lowest paid workers have received higher than average pay rises with no significant adverse impact on employment. Tentatively, it thinks that the national minimum wage may have led to a modest reduction in hours. Its cautious recommendations for a change in the hourly rates (from October 2012) are for an increase of 11 pence in the full rate, no change in the rate for young people (which it is felt may increase their attractiveness to employers), and a five pence increase in the apprentice rate (to £2.65).

The Resolution Foundation (www.resolutionfoundation.org), which undertakes independent research aimed at developing policy proposals to improve outcomes for people on low and modest incomes, has looked at the extent of low pay across Britain. In London, where the effects of low pay are most acute, there is a 'living wage' level, not legally enforceable but endorsed by the Mayor, currently set at £8.30 an hour. Outside the capital, researchers at Loughborough University reckon that £7.20 is the least amount needed to cover basic necessities in order to sustain the most modest quality of life. Resolution has found that nearly a quarter of the workforce is taking home less than these minimums.

Particularly embarrassing for government ministers is the news that more than 150 cleaners employed across Whitehall, encouraged by the community organisation London Citizens, have signed and personally delivered letters to eight cabinet ministers and the president of the Supreme Court, seeking to lift their pay from the national minimum wage to the London living wage - an increase at present of £2.22 an hour. *The Guardian* (13 July) reported that a statement by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, headed by Vince Cable, on behalf of all the departments, said that a living wage at £8.30 an hour could damage employment prospects for low-paid workers. Quite so, but I take this to imply that unfair pay is justified because it might lead to fewer workers being employed and that a workforce on poverty pay is therefore a necessary evil. It might also, of course, dent the competitive edge of the various cleaning companies and pare down their profits. So, apparently, government policy is to tolerate injustice: a regime based on

pragmatism rather than principle. We may therefore view employment statistics with suspicion. Falling levels of employment may be perceived as good news, but the real picture is less rosy if this improvement is predicated on low-paid, transient jobs.

Derek Kinrade