

# 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. 51. November 2012

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*A Digest of Current Social Information*

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### VOTES FOR PRISONERS

Readers of my Briefings will be aware that I am one of the few people who agree with the ruling of the European Court of Human Rights against an automatic ban to deny prisoners a vote. However, since it is clear that my view cannot prevail, I suggest a compromise: simply to allow prisoners to make a formal, written request to be allowed a vote, making their case. This to be submitted through the prison governor, for his/her comments, to an adjudicator in the Ministry of Justice for a decision. His/her decision to be open to appeal to a higher authority. Acceptance of such applications would be exceptional. I feel that such a system would satisfy both the European Court and Parliament.

### PRIVILEGE

David Cameron told his party conference that he wanted to spread privilege. What did he mean? Privilege, as I understand it, is a right, advantage or immunity enjoyed by an individual or attached to an office. Is the Prime Minister's intention that it should be spread more thinly, beginning perhaps with the royals? Or, more likely, that more of us should enjoy privilege? But is it not the case that privilege, by definition, is finite? If everybody was privileged then nobody would be privileged (if you see what I mean). Speaking for myself I don't want even more people lording it over us plebs.

To be fair to the Prime Minister though, it is good to champion aspiration; to try to ensure that everybody has the opportunity to make the most of their abilities. The downside at present is that those who have made it through university will either face starting their careers with a huge tuition fee debt or be unable to find any suitable work. And those not so naturally gifted may find that aspiration is not enough to make a good life for themselves.

### FEEDBACK

**From David Yelding in Paris**

Hi Derek

Here's to being 88 and the 100th edition. Let's hope by then that the world has become a saner place (meaning it will think more like you).

However I hope you are wrong about privatisation being inevitable. The propaganda we are given is that private enterprise has energy, drive, imagination and flexibility always provides better and cheaper and more consumer friendly services. Recent history - the banks (@!~\*~#), care homes, railway companies, Olympic security, uncounted misselling and profiteering scandals etc - show this does not necessarily follow. Some

services cannot flourish if an organisations primary objective is to return increasingly large dividends to shareholders.

Like you I don't want to see the anti-Muslim film, which by all accounts is offensive, dishonest and without any artistic merit. However, I did buy a copy of Charlie Hebdo which came out with two pages of cartoons at the same time and led to (peaceful) demonstrations here and French embassies calling in armed protection. Some cartoons were mildly funny and some were deliberately provocative - but no more so than, say, the Christmas card you once sent to me with a picture of the V.Mary saying post coitally, Joseph, that was immaculate,,, I agree with you that we are all free to believe in what we want, however naive, misguided or plain idiotic and provided it does not harm anyone else. Equally we all have the right to criticise or make fun of these beliefs. Any belief system worth its salt should be strong enough to withstand it. But in both cases proportionality applies - there are circumstances in which we should hold our fire, and counter protests need to be appropriate and in scale. As you know, I am no advocate for any religion, but the orchestrated protests we have seen recently do no favours for the majority of Muslims who are both peaceful and moderate - see this from Alvaaz published at the time <http://en.avaaz.org/783/muslim-rage-protests-newsweek-salafists?slideshow>.

It's a huge issue here with a Muslim population of around 15%, and an increasing proportion of young people being unwilling to play along with the French deal that immigration is ok as long as you accept 'traditional' French values 100%. Multiculturalism is seen as an Anglo-Saxon - and dangerous - concept. Marine le Pen makes much of this and won over 16% of voters in the presidential elections. The problem is here and in the UK we are facing a situation where large numbers will identify with Islam first, and will follow a strong Muslim leader whatever they might be proposing.

### **CUTTING BACK ON WELFARE SPENDING**

George Osborne has made it clear that he wants to reduce the welfare budget by £10m – for starters. But is it not the case that we have just blown more than that amount on the Olympic Games, a project which, if I remember aright, was 'won' for London on the strength of an estimated cost of £2.3m. I know that most people think it was money well spent in terms of an event well done and hugely entertaining. But what does it say about our priorities?

I am encouraged to find that I am not quite alone in my dismal view. Writing in the HMRC magazine *Pulse* (October 2012), David McLean reveals that he is "sick and tired" of having the Olympics rammed down his throat: "Fine, a few sportsmen/women gained a medal after years of hard work, good luck to them. Apart from that this country has spent a large fortune (which we don't have) on an event which will leave no lasting significance".

Be that as it may, the coalition government's bid to reduce the welfare bill through the review of disabled claimants eligibility is continuing to throw up some harrowing tales of Atos finding obviously incapacitated people "fit for work". A strategy to encourage chronically sick and disabled people into work might be justified if there was an abundance of work open to them; but in present circumstances it is punitive. Some simple questions need to be answered:

- what proportion of claimants examined have been found fit for work?
- what proportion of those found fit for work have appealed?
- what proportion of those appeals have been decided in the claimants' favour?
- what proportion of reviews have resulted in increased benefits?
- was there, as commonly asserted, a prior estimate of the anticipated savings?

### **THE BEDROOM TAX**

Among the coalition's welfare reforms is a particularly nasty provision that will cut the housing benefit entitlement of people of working age living in social housing who are deemed to have spare bedrooms. The reductions come into effect in April 2013. Typical victims will be families living in council or housing association homes whose children have flown the nest.

The effect of the changes is to limit housing benefit to allow only for bedrooms used by persons or couples living as part of the household. In this respect, children under the age of 16 of the same gender will be expected to share, and children under 10 will be expected to share regardless of gender. A disabled tenant or partner who needs a non-resident overnight carer will be allowed an extra bedroom. Otherwise, the

criteria are very closely defined to exclude from exemption, for example, temporary use by children who visit but are not part of the household.

The cut will be a fixed percentage of the housing benefit eligible rent, expected to be 14 per cent for one extra spare bedroom and 25 per cent for two or more extra bedrooms. I don't know what readers think, but this strikes me as mean spirited legislation, part of the infamous Welfare Reform Act. What, I wonder, would be the effect of converting a room so as to irrevocably preclude its use as a bedroom: making it a study perhaps, a snooker room or a computer hub to give underprivileged tenants broadband access? Rather like the response to the hated window tax.

**Based on information from the National Housing Federation at [www.housing.org.uk](http://www.housing.org.uk), which has more detail including how the bedroom tax will operate under Universal Credit.**

## UNIVERSAL CREDIT

An inquiry led by Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson has claimed that up to half a million disabled people and their families will be worse off under Universal Credit if current plans go ahead. The inquiry warned that cuts for the child disability additions and the severe disability premium are likely to result in disabled people and their families struggling to pay for basic essentials such as food and heating.

**From the BBC website, 17 October.**

## BADGERS REPRIEVED

The threatened badger cull (Briefings 43, March 2012 and 45, May 2012) has been postponed until summer 2013. It is difficult to see how it will become any less expensive or ineffective in the meantime – or less objectionable.

## THE THREAT TO INFORMATION PROVISION THROUGH LIBRARIES

From its earliest days the National Information Forum recognised and championed the role of libraries in the provision of information to disabled and socially deprived people. A representative of the Libraries Association served on its first committee. That role is now under severe threat from cutbacks and closures. I was therefore particularly interested to read the reported comments of CILIP President, Phil Bradley, at the Institute's AGM, featured in the October issue of *CILIP Update*: "Phil stressed that the role of the library is not about books – which he says are just one form of technology that librarians can utilise. Instead libraries should be about helping people find the answers to difficult questions...Phil added: 'If it's about books, we're stuffed. But it's not – it's about providing information'."

## SOCIAL CARE: GET A MOVE ON

According to *NB* (October 2012) the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) is concerned that the debate on the long-term funding of social care should not overshadow the issues affecting people with immediate care needs, who are looking to the Government to act more decisively. As long as action is delayed hundreds of thousands of older and disabled people are struggling without state-aided care. The problem is being intensified by local authority rationing.

**Note: The RNIB website would benefit if the listing of its reports were dated.**

## ANDREW MITCHELL

There was an exchange in the Commons at Prime Minister's Questions (17 October) in which Ed Miliband remarked that if a drunken yob in a city centre abused a policeman, ranting and raving, he would spend the night in a cell, whereas the Chief Whip had spent the night in the Carlton Club. The PM pointed out that Mitchell had apologised and the apology had been accepted. But the crucial question, surely, is what would have happened if the drunken yob had apologised?

(This was written before Mitchell's resignation).

## NHS PROGRESS

I was astonished recently, after an endoscopy, to be given straight away a written summary of the findings, including photographs of my duodenum. What a welcome change from the days when communication was kept confidential between hospital and GP. Or is this something unique to Kings College Hospital?

## LIGHT BULBS AND OTHER ENLIGHTENMENT

The curtain has finally been drawn on the traditional light bulb (but thank you Thomas Alva Edison for your radiant invention). Retailers can sell any remaining bulbs, but may not order fresh stocks. Energy-saving compact fluorescent lamps (CFL) are now the order of the day, commonly regarded as providing a harsher blue/white light.

But the sight-loss charity Thomas Pilkington Trust does not agree. In collaboration with Ricability, a guide has been produced which contends that new bulbs can be found that provide the same yellow light as of old. It reviews what is available, what they are good for and which are best. The guide, *Choosing energy saving bulbs for your home*, is available on line at [ricability.org.uk](http://ricability.org.uk) or by calling 020 7427 2460 (voice), 020 7427 2469 (text), or by e.mail at: [mail@ricability.org.uk](mailto:mail@ricability.org.uk).

**Question: Is this change heavy-handed? Cylinders were overtaken by single-sided acoustic discs, then by electric 78s, then by long-playing records, and later by compact discs. All this happened naturally. It wasn't thought necessary to ban previous formats, some of which indeed continue to be sold.**

Ricability guidance is also available on wheelchair accessible vehicles, digital radios, powered wheelchairs and scooters, car measurements, washing machines and easy-to-use TVs. Reports can be accessed on line for:

- mobility products and motoring for older and disabled people
- products to make home-life easier
- parenting
- personal care
- consumer rights
- helpful organisations

The first two of these reports are also available in print.

## SHARE THE VISION

In October, Helen Brazier, co-ordinator of the charity Share the Vision, spoke to the national committee of the Community, Diversity and Equality Group of CILIP. She began by pointing out that one in eight people in the UK have a print disability. Two million of our population has sight loss; a lot more, perhaps one million, have dyslexia. Their needs are individual, but they have some things in common: they are more likely not to be in employment, are often vulnerable to isolation and depression, and are more likely not to be online or computer literate. These tendencies are more pronounced among people from minority ethnic groups. Nevertheless, they all need to be able to access reading material.

Sadly, however, on average only seven per cent of printed material is accessible to sight disabled people. Libraries, in both the academic and private sectors, can play a big role in improving this situation. They have, of course, a statutory duty to promote equality of opportunity and not to discriminate against disabled people, but in practice performance is very variable and the problem is exacerbated by economic cutbacks, such as closures and the loss of mobile services.

Share the Vision has been around for over 20 years, attempting to improve provision and signposting available services, with a variety of leaflets encouraging reading in alternative formats. Its membership now includes the leading library service organisations, with their main (but not exclusive) focus on public libraries. One of its basic tools is a simple A4 leaflet, *Six Steps to Library Services for Blind and Partially Sighted People* which draws attention to the action libraries can take. 90 per cent of public libraries have now signed up to this strategy.

Ebooks can make a difference. They can transform access to books for many people with sight problems or other print impairments. They are inherently more accessible than print because they allow the user to adapt the content to their individual needs. A factsheet is available, explaining alternative ways of providing ebook services.

In co-operation with the Reading Agency, Share the Vision seeks to influence the effectiveness of the Parliamentary Group on Libraries and in June 2013 will run a campaign *Making a Noise in Libraries*.

**Further information from Helen Brazier at 0161 355 2004; e.mail: [helen.brazier@rnib.org.uk](mailto:helen.brazier@rnib.org.uk).**

## ROYAL SECRECY

In the October issue of this Briefing I argued that failing to release the Prince Charles letters would of

itself threaten our confidence in the constitutional impartiality of the monarchy. I stand by that view. Sadly, however, the Attorney General has vetoed publication on the strange ground “that the correspondence was undertaken as part of the Prince of Wales’s preparation for becoming king”. Dominic Grieve said that any perception that Charles was disagreeing with government policy arising from the publication of the letters “would be seriously damaging to his role as future monarch, because if he forfeits his position of political neutrality as heir to the throne he cannot easily recover it when he is king.”

Is Grieve subtly telling us that publication would have that effect? For if the letters were innocent of any such perception there would be no reason to veto their exposure.

Republic, the non-party campaigning group for a democratic alternative to the monarchy, has accused the government of a cover-up and has announced a new campaign for Freedom of Information reform.

Graham Smith, Republic’s chief executive, said:

“It’s an open secret that prince Charles lobbies the government. What the public has a right to know is what he is lobbying for and whether he is actually influencing policy.

“The Attorney General’s decision is all about protecting Charles and the royal family from scrutiny, putting his demands above the rights of the British people. The coalition agreement pledged to ‘throw open the doors of public bodies’ so that the public can hold them to account – that clearly doesn’t apply to the royal household.

“Dominic Grieve has made it clear today that no citizen should ever bother trying to find out what the royals are doing behind closed doors: the government will never let the light in.

“This decision is a serious affront to British democracy and must be challenged. That’s why we’re announcing a new campaign for changes to the Freedom of Information Act that will allow the royals to be held accountable for their interference.

“Grieve has said this is about protecting prince Charles’s impartiality, but that impartiality doesn’t exist. Charles has made that clear. The decision is about pretending Charles is impartial while he continues to lobby in favour of his own political agenda.

“If Grieve believes Charles to be impartial then let him prove it by allowing release of these documents.”

My feeling is that it is precisely because the Attorney does not believe the Prince of Wales to be impartial that he has declined to release the letters.

## **BE CAREFUL WITH YOUR CARDS**

The UK Payments Council urges people never to hand over a debit or credit card to anyone who has come to the door (would you?), never to enter your pin number over the phone, and to use only your bank’s advertised phone number when calling them. In other words be very careful if approached by callers who may not be who they say they are.

## **RACIAL ABUSE**

In my October Briefing I criticised the scale of the massive penalties imposed on John Terry, the Chelsea footballer. I am convinced that had he been found guilty in court the penalty would have been of a much lower order. My point is not to defend his abuse, but to argue for proportionality.

I mentioned a report that some black footballers were set to boycott the Kick it Out campaign. This turns out to be true, but what I didn’t guess was that this is because the ban and fine were seen to be inadequate! I fear that the fires of divisiveness are already being stoked. Let me be clear about this. I see a world of difference between angry, heat of the moment, offensive insults which include reference to race, and outright racism. In the same way that blasphemy is not necessarily indicative of attacks upon religion. Nobody argues that John Terry is a racist.

The kind of disrespect heard at the recent under-21 international in Serbia is completely beyond the pail and an entirely different level of abuse. This kind of deplorable behaviour is intended to convey that black people are an inferior sub-species. It is ironic that foolish, lubberly, uncouth spectators should disparage highly talented footballers.

## **THE NAKED SCIENTIST.COM**

A podcast from 14 October includes an exploration of the workings of the auditory system, the

causes of deafness, how hearing aids work, the origins of tinnitus, and a novel therapy for eczema, which currently plagues me greatly. I think I knew that scratching increases the intensity of the condition. There is, however, some hope that interventions could be developed to eradicate the condition. But so far tested only on mice.

## WE HATE NO. 51: SEXISM

*“Think what a year can bring:*

*He’s washing dishes and baby clothes*

*He’s so ambitious he even sews*

*But don’t forget folks that’s what you get folks*

*For makin’ whoopee…….”*

Gus Khan: ‘Making Whoopee!’ (from the song popularised by Eddie Cantor)

*“Marriage is the price men pay for sex, sex is the price women pay for marriage.”*

Anonymous

You will understand (I hope) that since I am a man this month’s polemic is written from a male perspective. And the fact is that the heteros of our gender are sexually attracted to women as a moth to a candle flame (with similar consequences). That makes us vulnerable and open to exploitation. Robert Burns famously wrote: “Smiles, glances, sighs, tears, fits, flirtations, airs – ‘Gainst such a host what flinty savage dares. When awful Beauty joins with all her charms, who is so rash as rise in rebel arms?”. The answer, surely, is only a misogynist: certainly not Burns. He had fifteen children, six of them out of wedlock. Like so many of us, he loved too much. He thought that a sacred right of womankind was that they should be protected, whereas he was the one who was defenceless in response to the allure of the “tender flowers”.

Nowadays, women in search of love and support can brazenly intensify their attraction by dressing provocatively: figure clinging dresses, high heels to accentuate pulchritudinous curves, a discrete décolletage to expose a tempting cleavage. Breast enhancement has become disturbingly popular. The dangers of this kind of allure are well understood in certain middle-eastern countries, as in Edgware Road, by draping the female form from head to toe in a voluminous black shroud, allowing only the eyes to be seen, which even then can beckon. In some communities women will follow behind their men, emphasising their proper place in society. (Behind closed doors, I am told, a different relationship prevails.)

Marriage is therefore inevitable. It can be the abattoir of passion, as I once found to my cost. But even Paul of Tarsus (a largely male community) recognised its necessity: “...for it is better to marry than to burn.”(1 Corinthians 7.9). Such unions are mostly unequal. Women may well be looking for a prince charming or a knight in shining armour, but such men are in short supply, and generally wives are likely to be disappointed in their husbands. If a woman’s instinctive, biological drive is to have children, her partner may be required to have sex on a functional basis and rather too often. Otherwise husbands may find mutual concupiscence (whoopee) in much shorter supply. Yet most men, even if ugly and married, until too old, need sex and are plagued by desire. Conventionally, however, the husband will have sworn to love his wife, comfort, honour and keep her, in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all others, keep himself only unto her, so long as they both shall live. It is this oath that is hard to keep and which leaves men open to the wiles of women who lay in wait to tempt them, beyond endurance, to stray. Young women shamelessly offer themselves for money on advertisements in public telephone booths, and parade themselves in strip joints, massage parlours, lap dancing clubs and a macrocosm of pornography, where they frequently engage in sexual activities well beyond the usual marital repertoire. Some have even been prepared to appear topless on page three of a serious and responsible newspaper. They play upon innate masculine weakness, soliciting sexual lust. I would call it harassment were it not for the fact that men are complicit in the sordid game.

But this sexist attack on naïve men extends beyond the bedroom. It has infiltrated the world of work. Most women, to be fair, choose low-paid, monotonous work, but there is an increasing tendency for some to compete in the higher reaches of business. These assertive go-getters are mostly fortunate enough, however, to be protected by a ‘glass ceiling’ that saves them from the rigours of senior management and a role in the boardroom. Not so their male counterparts, who must endure the executive stress of tough decision making, working all the hours Whoever made; denied – apart from the occasional round of golf and long lunches – the balance of a normal social life. Here is discrimination, red in tooth and claw.

Much the same story applies to routine tasks around the home. Men, at a push, can manage things like sewing and knitting, traditionally crafts associated with women. For them, Peter Lappin has a male sewing blog 'Male Pattern Boldness'. But, in my experience, the same does not go for women if faced with changing a wheel on the family car, cleaning out the gutters or unblocking the drains. Amelia Earhart said: "Women must try to do things as men have tried. When they fail, their failure must be a challenge to others." Well they are certainly still trying.

Let's face facts. Apart from in bed, men, when they come their senses, prefer the company of other men. Plebs like nothing better than bonding with others of their gender at football matches and in public houses. Toffs delight in the quiet companionship of gentlemen's clubs, the solace of time together after the 18th hole, and riding bicycles through large gates. Men feature more prominently in the media simply because they make the news. And they die earlier than women because they have faced the rigours of steering the good ship Britain through the storms of life. Or, perhaps, because they have had their testosterone depleted in encounters with women. A recent study suggests that eunuchs lived longer than uncastrated men; substantially longer in the case of Robert Burns. The little woman need not trouble her pretty head about such things. If ever excited, she should calm down and carry on, preferably in the homestead.

But please don't take any of this too seriously.

Derek Kinrade