

# 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. 52. December 2012

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### ABLE

Chris Bazeley phoned to sing the praises of the disability lifestyle magazine *Able*. I think he described it as the Rolls Royce of disability magazines. That, sincerely, was good enough for me, but for the wider benefit I should add my own commendation.

I am looking at the November/December issue. Despite being very glossy (usually a bad sign), I find it intelligent and principled. I was somewhat taken aback by Tom Jamison's opening editorial comment that although he could talk about politics and religion, both subjects are so incendiary that he would be answering letters of complaint for months. As readers will know by now my approach on both subjects is somewhat opinionated, and my experience is that reasoned criticism of both these institutions evokes a surprising amount of support and, as yet, limited hostility. But reading on I realised that Jamison has a different priority. The clue and first principle is in the title. The magazine is emphatically dedicated to promoting positive deployment of our abilities. We all have limitations (disabilities); the important thing, particularly in the context of work, is to play to our strengths.

Chris chose to eulogize this particular issue because it has an in depth report on assisted dying, a subject on which he knows I have very definite views. *Able* takes a more balanced approach, drawing on the thinking of pro-choice campaigners, represented by Sir Terry Pratchett, and pro-lifers, defended by Anthony Ozimic. The article is fair in presenting both sides of a complex argument, but the author does conclude with the thought that "further compromise is necessary and that pro-life campaigners cannot expect everyone to respect a law fundamentally based on religious doctrine." So not quite impartial then.

There is also a concession to political ideology in a contribution from Esther McVey, the new Minister for Disabled People. It is the usual optimistic ministerial stuff, but welcome in that she is communicating at all. It left me, however, wanting to ask whether, like her predecessor Alf Morris, she wants a society where "needs come before means". Perhaps the editor should ask her, and invite her views on, say, the lamentable failure of the Work Programme.

As one of the authors of *Motoring and Mobility for Disabled People*, I was particularly pleased to see the 'Guide to Buying a Wheelchair Accessible Vehicle'. It sets the tone of a publication dedicated to the provision of useful information. This is a well-produced, lively, positive magazine, full of interest, in which even the adverts make a sprightly contribution.

A year's subscription (six issues) costs £15, from Craven Publishing,

## GOINGS ON

I am looking back on a month of high profile casualties. If I am not mistaken, George Entwistle's resignation was inevitable not so much because Newsnight repeated an ill-conceived defamation, but because of the Director General's unconvincing response to both this crisis and the Jimmy Savile revelations. It is to be hoped, however, that the inflated furore does not distract attention from the allegations of widespread sexual abuse by paedophiles.

The other fall from grace was that of retired but celebrated General Petraeus as head of the CIA. This has been put down to the shame of an extra-marital affair with his biographer, Paula Broadwell, but that alone would surely not reflect upon his fitness to serve. Such infidelities are devastating for partners, but all too common. Should we not rather reflect on the possibility that the real default concerned access to certain e-mails and a risk to national security? I understand that the US Congress is on the trail. No doubt the facts will emerge after I have written this.

## LEGAL HIGHS

So-called legal highs are substances designed to mimic the effects of illegal drugs like ecstasy and cocaine which are not controlled under the Misuse of Drugs Act. The government has recently announced that two such products, 'Black Mamba' and 'Mexxy' (methoxetamine) will be added to the list of Class B drugs prescribed as illegal. Users will face up to five years in jail, suppliers up to 14 years. But the problem about this is that as fast as particular drugs are banned new variants come onto the market.

Thus while the overall number of drug-related deaths in the UK fell between 2009 and 2010 (2,182 to 1,853), a report by the International Centre for Drug Policy indicates that the fatality figures for now-outlawed methcathinones rose sharply in the same period (5 to 43). Of the latter total, so-called 'Meow Meow' (mephedrone) accounted for 29 deaths.

For a helpful piece on drug use see [www.bbc.co.uk/health/emotional\\_health/mental\\_health](http://www.bbc.co.uk/health/emotional_health/mental_health). Further information/support can found at:

- [www.whynotfindout.org](http://www.whynotfindout.org)
- [www.talktofrank.com](http://www.talktofrank.com) (The National Drugs Helpline)
- [www.famanon.org.uk](http://www.famanon.org.uk) (Families Anonymous)
- [www.ukna.org](http://www.ukna.org) (Narcotics Anonymous).

## FEEDBACK

RH is to be congratulated on spotting 'beyond the pail' in the November issue. The pail, of course, is something that we will all kick. But I wish everyone read the Briefing with such diligence.

### From the USA:

"As always I thoroughly enjoy your monthly forum. It helps me keep abreast of social, economic and political news from the UK; but, more than content, I just love your passion for social justice, your exposure of political cant and your delicious sense of humour."

Lydia Karoum, Alexandria.

## LIVERPOOL CARE PATHWAY

This euphemism leads, hopefully, to a peaceful death. Developed at the Royal Liverpool University Hospital and Marie Curie Hospice, the 'pathway' is said to sometimes include the withdrawal of food and water from dying patients as part of a treatment regime to relieve suffering in the last days and hours before their end.

It has come to light, however, that in some cases this has been done without the knowledge of patients' relatives. The government now proposes to regularise the practice by ensuring that families are informed in advance. It has launched a 12-week consultation on proposed changes to the NHS constitution. My concern here is whether there is an assumption that relatives know best and have the final say.

## CARE HOME CONCERNS

Bad enough that the offences of so-called carers at Winterbourne View were so appalling as to result in custodial sentences, but concerns have since arisen about the treatment of some of the patients moved

elsewhere.

What's more, serious doubts have now emerged about the rating of some of our care homes. The BBC's programme '5Live Investigates' (28 October) drew attention to allegations of a "cheque book system" whereby homes can pay independent ratings companies and consultants to assess them. The suggestion is that while some homes given a five star rating are "heaven", others are "hell". Hannah Barnes has reported that some care homes given top ratings enjoy bonus payments from local authorities despite not meeting the Care Quality Commission's basic standards.

**More at [www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-20100734](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-20100734).**

### **ARE YOU REALLY BETTER OFF IN WORK?**

A report from KPMG, a leading provider of audit, tax and advisory services, reckons that one in five workers in the UK is paid less than is required for a basic standard of living. The proportion rises to up to nine out of ten of those employed as waiters and bar staff.

**More at [www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-20104177](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-20104177).**

### **WOMEN BISHOPS**

Such a pity that the C of E has narrowly turned its back on equality. But then my *Cruden's Concordance* does not have anything under 'Discrimination'; which is not that surprising given that the scriptures were presumably written only by men and centuries ago. Next time, the Synod might put the motion that 'we object to female bishops'. That would be unlikely to get a two-thirds majority.

### **THE MANDATORY WORK SCHEME**

This DWP initiative, launched in May 2011, appears not to be particularly effective. The scheme, which requires Jobseeker Allowance claimants to work as volunteers for four weeks as a condition of retaining the benefit, has also attracted fierce criticism from campaigners, who argue that it is a form of forced labour. Right now the DWP is striving to avoid revealing the names of participating organisations, conscious, it is said, that disclosure would be likely to lead to the collapse of the scheme.

**Go to *Guardian online*, 9 November, for further information.**

### **THE RELENTLESS DRIP OF INEQUALITY**

"Wealth is sucked upwards, it doesn't trickle down."

**Giles Fraser, *Guardian*, 3 November 2012**

### **O SLEEP, WHY DOST THOU LEAVE ME?**

This is the title of an aria from Handel's *Semele*, made famous years ago by John McCormack. Some answers have been provided in *G2* (5 November). Quite fascinating, but I will restrict myself to the main points:

- more than 51% of British citizens struggle to get a good night's sleep [I am one of them, Ann is not]
- 93% of insomniacs report low energy levels, 83% complain of mood swings, 77% find it hard to concentrate, 64% say they are less productive at work, and 55% report relationship difficulties [perhaps they snore for the rest of the time]
- the NHS spent £50 million on sleeping pills last year, and dispensed 15.3 million prescriptions across the mainland countries.

Various factors account for our sleep problems, but 90% of the battle is said to be in the mind.

**Jon Henley, based on [www.greatbritishsleepsurvey.com](http://www.greatbritishsleepsurvey.com)**

### **NEW STANDARDS FOR HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE**

The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) has begun developing its first health and social care quality standards.

Areas that NICE will cover include the transition between child and adult services, mental wellbeing of older people in residential care and medicines management in care homes.

The standards will be based on NICE clinical guidelines and public health guidance. NICE will produce a number of standards on topics where no current health or social care guidance exists.

**From the RNIB magazine *NB*, November 2012.**

## DEMENTIA

On 8 November the *Daily Telegraph Online* carried a report that the Prime Minister would be announcing a Dementia Friends project which would require all health-care professionals to ask all patients aged between 65 and 74 about their memory during a check-up. And that over the next three years members of the public will be invited to training sessions on how to recognise dementia and provide support. Jeremy Hunt, now Secretary of State for Health, is quoted as saying that we need to build a society where people can live well with dementia, enjoying the best possible quality of life for as long as possible.

Well of course we do; but is not the nub of the problem about those who can no longer “live well”, when the best possible quality of life is very poor indeed? Is this not the stage at which the burden on the economy is so massive? And are all pensioners to be obliged to undergo a memory test when they go to their GP because, say, they have wax in their ears? And why stop at 74?

Does anyone agree with me that ‘dementia’ is an unfortunate term, defining the condition as a species of insanity? Do we want to imply that people with memory loss are mad?

## LEGACY OF THE PARALYMPICS?

Writing in the October issue of the Spinal Injuries Association magazine *Forward*, Chairman Jonathan Fogerty expressed doubts about the continuing impact of the Games:

“I remain to be convinced of what the real legacy of these games will be. Having eventually recognised that disabled people living in society can make a positive contribution, we learn of cuts to care funding and the withdrawal of support for independent living. Surely now is the time to invest in disabled people and seize the positivity generated by the Paralympic Games? Few of us have the necessary qualities to win a gold medal but we should all be allowed to fulfil our own potential, whatever that may be.”

Similar doubts were echoed in a survey run by the disability charity Vitalise. According to a report published on 29 October, 54 per cent of respondents thought that the public did not have a better understanding of the day-to-day lives of disabled people as a result of the Paralympics. Although 82 per cent of those surveyed felt that the Games had made the public more aware and open-minded, 40 per cent expressed worries that any positive change would just be temporary.

Go to [www.vitalise.org.uk](http://www.vitalise.org.uk) for more.

## NHS CONTINUING HEALTHCARE

There is an important distinction between continuing health care provided by the NHS and social care provided by local authorities. Continuing NHS care remains free, whereas social care is means-tested. People whose care needs are mainly health care needs (they are said to have a Primary Health Need) related to the treatment, control or prevention of a disease, illness, injury or disability, and established by assessment, are entitled to receive such care free at the point of delivery.

Details at [www.spinal.co.uk](http://www.spinal.co.uk), in the SIA Academy and Training pages.

## MINISTER FOR DISABLED PEOPLE

Esther McVey replaced Maria Miller as Minister for Disabled People in the recent mini reshuffle. Liverpool-born (24 October 1967), she has been MP for Wirral West since May 2010. She graduated from John Moore’s University with a distinction level MSc in corporate governance and won the North of England Excellence Award for her studies. Having initially worked in her family’s business, she later embarked on a media career as both a presenter and producer. As an MP she has previously served as PPS to Chris Grayling. Interestingly she is a longstanding friend of Kate McCann and helped to set up the Madeleine McCann Fund. I hope that she will now truly be *for* disabled people. They certainly need a champion.

## READING ON PRESCRIPTION

Not for the first time an initiative has emerged in which public libraries and GPs and mental health professionals work in tandem to provide books on prescription. The idea is to encourage reading to help in the treatment of people with problems such as stress, anxiety, depression and newly diagnosed dementia. The aim is to give patients access to self-help resources to help them learn about and manage a range of

common mental health problems.

The project, being rolled out in Warwickshire, is free through 17 libraries, with 24 chosen titles covering 11 topics.

**More at [www.warwickshire.gov.uk/booksonprescription](http://www.warwickshire.gov.uk/booksonprescription), including a video.**

## **NHS CHANGES**

### **Healthwatch**

Just when you thought that quangos were being consigned to a bonfire of history, an extra one has been announced. From April 2013 a new organisation, Healthwatch England, will form part of a network aimed at giving users of health and social care services a voice both nationally and locally. At the national level it will work by highlighting national issues and trends and raising them at “the highest levels”. It will be helping to set up local Healthwatch organisations as a conduit to gain knowledge of the experience that people have of local care in every local authority area in England and will be using the information to shape local services and influence national policy.

The idea is that, with support, local Healthwatch organisations will become strong ambassadors for local people. They will:

- have the power to enter and view services
- have a seat on the local health and wellbeing board, and thus be able to influence how services are set up and commissioned
- produce reports to influence the way services are designed and delivered
- provide information, advice and support about local services
- pass information and recommendations to Healthwatch England and the Care Quality Commission (CQC).

In principle, the intention is to ensure that the views of users are more strongly heard by the Secretary of State for Health, the CQC, the NHS Commissioning Board, Monitor and all the English local authorities.

**More at [healthwatch.co.uk](http://healthwatch.co.uk)**

## **NHS Commissioning**

A new, independent NHS Commissioning Board was established on 1 October. The most notable of its responsibilities will be the authorisation of Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs). The Board has already agreed the proposed configuration and member practices for 212 such groups covering the whole of England. One senior clinical lead from each CCG will join a new NHS Commissioning Assembly.

From 1 April 2013, the Board will take over many of the current functions of Primary Care Trusts (PCTs) in commissioning primary care services. An operating model, *Securing excellence in commissioning primary care* describes the system by which the Board will use the £12.6 billion that the NHS currently spends on commissioning primary care. On the same date PCTs and Strategic Health Authorities will be abolished. Until then they will retain their statutory functions.

**More at [www.commissioningboard.nhs.uk](http://www.commissioningboard.nhs.uk)**

## **SCOTTISH ACCESSIBLE INFORMATION FORUM (SAIF)**

I am advised that the hosting of the SAIF project by Consumer Focus Scotland will shortly be coming to an end. Its 2012/2013 work plan is being brought to an orderly conclusion. All work under the supervision of Consumer Focus Scotland will have ceased by the end of December 2012.

The Forum has been hosted for over 15 years, first by the Scottish Consumer Council and since 2008 by Consumer Focus Scotland. It has worked to combat social exclusion by striving to ensure that people who find it hardest to access information because of disability get the same access as others. Much has been achieved through the provision of training, advice, work-tools and publications to help public bodies and others improve the accessibility of their information.

Sadly, it is said to be no longer possible for Consumer Focus Scotland to host the project. This is because the UK government is implementing a major restructuring of Consumer Focus which, I am told, will result in a changed role not compatible with the work of SAIF.

The Scottish Government, however, is committed to supporting people with disabilities, and is considering ways to ensure the continued improvement of access to information.

**Consumer Focus Scotland can be contacted on tel: 0141 226 5261 (Chris Thirkettle) or e.mail: [mail@consumerfocus.org.uk](mailto:mail@consumerfocus.org.uk)**

## SCHIZOPHRENIA: THE ABANDONED ILLNESS

The Schizophrenia Commission is an independent body established by the charity Rethink Mental Illness, and is made up of 14 experts chaired by the eminent psychiatrist Professor Sir Robin Murray. Having conducted a year-long inquiry into the state of care and outcomes for people living with schizophrenia in England, the commission has published a report, *The Abandoned Illness*, which draws attention to “a broken and demoralised system that does not deliver the quality of treatment that is needed for people to recover”.

The inadequacy of care that many people with psychosis receive is said to add greatly to their distress, worsening the outcomes for what can already be a devastating illness. The report finds that too many wards in psychiatric hospitals are frightening places where the overwhelmed nurses are unable to provide basic care and support. Medication is resorted to at the expense of psychological interventions and social rehabilitation.

Among several specific findings, the report concludes that people diagnosed as having schizophrenia can expect to have their lives shortened by 15 to 20 years. And this despite a greater understanding of mental illness and appropriate therapies. Only one in ten of those who could benefit get access to true cognitive behavioural therapy.

**Both a long executive summary and the full report can be downloaded from [www.schizophreniacommission.org.uk](http://www.schizophreniacommission.org.uk).**

## SQUATTING

Squatting (taking unauthorised possession of unoccupied premises) in a residential building in England and Wales became a criminal offence on 1 September. Such squatters now face a penalty of up to six month imprisonment, a £5,000 fine, or both. It must be proved, however, that the person knowingly entered the building as a trespasser and “is living or intends to live” in it. The new law (Section 144 of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012) applies to existing squatters.

This marks the end of so-called ‘squatters’ rights’, but opponents of the change see it as a further attack on vulnerable homeless people, criminalising them and increasing the extent of rough sleeping.

## ACCESS TO READING

*Assessing the impact of reading for blind and partially sighted adults* (28 September 2012) is the somewhat cumbersome title of a report by The Reading Agency, prepared for the RNIB by Claire Creamer and Rachel Spacey of the LISU Reading and Information Centre at Loughborough University, and Debbie Hicks on behalf of the agency. It does, however, what it says on the tin. Following a review of relevant literature, a series of interviews with 108 blind and partially sighted readers was undertaken. This was supplemented by an online questionnaire completed by another 186 respondents.

The key findings were that 95% of participants read for pleasure more than once a week, with 55% reading more than 10 hours a week. 82% said that reading was ‘very important’ in their lives for a variety of reasons, and had a significant impact on learning and skills.

Those who belonged to reading groups enjoyed the opportunity to socialise. Such groups were seen as a key support of learning and skills development, introducing readers to a wider range of material and new authors, and providing a social context in which to explore their reading.

The participants relied on a variety of reading formats from a range of sources, particularly DAISY (71%) and audio books on CD (66%). Although ebooks were used by only 5% of the participants, other recent research shows that they make a significant difference to the accessibility of reading material.

Overall, the findings indicate that reading plays a key role in maintaining a quality of life that helps people with visual impairments to overcome some of the daily limitations they face. It is unfortunate, therefore, that they commonly experience frustrations in accessing all the material they would like to read. The report recommends that authors, publishers, RNIB, public libraries and local authorities work together as much as possible to provide resources for blind and partially-sighted people.

**Go to <http://readingagency.org.uk> for the full report.**

## NEW REPORT ON AIR TRAVEL FOR DISABLED PEOPLE

This is number 10 (October 2012) in a series *Inclusion Now*, published by Trailblazers, a group of

disabled campaigners from across the UK, part of the Muscular Dystrophy Campaign. The investigation into the accessibility of the air industry was prompted by repeated reports of disabled passengers receiving a second-rate service from airlines. It came four years after the introduction of European Union legislation to protect the rights of disabled passengers flying in and out of Europe.

But despite the EU Regulation (1107/2006), Trailblazers found that disabled passengers still regularly encounter barriers to a smooth and pleasant travelling experience. Its members described:

- being unable to take flights with best-priced airlines because most budget airlines will not carry wheelchairs above a certain weight
- wheelchairs being damaged beyond repair, and holidays or business trips being ruined
- being physically hurt or feeling humiliated when being carried from wheelchairs to airline seats because staff members ignore advice on best lifting techniques
- having low expectations of airlines to take care of their medical and mobility equipment.

Unsurprisingly, therefore, Trailblazers found that many disabled people avoid travelling by plane, at any cost. Yet, they point out, air travel can often be an essential requirement for a job, so that some disabled people are unable to pursue some careers.

Air travel is also a vital part of many holidays, but for many people consulted past experiences have given rise to days and weeks of worrying about travelling by plane.

The report summarises relevant legislation, but points out that court rulings earlier this year state that the rights of disabled passengers do not extend beyond the time the plane is on the runway. Therefore, once a passenger has boarded a plane the Montreal Convention takes precedence over British and European law.

**Full report at [www.mdctrailblazers.org](http://www.mdctrailblazers.org)**

## **REFORMING THE EQUALITY COMMISSION**

Hugh Muir's article 'Hideously Diverse Britain' and Maria Miller's response (*Guardian*, 2, 4 –online and 9 November) are of great interest and give rise to considerable disquiet. The substance of Muir's piece refers to a strange culling of at least two EHRC Commissioners: Simon Woolley, the only Black Commissioner, and Lady Meral Hussain-Ece, at present the only Muslim Commissioner. Miller responds only in general terms: "We are reforming the EHRC because, since its creation in 2007, it has struggled to deliver across its remit or inspire confidence in its governance, expertise or ability to deliver high-quality work at good value for the taxpayer. The noble aims with which it was created became lost in the mire". This followed the qualification of its first three sets of accounts [i.e. up to 2010] and a critical report from the Joint Committee on Human Rights. [This goes back to 2 March 2010. It was indeed critical, but noticed recent "signs of improved performance".]

This forthright statement prompted a response from Margaret Prosser, the EHRC's interim chair (*Guardian*, 13 November), which appealed to Miller to take more informed advice before making any further comments on the EHRC. She admitted initial difficulties, but argued that the EHRC's record spoke for itself, including groundbreaking legal cases, inquiries exposing exploitation of migrant workers, [action to combat] harassment of disabled people and discrimination in home care and the finance industry, and equality deficiencies in the Treasury's 2010 spending review. Having begun with a budget of £70 million, the expected settlement for this year is down to £18 million.

Many of us with an interest in the various strands of equality legislation were dubious about the merging of the previous equality organisations in 2007. We felt that a combining of so many distinctive regimes would be difficult to manage and was likely to result in diminishing their impact in previously dedicated areas. To now have such a withering critique from the Secretary of State of the DCMS is worrying and surely merits a fuller explanation. No doubt *The Guardian* will have similar thoughts.

## **MOODY BLUES**

It has been reported that the rating agency, Moody's, has warned that Britain's AAA status is in danger. It identifies the importance of policies that balance the need for fiscal consolidation against the need for economic stimulus.

It is arguable, however, that the approach to the first need can be inimical to the second. How can we balance austerity and growth? It looks increasingly apparent that present policies are not in equilibrium and are simply not achieving growth. Few will deny the crucial imperative to balance our books. What

is debateable is how this is best achieved. Two aspects of present government strategy are particularly questionable. The first, in my view, was the decision to cut the top rate of tax and to extend the laudable reduction of the tax burden on low-paid workers to people on middle and higher incomes. When it is necessary to usher in a period of austerity, it is odd to begin with wholesale reductions in direct taxation. The second dilemma is to judge just where necessary spending cuts should fall, and on this there is a widespread perception that poor and vulnerable people are suffering disproportionately. It is already evident that cuts in social and mental health services and in housing benefit bear most heavily on those in greatest need. Some of our public services are already in danger of being overwhelmed because they have neither the staff nor the resources to meet a growing demand. Support for disabled people is waning, libraries are being closed, and the arts neglected. Ever more people in poverty are reliant on food banks, while the barely able and the virtually unemployable are expected to save themselves by finding work, even though, if successful, they are unlikely to be paid a living wage. Meanwhile the gap between the minimum wage and executive pay continues to grow. An impoverished underclass is losing out, while a wealthy elite, including members of parliament, sail on serenely, barely troubled by austerity measures. It is a recipe for disaster, with poor people increasingly vulnerable to loan sharks and pay day loaning. If we have a broken society, it is legitimate to ask who has broken it.

Yet more huge welfare cuts are in the offing. We cannot yet say where they will fall, but the auguries are not good.

### **CHARITIES FEEL THE STRAIN**

A survey by the Charities Aid Foundation and the National Council for Voluntary Organisations reveals that UK charitable donations have fallen by 20% during 2011/12 (£11 billion to £9.3 billion)

[www.ncvo-vol.org.uk](http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk), press release, 13 November 2012.

### **POLICE COMMISSIONERS**

Some time ago I wrote to my local police station to ask who appointed my representatives on the police authority, the criteria used in making their appointments, and to whom they were accountable. I received no reply. The Association of Police Authorities website ([www.apa.police.uk](http://www.apa.police.uk)) tells me that here in London each authority is normally made up of nine local councillors appointed by the local council, and eight independent members “selected following local advertisement, at least one of whom must be a magistrate”. But, unless I have missed it, information is lacking on who does the selection and whether the appointees remain in post indefinitely, irrespective of performance and attendance. On the face of it this system seems profoundly undemocratic, and the move to elected representation outside the metropolis welcome.

But the paradigm that authority should reside in one salaried individual is a quite dramatic change. Many reasons have been advanced for the abysmal electoral turnout across the country, but one possibility is that people are not persuaded that it is a good idea.

### **WE HATE NO. 60: BELIEF IN GOD**

*“Whence came it we were tempted to create  
One whom we can no longer keep alive?”*

Thomas Hardy: God’s Funeral (1910)

*“It is unremarkable that in cases of extreme pain, or grief, or wonder, men and women should seek, and find, consolation. Perhaps it is more remarkable that the intelligent human mind, knowing all it knows about the arguments against God’s existence, should continue to practice religious observances.”*

A.N.Wilson: God’s Funeral (1999).

*“Thus much for the first part of the Bible. Every other part is marked with circumstances equally as suspicious. We ought therefore to be reverentially careful how we ascribe books as his word, of which there is no evidence, and against which there is abundant evidence to the contrary, and every cause to suspect imposition.”*

Thomas Paine: letter to Camille Jordan (1797).

Well, hate is too strong. I simply feel that, given that believers are prone to proclaim their belief from pulpits, through the media and on my doorstep, I am entitled to make the opposite case. In doing so in a

short essay, I cannot, of course, elaborate a definitive argument. This is already the subject of a voluminous literature, of which Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion* is perhaps closest to being comprehensive. Rather I express an intensely personal conviction: a sense of certainty that God is a myth. I am in category seven of Dawkins' list of denial.

I am aware that I have previously inveighed against dogma (We Hate no.5) and have no doubt elsewhere touched on what I see as the fallacies of religious belief. With the dawn of the Enlightenment many writers began to question the historical record and religious ideas. Among them was Thomas Paine, with his *Age of Reason*, written during the turmoil of the French Revolution. He launched a frontal assault on Christianity, arguing that the Bible was not the word of God and that traditional Christian beliefs were similar to the mythology of ancient Greece. Paine found that religious institutions had compounded the delusion: "All national institutions of churches, whether Jewish, Christian or Turkish, appear to me no other than human inventions, set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolise power and profit". But Paine and many other critical writers stopped short of denying the existence of God.

I similarly reject much of religious canon, written and chosen by men, more especially its supernatural elements. To believe it to be the word of God, one must first accept that God exists, then second that the divine 'message' has been faithfully transcribed by human hands. I think, in fact, that Paine did not entirely get it right. My conviction is that God is also a human invention, but that there are nevertheless some timeless treasures in the Christian texts and lessons to be learned from the life of Jesus (as recorded): which is only to be expected if the texts were conceived by thinking, honest men. As to churches, I think that they should be judged in the here and now, rather than on their dubious and sometimes cruel, intolerant and violent history (though some, of course, still have a distasteful agenda).

I came to atheism after a lengthy period of exposure to Christian teaching and unease with it. It was a kind of conversion in reverse, a liberating experience from which I have never felt the least temptation to stray. I find no evidence of God, nor of the efficacy of prayer, but a great deal to the contrary. I follow Hitchens in his final book, *Mortality* (2012), who notices that cancer (from which he was dying) is an undignified thing quite evenly distributed among saints and sinners, believers and unbelievers. He remarks that infants suffer from leukaemia, and devout persons have died young and in pain, whereas Bertrand Russell and Voltaire, along with many psychopathic criminals and tyrants have remained spry until the end. Broadening this argument, it is evident that the experience of fortune and misfortune, and of natural disasters, is entirely random, at odds with the notion of an omnipotent God, a supernatural creative intelligence who designed the universe and everything in it and who remains in charge, endowed with moral authority. This is to say nothing of the tenacious view that humankind was created in this God's own image, some six thousand years ago, when it is by now beyond doubt that life began an aeon ago in primitive form and has evolved over time into the myriad forms of which we are one. Believers see the complexity of life and draw the conclusion that it must have been planned. I prefer not to speculate, content that the origins of our world and its abundance should remain something of a mystery.

Prayer, supplication to a benevolent God, is equally dubious. Seen as an imagined communication between the supplicant and a fanciful Almighty it may have some value in conditioning mood, fashioning a way forward, or reconciling the petitioner. But evidence that prayer is a two-way street is decidedly questionable. Hitchens (again) considers intercessory prayer, drawing attention to a study published in 2006 which investigated its therapeutic effects. This "could find no correlation at all between the number and regularity of prayers offered and the likelihood that the person being prayed for would have improved chances."

Long since I concluded that much belief in God derives from wishful thinking, and in particular from the hope of an after-life (despite Ecclesiastes 9.5-6). This is beyond my comprehension. To me, the very idea of some form of eternal life is irredeemably horrid, whereas oblivion seems peaceful and reassuring. I just cannot understand why people who accept that there was a time before they existed should balk at the thought of ceasing to exist, other perhaps than through the chain of their DNA.

Yet my perception admittedly leaves a vacuum. Atheists miss out on the community of belief and an organised system of pastoral care. Nor does my view diminish the splendour of religious art and music or the grandeur of our churches and cathedrals. It is also apparent that worship of a god, even if that god is scientifically a delusion, brings both solidarity and comfort to many people. Atheists, by contrast, share only ideas. We are not yet a communion, and Andrew Brown (*Guardian Online*, 25 October) is right that humanism "is defined in a largely negative way", and moreover that humanists can be defined simply as "people who

are free of religion and superstition.” Thus our identity becomes dependent on what we are not. To eliminate religion in the wider definition suggested by Brown is “to eliminate all social bonds”. Thus we are excluded from the religious fraternity (such as it is) partly by self withdrawal, but also because the traditional religious community tends to reject interaction with ‘outsiders’. Religion in its various manifestations largely requires faith and compliance with settled beliefs, even though these are not identical. The story of George Pratt, an 11-year-old atheist, recounted in *The Week* (27 October) is illuminating. Young George wanted to join his local scout group, but was refused membership “for refusing to swear allegiance to God and Queen.” Alternative versions of the Scout Promise were available to members of other faiths, but there was no provision for non-believing republicans.

What I can promise is that I won’t ever argue my case on your doorsteps. Perhaps I might not need to.

## ALF MORRIS

I said that the tribute to Alf in the October Briefing was my last word, but I think you will want to share some of the family perspective offered by his son Paul at a memorial service at St. Margaret’s, Westminster Abbey on 13 November. It is testimony to the fact that if you thought you knew someone, then that knowledge was incomplete:

“It is so hard to truly believe he has gone, for me, my brothers and sisters he has always been there and we thought he would live for ever. With dad there was no gradual dimming of the light; he worked, wrote, campaigned, spoke publicly and never stopped into his 84th year. In his last waking moments he was so full of life, exhibiting mental agility, cracking jokes and befriending the ward staff at the hospital. We have been helped by the literally hundreds of messages, letters and cards of condolence from all over the country and the world. Messages recalling small acts of kindness, his friendship, help received by constituents, messages recalling support for campaigns and appreciation from those who felt a positive impact from the legislation he steered through parliament. Thank you from the family for your help in the healing process. In his living years my father helped and touched the lives of so many people. It is comforting to know of the esteem in which he was held and how well liked, regarded, respected and appreciated he was.

For us, his family, he was Alf, never Alfred, and certainly never referred to as The Right Honourable, The Lord Morris of Manchester AO QSO. He was dad, uncle Alf or grandad Alf: a brother, a father, an uncle and a grandfather.

There were qualities that underpinned his family and working life: the qualities of love, generosity, determination, strong will, pride, good humour, integrity, friendship, tenacity, conviction, kindness, loyalty and passion. His core values, beliefs and character were forged in his Manchester childhood and youth. An upbringing where the importance and strength of family was paramount and where he experienced poverty, inequality, disability and injustice at first hand. His heroes were his elder brothers and sisters who through guile, industry and ability, ensured the family survived in the harshest of economic environments. A family where each contributed what they could and took what they needed. He believed they and he were as good as anyone – but better than no-one. He accorded the same respect to both princes and paupers and everyone in between. He loved us, his family, mum, his children and grandchildren. Dad’s love for mum was full, rich and with a devotion that is rare and which endured for over sixty years. I witnessed his love; he told her he loved her almost every day and we always knew we were born out of a loving relationship.

He was proud of his heritage and background. He loved the city of Manchester and Wythenshawe, the buildings, the people, their humour, their wit, their resilience, but just one of their football teams.

He was a generous father who gave more to us than we could ever give back – proud of our accomplishments and able to give unqualified, unequivocal support when we found ourselves in difficult places. He was a man of conviction, whose support, once secured, was true, unflagging and timeless. When convinced of an argument or campaign he remained steadfast, and seldom wavered whether or not such a stance was popular. He was not afraid to go against the grain.

His knowledge of horseracing, which he did not publicise, was encyclopaedic. He could name every Derby and Grand National winner in the last 50 years, who rode them, and who trained them. This interest in racing was formed in his boyhood and supported by his quite incredible arithmetical skills. I understand that whilst still at primary school he could work out the return on a successful three penny bet, each way, treble odds, 100/30, 5 to 1 or 7/4 in his head. These arithmetical skills could occasionally apparently desert him when it came to tallying up scores. He was fiercely competitive and wanted to win in all sport from football

to bowls. Graham Gooch may believe he is the top English run scorer of all time. Well, not in our back garden. I am not alone in remembering dad only ever batting or bowling. We have no memory of him ever fielding. His determination in sport was mirrored in his working life. I believe he went to parliament to enact change, not to play politics, but to be a voice for those who could not be heard.

His loyalty to the Labour and Cooperative movement was never questioned and lasted a lifetime. He was of the class the party was built to support. Asked once whether he was 'New' or 'Old' Labour, he looked bemused, and responded "No, just Labour". That loyalty was extended to our family. His effect on us has been immense and our loss is great."