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LOOKING FORWARD TO AN UNHAPPY NEW YEAR?

- The Met Office predicts that we can probably anticipate even more extreme weather. Indeed it may become the norm.
- Predicted growth in 2012 has been trimmed by the Office of Budget Responsibility from 2.8 per cent to 0.1 per cent. And its expectation for 2013 is a feeble 1.2 per cent.
- Start of a three year 'squeeze' on certain working-age benefits, limiting increases to 1% a year. An official assessment has confirmed that our poorest households will be hardest hit by this draconian legislation. A sign of the times is that the number of children and pregnant women being housed in dismal bed and breakfast accommodation is already rising: by 60 per cent in the first quarter of 2012 compared to the same period in 2011.
- £500 a week benefits cap postponed until summer 2013 – meanwhile to be tested in Bromley, Croydon, Enfield and Haringey.
- Doubts are surfacing about the timely introduction of Universal Credit.
- According to an NHS report 24% of men and 26% of women in England are classed as obese – nearly double the figures for 1993 and rising.
- Under the Universal Jobmatch Scheme jobseeker's allowance claimants will have to use a job search website from early 2013. They will lose benefit if found not to be seeking work.
- From April 2013 housing benefit will be cut if claimants have spare rooms – 14% for one extra; 25% for two or more extra.
- More cuts in local authority funding, spread unevenly across the country, draconian in some places, inevitably further reducing local support services. At least 57 English councils plan to introduce minimum Council Tax payments from working-age households currently exempt.
- "Soaring" demand for help from the Disability Law Service, as social service budgets are cut back.
- Older people account for 70% of hospital bed days – a figure set to rise if nothing is done.
- Rail fares rises above inflation for the tenth consecutive year.
- Couples will begin to lose Child Benefit if either of them has an income above £50,000. But if neither enjoys such an income they may keep their benefit intact if their joint income is below £100,000. Amazing!!!
- A continued decline in university applications, thought to be a consequence of increased tuition fees, is likely. There was a

decrease of more than six per cent in the year to 17 December 2012.

- Following the failure of Jessops and HMV further retail casualties can be expected.

STATISTICAL GAMES

2 January: The DWP claims that over the past five years private sector pay rose by an average of 12%, against an increase of 20% in many working-age benefits. This comparison is intended to justify the pruning of some future benefit increases to a miserly 1%. But such an analysis depends on the period chosen. Labour has responded that if taken over the past ten years, average wages rose by 36%, compared to an increase in, say, jobseeker's allowance of 32%.

The greater reality is that state benefits have never been generous, pitched at subsistence levels that scarcely cover crisis expenditure, and subjected to stringent conditions. To provide adequate support to those who satisfy those conditions it must be right that up-rating should reflect inflation. If such increases should ever exceed those in private sector pay the problem is not with benefits, but with remuneration in the private sector. There, average pay levels are greatly affected by large numbers of low-paid workers, with earnings at or only slightly above the national minimum wage. Taking the five years 2008 to 2012, the statutory minimum has risen by only 8% for those aged 21 or above, 4.4% for 18/20s, and 4.24% for under-18s, an average of 5.8%!

If there is a genuine anomaly it is surely that of the Working Tax Credit, which tops up low pay. Here the state is bailing out employers who are failing to pay their workers a living wage. I hope my MP (Harriet Harman) will correct me if I'm wrong.

FEEDBACK

Responding to my piece on same-sex marriage (Briefing no.53) **Chris Bazeley** has sent an e.mail received from a friend:

"It all makes sense now.

Gay marriage and marijuana being legalised on the same day.

Leviticus 20.13 – 'If a man lays with another man he should be stoned'.

We've just been interpreting it incorrectly all these years."

John Vincent has e.mailed:

"Many thanks - not "over-negative", I think, but picking up on a number of important topics. I liked your comments on same-sex marriage - pity others aren't as sensible!!"

Philip Wark likewise:

"As usual a thoroughly entertaining and thought provoking epistle. In particular, I loved the pieces on same sex marriage and youth. Keep up the good work."

From **Peter Salter**:

"All pretty depressing. Current coalition with people like Pickles in charge, and now Westminster will hit you if you do not go to weight loss clinics. No action on abusive tax avoidance. The £20million from Starbucks is a condescending gesture.

I saw the Parliament channel today - a November hearing about BBC and its workforce. Over 6,000 people on self-employed contracts. HMRC says it has a confidentiality responsibility towards the BBC and won't tell the MPs much. Just ridiculous. The confidentiality is towards taxpayers, not the BBC. Complete inertia.

But what's the alternative? Ed Balls wants to borrow more and spend more. He advised people not to pay off their credit card bills. What's with Labour and borrowing? They will also try and resurrect ID cards in some form."

From **Lindy Williams** (former co-chair, with Ann, of the Green Party):

"We always like receiving the News Briefings and find them both informative and thought-provoking. Very best wishes."

From **Frank Adams**:

“As usual I enjoyed reading your latest briefing (53). The thought that comes to me every December is the press and other media, including radio and television. make a point of ‘celebrating’ December 1st as Worlds AIDS Day. Yet December 3rd International Day of Disabled People passes without a mention. Is this because society is more concerned about the possibility of being infected by HIV, than acquiring a physical, sensory or mental disability? Keep up your excellent work.”

From **Richard Lansdown**

“Two thoughts. Well, one thought and one question:

The Remploy closures seem similar to the reduction in Special Schools. I am not arguing for the status having remained quo, many children do better in mainstream, but I am wary of action based on ideology rather than practical considerations. I have seen too many children with disabilities who are lost in big schools.

The question is to wonder what you think about Labour’s proposal to create jobs. I have long held that the old Soviet idea of having no unemployment by over-employing in some areas had merit, but so far I have found few who agree with me.”

AN OVERVIEW OF SEXUAL OFFENDING IN ENGLAND AND WALES

You may have thought that these two countries had renounced barbarism. Think again. This joint statistical bulletin from the Ministry of Justice, Home Office and Office for National Statistics lifts the lid on a very dubious culture. It brings together, for the first time, a range of official statistics from across the crime and criminal justice system; and is structured to highlight the victim experience; the police role in recording and detecting crimes; how the various criminal justice agencies deal with an offender once identified; and the criminal histories of sex offenders.

The statistics are shocking. In summary, it is estimated that, on average, 404,000 females and 72,000 males had been the victim of a sexual offence (including attempts) in the previous twelve months. These figures span all sexual offences. Those for the victims of the ‘most serious’ offences (rape or sexual assault) were, on average per year, 85,000 females and 12,000 males.

In the Crime Survey of England and Wales, around one in every 20 females, aged 16 to 59, reported being a victim of a ‘most serious’ sexual offence since reaching the age of 16. Extending this to include other sexual offences such as sexual threats, unwanted touching or indecent exposure, took the incidence to one in five.

Around 90 per cent of victims of the ‘most serious’ sexual offences knew the offender. When asked, as to the most recent offence, whether they had reported the incident to the police, only 15 per cent of such victims, for a variety of reasons, said they had done so.

Full details at www.justice.gov.uk/statistics/criminal-justice/sexual-offending-statistics. I could not reconcile the number of male offenders (72,000) with the stated percentage (0.4).

JUDICIAL REVIEW SOUGHT OVER ATOS INTERVIEW

14 December: It is reported in *The Guardian*, that Patrick Lynch, represented by Public Interest Lawyers, and supported by False Economy (falseeconomy.org.uk) has launched a legal action to seek a judicial review of a work capability assessment interview administered by the private company Atos on behalf of the DWP. His action is based on a failure to record the interview. When first assessed, Lynch, a former social care worker, was found ‘fit for work’ despite having previously undergone major brain surgery. That decision was eventually reviewed and Lynch was given £100 by way of compensation. But at a reassessment interview in 2012, having asked for the interview to be recorded, he was told that “no recording equipment was available”. It is reported that 11 recording machines, some faulty, are shared between 123 assessment centres.

This action reflects wider concern about the assessment process and its findings. It will be one to watch.

False Economy presents a case that government cuts are unfair and won’t help the economy.

ARE TV PROGRAMMES BEING DUMBED DOWN?

Over the festive season a number of friends commented that despite widening choice the standard of television fare is in decline. This is genuinely a social issue. For many people TV is an antidote to loneliness,

not to mention even more widely a potential source of enlightenment. This is particularly true over the Christmas season. Tired repeats and second-rate old films are simply not good enough.

I have come to compare TV with panning for gold. One must discard a huge amount of dross and debris to find precious nuggets. And on those terms there were a few golden moments. I welcomed Rossini's Cenerentola (Cinderella), but that was a personal choice based on the fact that it was this opera (and on record Conchita Supervia's singing) that first attracted me to such treasure. Less esoterically, I would single out Michael Portillo's *Great Continental Railway Journeys*, the next best thing to a real touring holiday, superbly presented. And more recently *Africa*, fronted by the irrepressible David Attenborough, but, as he would be the first to concede, a wondrous team effort. We were given, in advance, a copy of the companion book, and one of the highlights of our Christmas was Ann's delight in sharing the photographs with our guests and reading aloud for the best part of an hour from the accompanying text!

Then there were some repeats that have stood the test of time: *Fawlty Towers* and *Porridge* still entertain (unlike the current *Miranda* series). Of course, everyone will have their own definition of gold, but I stand by my contention that it was in short supply.

BRITISH LIVER TRUST CALLS FOR EARLY SCREENING

In her annual report on the state of the nation's health, Professor Dame Sally Davies, Chief Medical Officer for England, has highlighted a shocking rise in deaths related to chronic liver disease and cirrhosis. While rates in most of the rest of Europe have fallen, those in England have increased significantly; by roughly 20 per cent in people under 65 over the decade 2000-2009. There are three main causes for liver disease: obesity, alcohol abuse and undiagnosed hepatitis infection. The figures indicate a need for investment in prevention, early diagnosis and effective treatment.

Responding to the report, Andrew Langford, CEO of the British Liver Disease Trust, said that the government needed to get the NHS to be more proactive, with doctors asking patients more questions about their lifestyle and offering a simple test for liver function.

SOCIAL CARE

In the coalition's mid-term review, rose-tinted though not in a rose garden, there was a promise of a long-awaited response to the vexed question of a cap on the costs to be met by individuals needing care.

According to Kate Connolly (*Guardian*, 27 December), Germany's response to the problem of caring for its elderly and sick people is increasingly to rehouse them in cheaper accommodation in Eastern Europe and Asia.

THE YOKES OF YOUTH

Interesting, though coincidental, that my piece on 'youthism' has been followed by The Prince's Trust *Youth Index 2013*, reporting that, based on 2,136 interviews, one in ten young people feel unable to cope with day-to-day life, and that the incidence of this sense of inadequacy is more than doubled in the case of those not in employment, education or training (NEETS), who are also less likely to have someone to talk to about their problems while growing up.

27 per cent of interviewees in work feel down or depressed 'always' or 'often', but this goes up to 48 per cent among NEETS.

Richard Parish, CEO of The Royal Society of Public Health, said: "With recent record-breaking youth unemployment, the work of charities like The Prince's Trust with vulnerable young people is more critical than ever."

Full details at www.princes-trust.org.uk

ASSISTED DYING

The late Tony Nicklinson's family has been given the right to appeal against the ruling that any change in the law on assisted dying is a matter for Parliament.

UNDIAGNOSED DEMENTIA

14 January: New figures released by the Alzheimer's Society reveal wide variations in how many people are receiving a diagnosis of dementia in the UK, and a large overall shortfall in basic diagnosis. Estimated rates range from 31.6 per cent in the East Riding of Yorkshire to 75.5 per cent in Belfast. Aggregated, the

rate of formal diagnosis is reckoned to be 46 per cent, with another 428,000 people (54 per cent) thought to be living with the condition but not diagnosed. Health Minister Jeremy Hunt has said "I have committed to making this a year of dementia awareness...I want local areas to set ambitious targets for improved dementia diagnosis."

Further details at www.alzheimers.org.uk/site/scripts/news_article.php?newsID=1463. There is a map highlighting the figures for different parts of the UK. In London, for example, 69,849 patients have been diagnosed, with 38,689 undiagnosed.

PRESSURE GROWS ON CITIZENS ADVICE

Gillian Guy, CEO of Citizens Advice, is reported as wanting to see universal credit work, but fears that if it does not go to plan CABs will face an upsurge in the present annual 2.2 million cases of people with benefit problems. There are already grounds for concern. In the last quarter there were more than 100,000 inquiries about Employment Support Allowance, a rise of 76 per cent. Around a fifth of these related to appeals against Atos work capability assessments. Guy says that Atos mistakes have cost the taxpayer £60 million over the past year.

A particular concern in the case of universal credit is the transition from weekly to monthly payments. Already 67 per cent of benefits claimants sometimes run out of money before the next payment. For 34 per cent this happens most of the time. What will be the consequence of having to manage over a month? This is a problem that even as things stand brings bailiffs to the door or pushes people into the snare of moneylenders.

And how will the millions who have never used the internet or lack computer skill cope with an online system?

Source: *Society Guardian*, 28 November 2012.

THE LOW COMMISSION ON THE FUTURE OF ADVICE AND LEGAL SUPPORT

Launched on the 4th of December 2012 and chaired by an old friend, Lord (Colin) Low, this commission will seek to develop a strategy for access to advice and support on social welfare law in England and Wales. It plans to hold a consultation on its primary recommendations in September 2013 and to publish its final report in December.

The initiative has been prompted by changes to the scope of legal aid and cuts in central and local authority funding which threaten existing services, precisely when demand is escalating. [I am tempted to say when social security is being replaced by social insecurity]. The commission aims to develop a strategy that:

- meets the need for the public, particularly poor and marginalised people, to have access to good quality, independent legal advice
- is informed by an analysis of the impact of funding changes and by an assessment of what can realistically be delivered and supported in future
- influence the thinking and manifestos of the political parties in the run-up to the next general election.

Evidence can be submitted through the commission's website: www.lowcommission.org.uk. Its secretariat is based at the offices of the Legal Action Group, 242 Pentonville Road, London N1 9UN.

SEEKING CARE

The Social Care Institute for Excellence has introduced a new website: www.findmegoodcare.co.uk, to help people find care and support to suit their needs and lifestyle. It has information and guidance on how to choose and pay for care, home and residential care providers, legal issues, support in your own home and what to do if things go wrong.

DIRECTGOV

This invaluable website has been replaced by www.gov.uk. The new site also includes information previously provided by Businesslink.

HMV

Reports on HMV's troubles trace the company's history only to 1921, when the Oxford Street store was opened by Sir Edward Elgar. But it is much older than that. In London, as The Gramophone Company, it began in April 1898, opening a recording studio at 31 Maiden Lane later that year. This became The Gramophone and Typewriter Company (G&T), selling gramophones, typewriters and records. The typewriter business did not succeed, and in 1908 the company reverted to its original name. The first records of that period (Gramophone Monarch and Gramophone Concert), with the angel trademark, are known to collectors as 'pre-dogs'.

Francis Barrault's original painting of Nipper, listening to a phonograph, had first been offered to the Edison Bell company, but was turned down. Barrault substituted a gramophone and the famous revised picture was acquired by William Barry Owen for The Gramophone Company. It appeared on record labels in 1908/9. The trading name of His Master's Voice was adopted in 1910.

The early history is a rich one. The agents of G&T, notably Fred Gaisberg, were assiduous and travelled widely to record the great singers, actors and instrumentalists of their day – and many not so great. Their most famous coup was the recording of the young Caruso in 1902. His disc of 'Vesti la giubba' is said to have been the first record to sell a million copies. But there were many other great names: Sobinov, Boronat, Neshdanova, De Lucia, Kurz, Melba, Patti, Tetrzzini, Battistini, Chaliapin, Kubelik, Bernhardt and many more. A remarkable listing was provided by Roberto Bauer in *Historical Records: 1898 – 1908/9 (1947)*. Nipper himself died in 1895, but he has been reproduced on thousands of collectable artefacts, none more loved than the recorded treasury. HMV went on to be one of the leading sources and providers of recordings, particularly of classical music and celebrated artists. A great deal of its heritage has been reissued in modern formats. Nowadays, no doubt, much of it can be downloaded from one's computer. But, to my mind such ephemeral listening is no substitute for the precious originals. And if the creative force of HMV has altogether been extinguished it is a sad day.



INTRODUCTION OF THE PERSONAL INDEPENDENCE PAYMENT (PIP)

A phased programme for the introduction of PIP for new claimants will begin in certain areas in April 2013, and will be extended across the rest of the UK in June 2013. People who have previously received Disability Living Allowance (DLA) will begin to be reassessed from October 2013. Existing DLA recipients will be kept informed by letter, but further information is available at www.dwp.gov.uk. The new allowance has different eligibility rules, and some existing DLA claimants, even if PIP is awarded, may lose their entitlement under the Motability scheme. Age UK has produced a factsheet on PIP (phone 0800 169 6565 or download at www.ageuk.org.uk).

LIVERPOOL CARE PATHWAY

I commented on this end-of-life treatment in *Briefing* no.52. Since then, Martin Brunet, a GP, has made an impassioned defence of the LCP as "a compassionate, carefully written document which helps doctors, patients and their families to make the right decisions near the end of life." He points out that the involvement of relatives is enshrined within the very fabric of the Pathway. "Where relatives have felt excluded, we need to ask why doctors were not using the LCP properly, not to attack the pathway itself."

Brunel's informed comments against what he calls a "powerfully destructive campaign" appeared in *The Guardian* on 7 November.

OFT NEWS

The Office of Fair Trading has published the findings of a review on the energy efficiency sector that found instances of poor practice towards consumers such as the use of high pressure sales techniques,

unclear information about paperwork and cancellation rights, and poor quality installations. The OFT has written to over 50 of the leading installers of double glazing, insulation and solar panels, asking them to ensure they are providing consistently good standards to consumers. As part of its initiative to raise compliance standards across the energy efficiency sector the OFT has launched an Energy Efficiency 'Wise-up' campaign. This includes producing guidance for consumers and businesses on buying and selling energy efficiency products.

Eight supermarkets (Aldi, Co-op, Lidl, Marks and Spencer, Morrisons, Sainsbury's, Tesco and Waitrose) have agreed to a set of OFT principles to address concerns over special offers and promotions for food and drink. The principles clarify the OFT's view on how promotional claims should be used so that consumers can rely on them being fair and meaningful.

The OFT has issued a set of principles for businesses using continuous payment authorities (CPAs) amid concerns that customers are not always being made aware of what they are signing up to and may be misled about their rights to cancel. CPAs are often used to collect renewal payments for things like vehicle breakdown services, insurance policies, gym memberships, online dating, mobile and broadband services or magazine subscriptions.

STRANGE DISHARMONY OF CONTRASTS

It is difficult for the person in the street to comprehend how unemployment is falling when the news is full of business failures and associated job losses. Are the new jobs real jobs? Similarly it is puzzling that the famous deficit is said to have been reduced by 25 per cent when the government is having to borrow more to bridge the gap between tax receipts and expenditure. I have said before that an increase in our income tax rates for middle and upper earners is overdue, and it is heartening to read that Dr Mark Porter, the new head of the British Medical Association, appears to take a similar view. Far better than squeezing those already on the breadline.

EVEN BRIEFER

The government has agreed to give the new Financial Conduct Authority powers to limit the interest rates on payday loans, which as things stand can be as high as 1,700 per cent. This will be the subject of an amendment to the Financial Services Bill.

Source: *The Guardian*, 29 November 2012.

The Social Care Association, which represented staff working in the rehabilitation and social care sector, has had to close down. Former members will be transferred to a Rehabilitation Workers Professional Network, a special interest group within VISION 2020 UK.

Source: *NB*, December 2012.

Four new guides to help commissioners plan and deliver high quality mental health services have been produced by the Joint Commissioning Panel for Mental Health. They can be downloaded from the website of the Royal College of General Practitioners (www.rcgp.org.uk).

A new edition of the National Trust's Access Guide can be requested, as usual, by e.mail to enquiries@nationaltrust.org.uk or 'phone to 01793 817634.

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

Source: *NB*, November 2012.

The Secretary of State for Health, Jeremy Hunt, has accepted that the standard of care in some NHS hospitals and care homes has been less than satisfactory. But there is a widespread view that pressure to save £20 billion by 2015 is contributing to these problems. In a recent *Guardian* survey almost half of respondents said that this financial restraint was affecting patient safety and almost two thirds thought it was diluting the quality of care.

The Relatives and Residents Association (R&RA) is asking people to sign up to an online petition calling for change in the inspection regime of care homes. Go to www.relres.org/our-petition/. The petition closes on 24 April 2013.

WE HATE NO 62: POLITICIANS

"A good politician is quite as unthinkable as an honest burglar."

H.L.Mencken: *Minority Report* (1956)

"Politics and the fate of mankind are shaped by men without ideals and without greatness. Men who have greatness within them don't go in for politics."

Albert Camus: *Notebooks* (1962)

Having written a biography of a great parliamentarian (Alf 'needs before means' Morris) and being blessed in Peckham with a superb MP, I am not sure that I can claim to hate politicians – certainly not all of them. Yet it is clear that many people do, equating them alongside estate agents in their disapproval rating. Radio 5Live recently ran a phone-in on the subject, unleashing a tirade of enmity. "You just don't trust them," said one caller. In particular, the expenses scandal and a number of high profile misdemeanours weighed heavily in the scales against them. MPs were seen as very full of themselves, deaf to constituents' views, and motivated by self-interest in terms of both power and money. Two persistent themes were that they were prepared to bend the truth and rarely had any experience of the real world of work.

Prime Minister's Questions were widely seen as a public exhibition of bad manners, aggression, insults, jingoism, evasion, bluster, shouting and point scoring, presided over by a Speaker whose role is little more than that of a referee. It is seen as being played out as a game, with fouls, own goals and a prevailing interest in winning.

Juliette Jowit, reporting Gloria de Piero's efforts to discover why "everyone" hates politicians (*Guardian*, 1 January), added to the chorus. Having talked to various groups, de Piero found that MPs were seen as a class apart, insulated from the ordinary world of their constituents. And mistrust had escalated. She noticed that the latest Social Attitudes survey, conducted after every general election since 1987, had asked people how much they trusted the government to place the needs of the nation above the interests of their own party. When the survey began, 47 per cent of people believed the government of the day would do this; by 2010 that figure had fallen to 20 per cent. One person told de Piero that it was because of "the way you do politics".

The hatred can be vitriolic. I found one comment on the internet which described politicians as "boring, liars, sneaky and/or dogmatic." Such criticisms, of course, are generalisations, yet it is how people feel. The common man/woman does not readily accept that politicians can be simultaneously self-serving while genuinely concerned to make Britain a better place, determined to do something useful with their lives, or that many of them could make more money in the business world were they not driven by a sense of civic duty. Rather they see MPs as well-off, detached from the penury endured by many of their constituents.

But my view is that the sense of detachment is long-standing and relates less to individuals, more to a system that is democratic only in name. Fundamentally, parliamentary business is adversarial: a clash of ideologies. Exponents on opposing sides will all claim to have the national interest at heart, but in practice they are conditioned by adherence to a party line, which from their own distinctive perspectives they project as synonymous with the national interest. There is very little scope in the Commons for independence of mind. The views and interests of constituents seem pretty much a side issue. They appear to come into play only in the avoidance of policies, no matter how sensible and appropriate to the national interest, seen as likely to lose their party votes or disturb party unity. Right now government is widely and I think rightly perceived as a throwback to a ruling class, concerned to protect its own interests.

The masquerade begins with the choice of prospective parliamentary candidates. At this stage the contenders will be expected to demonstrate commitment to their party's ideals, together with certain facilities: to impress, to speak convincingly, to be able to win hearts and minds. Some of these primaries are now open to the public, but the process of selection itself remains exclusive. At a general election these characteristics will be put to the test. But more important is the efficiency of the party machine to persuade enough potential voters to support their chosen individuals. Voters, in turn, if involved at all, tend to be predisposed to choose the candidate most likely to support their own interests.

It is likely, given recent trends, that turnouts will not be large: in 2010 the UK average was 65.1 per cent, falling as low as 45.7 per cent in one constituency, (compared to an average of nearly 84 per cent sixty years earlier). This is not necessarily because the electorate is apathetic, rather that it is disillusioned. There is a wide gap between social classes in the system, those most disadvantaged being less likely to vote. According to the Electoral Reform Society, in 2010 two thirds of successful candidates won with less than half the votes cast; none did so with the support of a majority of electors. And across the parties the result has also been an under representation of women and ethnic minorities.

When the successful candidate joins the cut and thrust of adversarial politics, new personal qualities will tend to emerge (I do not here aim at any particular party): the arts of spin, of blame, of ignoring public and professional opinion. Where issues are contentious, then, apart from work in committees, attitudes stiffen and become doctrinaire. There is little time or appetite for reasoned debate towards consensus. Divisions are for the most part foregone conclusions, and genuine analysis is left to the more thoughtful media.

Into the mix, and crucial to it, are curious ministerial arrangements, which allocate departments of state and their opposition 'shadows' to members who often have little previous experience of their remit. Yet from day one, on the government side, they are thrust into positions of authority. Such appointments, both real and shadow, are eagerly sought. They confer a place on the 'front benches', most visible at PMQs. Now that we have television coverage, the populace at large can see the smirks, gestures, disdain, rancour and sophistry that characterise the conduct of some of those involved in these exchanges and their supporters. There is a perception of arrogance and elitism, particularly on the government side. Appearance on either front bench confers status, but trust and respect can be lost in inverse proportion, distancing Parliament still further from the people it supposedly represents.

The Hansard Society's press release for its ninth *Audit of Political Engagement* is headed "Disgruntled, disillusioned and disengaged. New Hansard Society research shows people turning away from national politics." Only 42 per cent of respondents said they were interested in politics, down 16 points to the lowest level in the audit series. Those 'certain to vote' also fell – at 48 per cent – to the lowest level ever recorded in the audits, whereas a depressing 30 per cent said they were 'unlikely' or 'absolutely certain not' to vote (up 10 points). This increased negativity appeared to be strongly linked to public attitudes to the current coalition, with only 24 per cent thinking that the system of government works reasonably well. None of this can be dismissed as a general lack of public interest. Knowledge levels remain stable at 40 per cent, and 66 per cent acknowledge the crucial part that Parliament plays. But only 49 per cent agree that the issues debated and decided in Parliament are relevant to their own lives. Even fewer – 38 per cent – believe that the government is held to account by Parliament, while only 30 per cent agree that Parliament encourages public involvement in politics. In particular, the concept of the Big Society has not taken off: a minority of the people surveyed actually want to be involved in local or national decision making, and over the past two years there has been a striking decline in the proportion – at 21 per cent - of the public undertaking voluntary work.

Small wonder on this evidence that the collective 'we' hate politicians. Nor does it help to see reports that a majority of MPs believe they should have a pay rise, seeking an average increase of 32 per cent, taking salaries to £86,250. Surely it can't happen.

Derek Kinrade