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In This
Issue

A Digest of Current Social Information

• ABUSE AND SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

• LEVESON

• AIDS

• POVERTY

• REMPLOY

• THE CARE CRISIS

• HOMELESSNESS

• EQUALITY ISSUES

• LORD FREUD

• SCOUTING FOR ATHEISTS

• COALITION HEALTH POLICY

• SAME-SEX MARRIAGE

• THE GUARDIAN'S CHRISTMAS APPEAL

• IS YOUR HOSPITAL FIT FOR THE FUTURE?

• WE HATE NO. 61: YOUTHISM

ABUSE AND SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

21 November: An interim report published by the Office of the Children's Commissioner for England, following an inquiry chaired by Sue Berelowitz, has found that sexual exploitation of a detestable kind is rampant. The media has focused on a number of high-profile cases involving Pakistani men and white British female victims, but the evidence shows that such crimes are far more widespread and that neither the perpetrators nor their victims belong disproportionately to any particular ethnic group. Thousands of children, mainly girls, and from as young as eleven, are being groomed, raped and abused year on year, with devastating results.

There is an acceptance that such activity goes largely undetected and that the recorded scale of such offences is likely to be 'the tip of the iceberg', with many victims too frightened to complain. Children in care or from dysfunctional families are at greatest risk, but the report makes clear that children from loving and secure homes have also been abused by gangs and groups.

Sue Berelowitz, the Deputy Children's Commissioner for England, herself writes in *The Guardian* that while each case is unique, all of them are stories "of sadness, of wanting to be loved and to belong, and then of experiencing horrific sexual violence, of being violated, raped and misused on a relentless basis and often for years." The inquiry discovered 2,409 confirmed victims over 14 months between August 2010 and October 2011, with 16,500 at severe risk of abuse. Berelowitz describes the report as "a wake-up call, providing proof that the sexual exploitation and objectification of children must be urgently addressed."

If you can take it, the report, I thought I was the only one. The only one in the world, is available at www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk

LEVESON

29 November: I was elated by Lord Justice Leveson's report, a light in the darkness on a really important issue; but disappointed by the Prime Minister's reservation doubting the need for underpinning legislation. For Leveson made it clear that the "essential" need for legal reinforcement could not be construed as statutory regulation. Rather, what is intended appears to be nothing more than legislation to ensure the integrity of the regulatory process: to audit its independence, integrity and effectiveness. A number of correspondents have come up with bright ideas for regulatory principles, but the priority must be to set up a regulatory body that is free of the influence of powerful press magnates and whose rulings have legal force. Without such enforcement the initiative is likely to go the way of



previous failures and subside like a house without foundations.

A recent YouGov poll found 79 per cent in favour of legislation to create an independent press regulator, with only 9 per cent opposed. If you believe that underpinning legislation is needed I would urge you to sign the HackedOff petition. It can be found at <http://hackinginquiry.org/news/sign-the-petition-implement-leveson-support-the-victims/>

ACQUIRED IMMUNE DEFICIENCY SYNDROME (AIDS)

1 December: It is World AIDS Day. Ann and I can justly claim to have been among the early prophets warning of the menace of HIV and the dangers ahead. In our *Sex Directory* (published in 1988, but written somewhat earlier) we saw “a major threat to human kind”, and devoted an entire chapter to explain its aetiology, incidence and potential spread, with a very frank analysis of the level of risk associated with various sexual activities, the availability of testing, and sources of help and advice.

In the UK not less than 30,000 people were then estimated to be carrying the virus. Today the Health Protection Agency reckons that, inclusive of both diagnosed and undiagnosed cases, the UK total has reached 96,000. This is partly because treatment is keeping more people alive for longer, but with 6,280 new diagnoses in 2011 there is no room for complacency.

Back in the 1980s we wrote of AIDS as an “international disease” and of “the growing concern over the sexual abuse of children [being] in the forefront of all our minds.” Nothing changes then. But I find it strange to read premonitions written years ago now substantiated. They were then intended to inform and guide others, but they return to us afresh as revelations.

POVERTY

The latest Family Spending survey from the Office of National Statistics shows (unsurprisingly) that spending is falling fastest among our poorest people. On average in 2011 the bottom 10 per cent of households spent £187.20 a week (down 9 per cent), while the figure for the top 10 per cent was £1,750, or over nine times more. *The Guardian* (19 November) contrasted the squeeze on incomes with a 32 per cent rise in the price of food.

This briefing does no pretend to be ‘in-depth’ on any subject, and poverty is no exception. May I therefore mention a recent book that studies the relationship between social exclusion, poverty, and the labour market in academic detail. The authors, Tracy Shildrick and Robert MacDonald, Professors of Sociology at Teeside University, have researched a study under the title *Poverty and Insecurity: Life in Low-Pay, No-Pay Britain*. It challenges myths about unemployed and poor people in the light of lived realities. While accepting that work may be the best route out of poverty, for many people trapped in a cycle of poorly remunerated jobs and unemployment it fails to solve recurrent poverty.

Shildrick comments that seven million working-age adults in the UK are living in extreme financial stress, despite being in employment and largely independent of state support. As a result, 2.2 million children live on the edge of, or in, poverty. She believes that the growing problem of in-work poverty – jobs paying so little that workers can never escape poverty – is gradually being recognised by policymakers, and hopes that the book will correct the myth of the welfare scrounger. The next step, she argues, is a welfare system that promises social security, not greater insecurity, opening up opportunities for better-paid and more lasting jobs.

Published by The Policy Press, Bristol University (www.policypress.co.uk), price £21.59.

REMPLOY

24 November: Despite promises that disabled people made redundant as a result of the closure of Remploy factories would be supported towards finding alternative work, it is reported that only a little over three per cent of them have so far found new jobs (35 out of 1,021). Now plans have been announced to shut down or transfer the remaining 18 factories. On 1 December I attended a disability meeting in Manchester organised by Liverpool-based TUC North West. The feeling among the disabled people I spoke to was that, notwithstanding the unprofitable balance sheet of Remploy, the closures were being driven by an unrealistic ideology, and that disabled workers, with little chance of finding work on the open market, were effectively being dumped on the scrap heap. But I also found that people there (including TUC representatives) didn’t know who was now the minister for disabled people - despite the proximity of her constituency.

THE CARE CRISIS

Allegations of poor care and lack of compassion are currently surfacing in parts of the NHS and some private care homes. While the government appears to be grasping the problem in respect of people with learning disabilities, the plight of many older people “warehoused” in hospitals is more intractable. It seems that there are two main factors: reductions in the number of NHS nurses, said to be in the region of 7,000, and a relentless growth in the number of older people needing intensive care. The situation is not unlike that of teachers with classes too large to allow children to receive individual, considerate attention. With more and more older people being kept alive longer, and the government demanding further efficiency savings of £20 billion by 2015, it looks as though the situation can only get worse. I don't have any solutions, but I think health secretary Hunt has an emergency on his hands. And it is no accident.

This view is reinforced by a recent report of the Care Quality Commission. Hospital inspections confirm that staffing shortfalls, especially those with appropriate skills, is a key reason why some patients are being denied respect and dignity, are not properly fed, and experience neglect of their care and welfare. One in six of 250 hospital services inspected in 2011/12 did not meet the CQC standard for having enough staff on duty to provide proper care. A similar lack of staff is also a significant issue in 23 per cent of nursing homes and 16 per cent of residential care homes.

Source: Denis Campbell, *Guardian*, 23 November.

HOMELESSNESS

5 November: A report by Edinburgh's Heriot-Watt University and the University of York finds that homelessness in England is continuing to rise, and contends that further benefit cuts are likely to have an even more dramatic impact. National rough sleeper numbers increased by over 23 per cent in the year to autumn 2011 (1,768 to 2,181). In particular, with a cap on housing benefit, parts of London are simply unaffordable for people reliant on welfare benefits, and there are indications that London councils are already placing people elsewhere, to locations as far removed as Cornwall and Newcastle. Happy Christmas everybody.

EQUALITY ISSUES

29 November: I reported in my last Briefing that the Equality and Human Rights Commission has come under attack. Now Lord Ouseley has weighed into the argument, reportedly saying that the EHRC has failed as an organisation, and that if it were to cease to exist most of the people it was created to support would not notice its disappearance. Ouseley, a former chair and chief executive of the Commission for Racial Equality (1993/2000) described the failure as a tragedy. The EHRC had failed the most vulnerable communities in our society, having no relevance to the lives of victims of discrimination. He felt, as I do, that the previous system of separate bodies dedicated to particular equality agendas [race, gender, disability] had been more effective in standing up for people's rights.

We cannot turn back the clock, but the signs are ominous that the EHRC, and to some extent the equality agenda, is ripe to be sacrificed.

Source (largely): Amelia Gentleman, *Guardian*, 29 November.

LORD FREUD

23 November: I have previously commented extensively on the philosophy of Lord Freud, the architect of welfare reform, first for Labour and now for the coalition. Today, in an interview with the parliamentary *House* magazine, he speaks for himself. He is reported as arguing that people on benefits are too comfortable not having to work for their income, able to have a lifestyle on the state; and that the benefits system is dreadful in that it discourages poor people from taking risks to seek a way out of their situation.

His diagnosis has some merit. Long term reliance on benefits can lead to dependency, a welfare blanket - albeit a thin one - to trap people into a miserable but safe existence, eroding their 'get up and go'. But the remedy - working for a living - is practicable only if there is a sufficiency of available jobs paying a living wage, and of employers willing to take on these people, some faint-hearted, some genuinely impaired. Right now that is virtually impossible, and attempts to cure the malaise can prove extremely both expensive and ineffective.

A *Guardian* analysis (28 November) found that only one in 28 of people referred to the government's welfare-to-work programme have been found a job lasting for at least six months. In the 14 months to July of

this year none of 18 Work Programme contractors (15 of whom are private companies) succeeded in meeting the very modest government target of getting 5.5 per cent of unemployed people referred to the scheme into a job lasting half a year. And this despite a spend of £435 million so far.

Some critics have suggested that the limited success rate may well have been achieved without intervention.

Source (first paragraph): Juliette Jowit, *Guardian*, 23 November; (third paragraph) Randeep Ramesh, *Guardian* 28 November.

SCOUTING FOR ATHEISTS

4 December: In my last Briefing (no.52, December 2012) I mentioned the experience of George Pratt, denied admission to the Scouts because he felt unable to swear allegiance to God. Now there are signs of change. The Scout Association and Guide Association are consulting support among their members for an alternative non-religious promise. With a big increase in the number of people completing census forms as being of 'no religion' this is timely.

HEALTH POLICY UNDER THE COALITION GOVERNMENT

28 November: Among a wealth of information, The King's Fund today published its assessment of coalition health policy, finding that the NHS "is entering a period of significant risk which could jeopardise progress made over the past decade."

It concludes that NHS performance is continuing to hold up well, but that under unprecedented financial pressure cracks are beginning to appear, with Accident and Emergency waiting times rising and more hospitals experiencing financial difficulties. The impact of major organisational changes and the loss of experienced managers leave the service in a precarious position.

Ann Dixon, the Fund's Director of Policy, comments that the NHS is continuing to perform well, but there are treacherous waters ahead, with huge risks, particularly in ensuring that quality of care does not suffer with the further financial squeeze.

Chris Ham, the Fund's Chief Executive, in a related blog, stresses that the government must implement overdue service changes and new models of care at a scale and pace never seen before. "Failure to do so will inevitably result in more organisations finding themselves in deficit and the quality of care being compromised. It is on these issues that the public will assess the government's record on the NHS at the next election."

For the full report go to press releases at www.kingsfund.org.uk, which links to *Health Policy under the Coalition Government* (but see the Care Quality Commission's report above and the piece on Dr Foster's *Health Guide* below)

SAME-SEX MARRIAGE

I have been thinking around this issue. The 'Church', as usual, appears to be divided, but there will be significant numbers of various communions who hold on to the traditional view that marriage is properly something confined to a union of a man and a woman. The Church of England, in particular, seems obsessive in linking marriage to procreation; indeed to the concept of a sexual union in which the partners become 'one flesh'. Thus, as I understand it, a marriage which is not consummated is not seen as a marriage at all. It is decidedly odd that well-meaning religious leaders should predicate marriage on sexual intercourse, the most volatile element of personal relationships and, through adultery, the *primum mobile* of discord and, ultimately, divorce.

The linking of marriage with procreation raises a number of questions. Does this traditional view mean that a marriage between hetero-sexual partners who simply don't want children is invalid? And given that sexual attraction frequently abates with time, does the 'one flesh' doctrine imply that, even in theological terms, marriage has a 'best before' date? So that there is no longer a true marriage if hetero-sexual couples remain together, still loving each other but without an ongoing sexual relationship, because they don't want one, or have gone off sex, or are past it? Is a man/woman relationship based only on friendship, compatibility in shared interests, and commitment not worthy of being categorised as marriage? If the answer is to bless a loving relationship on any terms, then it is difficult to see why the union of partners of the same sex should be any different.

CHARITIES SELECTED FOR THE GUARDIAN'S CHRISTMAS APPEAL

1 December: Difference and equality were named as the grounding themes of the Guardian and Observer 2012 Christmas appeal. Editor Alan Rusbridger points out that one in every two adults with a disability is unemployed. Welfare reform, along with cuts to social care, will make it harder for many disabled youngsters and adults actively to participate in society. Hate crime against disabled people has increased. The clear risk, says Rusbridger, is that people with a disability or long-term illness become socially marginalised, their talents wasted. The eight chosen charities are:

- Oily Cart theatre company
- Ambitious about Autism
- Greenbank (Liverpool) Sports Academy
- Queen Elizabeth's Foundation for Disabled People
- The Ace Centre
- Disability Law Service
- Basic Needs, focusing on Africa and Asia
- Sense International.

When you receive this Briefing the appeal will be over, but you may wish to note these organisations for future reference.

IS YOUR HOSPITAL FIT FOR THE FUTURE?

3 December: Reinforcement of some of the above concerns arrived with the publication of Dr Foster's highly respected *Hospital Guide 2012*. Briefly it finds that hospitals are under increasing pressure from a rising tide of emergency admissions, particularly among frail, elderly patients. Dr Foster's analysis showed that the average mid-week occupancy in the NHS is 88 per cent, and that for most of the year most NHS hospitals experience rates above 90 per cent. The most acute hospitals are often working at 95-100 per cent capacity. Shortages of free beds impacts on the provision of safe, effective care.

One factor is that the number of acute and general beds has decreased by a third over the past 25 years, but today's problems are less about a shortage of beds, but more that they are occupied by people who would be better cared for elsewhere. The admission of frail, elderly people and dementia cases is a particular concern. The Guide points to a continuing lack of integration with social care and community services.

Of special concern is a finding of wide variations in hospital mortality rates. 12 trusts did poorly on two out of four mortality measures.

The full report can be accessed at www.drfoosterhealth.co.uk

WE HATE NO. 61: YOUTHISM

"It is an illusion that youth is happy, an illusion of those who have lost it."

W. Somerset Maugham: 'Of Human Bondage' (1915)

The Equality Act refers to a number of protected characteristics, one of which is age. This, I submit, is normally thought of as old age: the protection of older people from discriminatory, unequal treatment. But in many ways elderly people enjoy *beneficial* discrimination: a protected state pension, concessionary travel, free prescriptions, free television licences, winter fuel allowances, and at the end the solace of a home, hospital or hospice until, if lucky, we finally pass blissfully out of this world to oblivion, leaving others to lament or rejoice. Rather, I argue, it is young people at the dawn of adult life who bear the brunt of punitive discrimination and who are getting a raw deal.

Let me begin with the oft-repeated objection to tuition fees. Instead of encouraging our young people into higher education, those who in many cases have themselves escaped tuition fees and have enjoyed financial support through university have ruled that students must in future (but not retrospectively) pay their way, mostly trebling the contributions introduced under Labour. Admittedly, nothing has to be paid up front, but the reality is that as soon as the young graduate is able to find work at a prescribed level of remuneration he or she must begin to pay back tuition fees. Thus just when they are starting out in the world of work as inchoate fledglings, already faced with impossibly high rents, young graduates are saddled with an extra, huge debt.

Of course, this is not the only financial hardship faced by students in further and higher education.

The Pound in Your Pocket, a report from the National Union of Students (www.poundinyourpocket.org.uk) demonstrates that many students are struggling to make ends meet. Ordinary living costs are rising relentlessly: expensive course-related charges, accommodation and travel expenses and basic day-to-day bills for food and clothing are such that students from poor families, lacking parental support, are driven into debt. The report laments the abolition of the Education Maintenance Allowance and argues that financial support “is systematically inadequate”. Financial pressures inevitably affect concentration on studies and imperil the will of students to stay the course. Liam Burns, the NUS President, and Peter Mercer, Vice-President (Welfare), conclude that the system is one “that confounds itself by requiring students at all levels to pay ever more for their education without ensuring they have the means to benefit properly from that education”; a system “in desperate need of change”.

Those who eventually graduate then face a new struggle: to find work. For this has become the latest discrimination, a malaise that casts a shadow across the board at all levels of educational attainment. Despite a small but encouraging recent reduction in the number of young people unemployed (1.1 per cent down in the quarter to December), some 1,341,000 of those aged 16-24 are currently without work, some 18.5 per cent of the youth population. This compares to the overall rate of unemployment at 7.8 per cent. Young graduates, despite their qualifications, are no exception; they commonly cannot find a job, and even those young people who are in work are mostly at the bottom of the income ladder.

I cannot resist the temptation here to quote from William Cobbett’s *Advice to Young Men and (incidentally) Young Women, in the Middle and Higher Ranks of Life* (1829). The author’s deserved reputation is that of an arch radical, but here he is very much the traditionalist: indeed his remarks on work are scarcely distinguishable from those of Iain Duncan Smith in our own day:

“Start, I beseech you, with a conviction firmly fixed on your mind, that you have *no right* to live in this world; that, being of hale body and sound mind, you have no right to any earthly existence, without doing work of some sort or other, unless you have ample fortune whereon to live clear of debt; and, that even in that case, you have no right to breed children to be kept by others, or to be exposed to the chance of being so kept. Start with this conviction thoroughly implanted on your mind. To wish to live on the labour of others is, besides the folly of it, to contemplate a *fraud* at the least, and, under certain circumstances, to mediate oppression and robbery.”

What has changed, of course, is the opportunity to find such work. The natural yearning is to flee the nest of the parental home, but this has become inordinately difficult. Thousands who have to resort to a life on benefits fall prey to anxiety and depression, even to suicide. Unless supported by wealthy parents, the prospect of raising the deposit to buy a home of their own is a distant fantasy; the average age of being able to do so now about 37! Rents are rising inexorably, especially in London, and recourse to squatting in residential buildings has been criminalised. More and more young people are likely to swell the ranks of the homeless.

Even the Bertie Woosters of our society, able to afford a car, are faced with staggering insurance premiums. It is a principle of insurance that the many pay to cover the misfortunes of a few. But this ground rule is overlaid by relating individual premiums to perceived risk. And the perception, based on statistical evidence, is that young men are dangerous drivers. This may well be an accurate assessment, but the inevitable consequence seems to be one of class discrimination, a tarring of young people with the same pessimistic brush. It appears that one pays through the nose simply for being young, and the discrimination seems likely to be compounded by putting women drivers on an equal footing. Do correct me if I am wrong.

It has always been tough to be young, to be starting on the adult journey. But there are exceptions. Doing well are the offspring of wealthy parents, young footballers on huge salaries, elite sportspeople made famous through the Olympic and Paralympic Games, and juvenile entrepreneurs with a talent for making money. Like cream in blue top milk they rise to the top. My concern relates to the great mass of young people who lie beneath those who are gifted and successful. Right down at the bottom, to press the analogy, are young people whose lives have curdled: young men with no qualifications and no sense of purpose, who join gangs, carry knives and head for trouble, always living on the edge of riot; young women who are exploited, abused and drawn into prostitution. They present specific social problems. Then there are those young people who seek a way out through military service: opting to keep the nation’s peace by making war. It is seen as gallant, but all too often, alas, they can finish even worse off.

Mostly, however, young people lie between the extremes. Their plight isn’t helped by the fact that generally the temptations of love beckon before sagacity kicks in. They need help, lacking opportunity rather

than direction, and deserve better of us. A quip, attributed to Oscar Wilde, that “youth is wasted on the young” is cynical nonsense. The reality is that just now we are letting down a whole generation.

Derek Kinrade