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by encouraging better information provision

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THE HORSEMEAT SCANDAL

As someone who no longer eats meat I am a simply an observer of the present chaos. I merely wish to comment that the headlong rush to scale down regulation has been a fundamental mistake. Nor is it safe to rely on self-regulation. On the whole, regulations have been introduced for a valid purpose and to see them as simply an obstacle to business is to court disaster. This is the message of the misadventure at Mid Staffs Hospital, the calamity at Winterbourne House, and now the embarrassment of horse being sold as beef. The meat appears to have been esculent, but wrongly described. But regulation has to be effective. I see that it is now alleged that DEFRA was told of concerns back in 2011.

The latest mess prompted me to look more closely at the labelling of cat food. On the brands I give our Tom the retail suppliers are careful to front their products only as “*with*” beef (or whatever – my italics), and on the back, in smaller type, they make it clear that the food contains “meat and animal derivatives” (not specified, no mention of horse) with a small percentage (usually around 4%) of the relevant meat that is boldly highlighted on the front of the packaging. Nothing wrong there then. My cat doesn’t have a laboratory, but is nevertheless invariably discerning as to quality.

How would it be if we adopted a similar system for ‘value’ burgers, lasagne, et al!?

ARE WE ON THE RIGHT TRACK?

President Obama’s inauguration speech was exceptional for its content: rooted in the creed of America’s founding fathers: that all of us are created equal, endowed with certain unalienable rights, among which are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. I was particularly impressed by his contention that “a great nation must care for the vulnerable, and protect its people from life’s worst hazards and misfortune”. He asserted that, today, America’s people still believe that “every citizen deserves a basic measure of security and dignity” and that “no matter how responsibly we live our lives, any one of us, at any time, may face a job loss, or a sudden illness, or a home swept away in a terrible storm.” Therefore, “the commitments we make to each other – through Medicare, and Medicaid, and Social Security – do not sap our initiative; they strengthen us. They do not make us a nation of takers; they free us to take the risks that make this country great.”

I was reminded of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man*, written by Lafayette with the help of Thomas Jefferson, and approved by France’s National Assembly on 26 August 1789. This too declared the “unalienable



and sacred rights of man”, beginning with an article that said “Men are born and remain free and equal in rights. Social distinctions may be founded only upon the general good.”

I also went back to William Beveridge’s *Full Employment in a Free Society* (1944), the introduction to which makes it clear that the plan set out in his previous report, *Social Insurance and Allied Services* (1942) was aimed at “freedom from Want”. He defined ‘want’ as “lack of income to obtain the means of healthy subsistence – adequate food, shelter, clothing and fuel”. Beveridge was nevertheless unequivocally in favour of work. His plan for Social Security assumed that employment would be maintained, and mass unemployment prevented. This was wanted for its own sake and not simply to make his Social Security plan work more easily. He linked this with “freedom from idleness”, which he saw as “a positive separate evil from which men do not escape from having an income.”

I refer to these historic principles because, faced with significant unemployment and some measure of idleness, our present government has strayed from these cherished ideals; in response to the economic downturn it is now more concerned to reduce the welfare budget than to alleviate want and misfortune. Limiting the annual up-rating of some working-age benefits to 1 per cent (with inflation running at close to 3 per cent) is particularly punitive, as John McDonnell MP graphically spelled out in a Commons debate on 13 February. This targeting of the poor, alongside the indulgence of wealthy citizens, is creating a most unequal society. As Ann Darnbrough wrote in 2007: “In this country we are proud of our NHS and the financial safety net provided by the state. But we must be vigilant to protect benefits that provide basic support for the majority of our community. Yes, of course, some people will take advantage of the system, use the cash to lounge around and simply not bother to find a job. But that is a price we have to pay for the greater good.”

But most of all I go back to the vision of Thomas Paine. The latest newsletter of the Thomas Paine Society has an interesting report (by Barb Jacobson) on an international conference at Iona College, New Rochelle, USA. It includes the following salient comment:

Lewis Lapham’s keynote speech at the end of the first day was received very well by all, whatever their political leaning. He inveighed against the emptiness of current political discourse, dominated as it is by a press and politicians controlled by the current financial oligarchy. Paine’s vision of governance by the people has slipped into ‘a privilege reserved for the country’s equestrian classes, aka the 20 per cent of the population that holds 93 per cent of the wealth, the happy few who run the corporations and the banks, own and operate the news and entertainment media, compose the laws and govern the universities, control the philanthropic foundations, the policy institutes, the casinos, and the sports arenas’ ‘We live in a Gilded age even more swinish than that of the 1890s,’ he said, and quoted Mark Twain’s aphorism that ‘a society consisting of the sum of its vanity and greed is not a society at all but a state of war.’

There is a stark choice for government: demoralise and ruin the lives of those at the lower reaches of our society, or increase taxation on those who are wealthy and will experience only minor discomfort and inconvenience. (I was interested to read (in *The Gramophone*, May 1943), that when this country was under its greatest threat the government levied a purchase tax rate of 100 per cent on so-called ‘luxury’ items!)

ANOTHER ANTHEM

Oscar Pistorius
Demeanour dolourious
Shooting most curious
Was it foreseen?

THE GREAT DISABILITY SCAM?

28 January: Panorama BBC1 TV. The thrust of this disturbing programme (though it came as no surprise) was to draw attention to defects in the assessment of people as ‘fit for work’ and considerable concern as to whether those assigned to the Work Programme who are ‘hard to place’ are receiving adequate support. It reinforced doubts as to the merits of the current approach.

The private contractor Atos also came under massive criticism in a Commons debate on 17 January (see Parliament website). And in February the Public Accounts Committee published a critical report on the output statistics of the Work Programme, introduced by the Department of Work and Pensions in June 2011 and estimated to cost between £3 and £5 billion over five years (www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201213/cmselect/cmpubacc/936/93602.htm). The programme’s performance over its first 14 months

“fell well short of the Department’s expectations”. Only 3.6 per cent of claimants on the programme moved off benefit and into sustained employment, less than a third of the Department’s expectation and well below its own estimate of what would have happened if no Work Programme had been running at all. The performance of the 18 providers attempting to help claimants into employment was variable and not one had met their contractual targets. The shortfall in achievement was greatest for those claimants considered ‘hardest to help’ including, in particular, claimants with disabilities, leading to a suspicion of a culture of ‘creaming’ (concentrating on those most likely to gain employment [and attract payments]) and ‘parking’ (setting aside and being unmindful of difficult cases).

I could say more but the whole subject is being considered by a Select Committee which is to report in April.

CHANGES TO BENEFITS: YOUR QUESTIONS ANSWERED

John Vincent’s superb network e.newsletter draws attention to an update from Carers UK on how carers will be affected by changes to benefits: go to www.carersuk.org/help-and-advice/focus-on/item/2479-welfare-reform-your-questions-answered.

THE FUTURE FOR DISABLED PEOPLE

The Spinal Injuries Association has published a manifesto for the years 2013-15, which has relevance to a far wider range of disabled people. In an introduction, Baroness Masham, President and Founder of SIA, points out that the political landscape has changed dramatically since the previous manifesto in 2009. People with spinal cord injuries face the same social and environmental barriers, but the global recession and the sweeping reforms of the new government have added considerable further challenges. As budgets are cut across both national and local government, the support and services on which spinal cord injured people rely to live independently are increasingly failing to meet their needs. As the government pursues its localisation agenda it will become even more important for SIA to support spinal cord injured people to take action at local level and challenge their local authorities, health services or any other body that seeks to reduce services for disabled people.

The Manifesto is based on the UN Convention on the Rights of Disabled People, and extends to:

- access free of discrimination to health and rehabilitation services;
- an equal right to live independently in the community with full inclusion and participation and choices equal to others;
- the right to gain a living by freely chosen or accepted work on an equal basis with others, in a labour market and work environment that is open, inclusive and accessible;
- access, on an equal basis with other, to the physical environment, transport, information and communications (including IT), and other facilities and services open or provided to the public, both in urban and rural areas.

SIA can be contacted at SIA House, 2 Trueman Place, Oldbrook, Milton Keynes MK6 2HH; email: sia@spinal.co.uk; telephone; 0845 678 6633; freephone advice line: 0800 980 0501.

UNIVERSAL CREDIT: HALF A MILLION WILL SUFFER

Universally admired Tanni Grey-Thompson, now a baroness, has led an inquiry which estimates that almost 500,000 disabled people and their families will be worse off under Universal Credit. The inquiry, uniting the Children’s Society, Citizens Advice and Disability Rights UK, urges a government rethink.

“The findings of this report do not make easy reading,” said the athletic star. “The clear message is that many households with disabled people are already struggling to keep their heads above water. Reducing support for families with disabled children, disabled people who are living alone, families with young carers, and disabled people in work, risks driving many over the edge in future.”

The report warns that:

- 100,000 households with children could have their incomes reduced by up to £28 a week;
- One in ten families with disabled children affected by the changes fear losing their homes;
- 83 per cent of disabled adults living alone or with a young carer feel they would have to cut back on food, and 80 per cent on heating.

Condensed from All Together Now!, December/January 2013, which also carries a blast from Sir Bert

Massie, which looks forward to “so many having hopes shattered”.

This is not the message proclaimed by Secretary of State, Iain Duncan Smith. In a speech at Westminster’s Abbey Centre back in June last year he said: “For some people, such as those with severe disabilities, income from the state will always play a vital role – and this government has promised to protect the most vulnerable.”

The Guardian of 20 February carried an article by Ian Clark reminding Iain Duncan Smith that not everyone is on the internet and that making the universal credit system available only online will cut off many of those in greatest need, particularly those on low incomes. He argues that “The economic impact of the digital divide is a serious and very real concern. It seems that Iain Duncan Smith and the Conservative party either do not understand that their plans exclude many thousands or they do not care”. See also **THE DIGITAL DIVIDE** below.

ASSISTED DYING

Of all the subjects I cover, this is the one about which I feel most passionate. The latest issue of *Campaign*, the journal of Dignity in Dying, is full of hope for change. Prue Leith, who has become the organisation’s newest patron, is interviewed. She talks about her brother David’s grim demise from cancer. The NHS was not at fault for his death, but “spectacularly failed to manage his pain”. She concludes: “The present state of affairs is monstrous. With 80 per cent of the population in favour of assisted dying, what are they waiting for?”

Two new recruits to Dignity’s Board are the former MP Rob Hayward and the publisher Cameron Brown, both intent on a change in the law.

A mass lobby of Parliament in July 2012 will be followed this year by a Private Members’ Bill on assisted dying, to be tabled by Lord Falconer in the House of Lords, following the Queen’s Speech. It is difficult, but not impossible, for such bills to reach the statute book. My mind obviously goes back to the landmark Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons’ Act, and there have been other notable successes.

Campaign also reminds us that two newly appointed health ministers, Anna Soubry and Norman Lamb, have spoken out in favour of assisted dying. And a wide-ranging international review of research by Bangor University, taking account of the views of over 62,000 people, found that people from very different backgrounds and experience share similar views, with a majority in favour of assisted dying. This was backed up by a poll in November 2012, showing strong support for a change in the law and a majority in favour of ‘right to die’ legislation across 12 European countries.

Meanwhile, terminally ill British people, wishing to die but denied assistance to do so in this country, and having the means, have continued to resort to the help of Dignitas in Switzerland. The latest figures reveal 217 British deaths there.

But perhaps the most interesting news is that in France, following a government commissioned report, President Hollande has said that he will bring a bill on assisted dying before the French Parliament in June.

IS FOUNDATION TRUST STATUS A GOOD IDEA?

I have been reading the report of the inquiry, chaired by Robert Francis QC, into the failings at Mid Staffs hospital. Many factors contributed to the appalling lapses in the quality of care, but it is apparent that at the root of the disaster was the Trust’s drive for foundation trust (FT) status. A previous inquiry had found that management’s thinking was over dominated by “achieving FT status to the detriment of quality of care”. Again and again Francis confirms this finding.

On page 42 Francis finds that the process of assessing the Trust’s application for FT status largely focused on financial and governance rather than quality issues. In turn the Strategic Health Authority and other bodies concerned with the assessment process leading to the Minister giving his support had not provided him with adequate information.

On page 45 Francis finds that the Trust prioritised its finances and its FT application over its quality of care, and failed to put patients at the centre of its work.

On page 50 Francis finds, in relation to the Trust’s application for FT status, that the Strategic Health Authority did not offer information to the Department of Health about a series of concerns arising in relation to the quality of services at the Trust, of which it was, or should have been, aware. Its approach, doubtless driven by the focus of the process as a whole on financial and corporate governance and not clinical

standards, was to be supportive and focus on a goal of advancing the Trust as a successful applicant as an end in itself.

On page 52 Francis finds that there is no doubt that an elaborate regulatory assessment of the nature required by the National Health Service Act 2006 ought to have brought deficiencies to light, and its failure to do so calls into question the effectiveness of the FT regulatory system as a whole.

Francis goes on from page 69 to examine the factors that led to the recommendation and “erroneous authorisation” of the Trust’s status. This much is clear. What appears to be missing is a down-to-earth explanation of what lay behind the Trust’s – and perhaps other Trusts’ – enthusiasm for FT status. Could it be that in removing the Trust from the Secretary of State’s sphere of accountability and control, and achieving greater autonomy, there was an opportunity to bump up management pay? Is this what Francis means by financial and governance issues? Are we looking at old-fashioned greed? It would be good to know.

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION

Did you realise that private health companies running NHS services under contract are not covered by the Freedom of Information Act? Grahame Morris, the Member of Parliament for Easington, is seeking support for an Early Day Motion calling for “all private healthcare companies to be subject to freedom of information requests under the terms of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 in the same way as existing NHS public sector organisations”. The aim is to secure a level playing field. As things stand, Morris argues, private companies can “hide behind a cloak of commercial confidentiality, as billions of pounds in taxpayers’ money are awarded to them in barely transparent contracts”.

Based on *CILIPUpdate*, February 2013.

HEALTH INFORMATION

According to a study carried out by London South Bank University, 43 per cent of 16 to 65-year-olds struggle to understand everyday medical information and instructions. The figure rises to 61 per cent when maths skills are needed.

From *CILIPUpdate*, January 2013.

THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

Figures released during the sixth annual ‘Get Online’ week, claimed that another 50,000 people had been prompted to log on to the internet for the first time. But there are still an estimated 7.8 million people in the UK who are not online, half of whom have a disability. A further 15.5 million ‘lapsed’ or ‘little’ users still lack the basic skills needed to make the best use of the technology.

More at www.ukonlinecentres.com

THE LIVERPOOL CARE PATHWAY

I have previously referred to this programme, the subject of some questionable media reporting. Now a concise and definitive explanation, *Behind the Controversy*, has been provided by Davina Hehir in the winter issue of *Campaign*, the journal of Dignity in Dying.

Contact: 181 Oxford Street, London W1D 2JT; tel: 020 7479 7730; e.mail: info@dignityindying.org.uk; website: www.dignityindying.org.uk

RELEASING GOVERNMENT RECORDS

Measures under the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010 have been brought into effect so that government records can be made public after 20 rather than 30 years. The change will be spread over the next ten years.

From *CILIPUpdate*, February 2013.

But, as I understand it, this greater transparency will not extend to records relating to the royal family.

SAME-SEX MARRIAGE

‘Why not?’ I asked in *Briefing* no 52 (January 2013). Now a first step towards equality has been taken on a free vote in the Commons. But is there not a paradox here in that gay partners want to marry precisely when divorce in hetero-sexual marriages has become commonplace and the census has revealed that, for the first time, married and civilly partnered couples now make up less than half (47 per cent) of all our

households?

TEACHING CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

The Institute of Education, a leading centre for education studies, has found that pupils with the most acute special educational needs (SEN) spend too much time – over a quarter of their week – away from their class, teacher and peers. Rob Webster and Professor Peter Blatchford conclude that this means that both their education and social development suffer. This is because much of the responsibility for SEN children is devolved to teaching assistants rather than teachers.

These findings, says the Institute, are timely, as they come as the government publishes its draft Children and Families Bill, which includes a proposal to replace SEN statements with wider Education and Health Care Plans.

More at www.ioe.ac.uk/

SMOKESCREEN?

Focus on European issues brings at least three political benefits: for the Conservatives it serves to divert public attention from current fiscal failings and placates its Eurosceptics; for the LibDems an opportunity to show themselves as distinctive from their Tory partners, while continuing to enjoy the bounty of coalition.

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMITTEE SLAMS ATOS AND DWP

8 February: The Public Accounts Committee has published a report on the Department of Work and Pension's contract management of medical services. Its chair, Rt.Hon. Margaret Hodge MP, released a statement as follows:

“The Department for Work and Pensions is getting far too many decisions wrong on claimants' ability to work. This is at considerable cost to the taxpayer and can create misery and hardship to the claimants themselves.

This poor decision making is damaging public confidence and generating a lot of criticism of the Department's contractor for medical assessments, Atos Healthcare – but most of the problems lie firmly within the DWP.

The Department's view that appeals against decisions are an inherent part of the process is unduly complacent. Nearly 40 per cent of appeals are successful, with a third of those successful appeals involving no new evidence.

The Work Capability Assessment process hits the most vulnerable claimants hardest. The one size fits all approach fails to account adequately for mental health conditions or those which are rare or fluctuating. While the Department has started to improve, the process is still too inflexible and too often is so stressful for applicants that their health simply gets worse.

A key problem is that the Department has been unable to create a competitive market for medical assessment providers, leaving Atos in the position of being a near monopoly supplier.

The Department is too often just accepting what Atos tells it. It seems reluctant to challenge the contractor. It has failed to withhold payment for poor performance and rarely checked that it is being correctly charged. The Department also cannot explain how the profits being made by Atos reflect the limited risk that it bears.

There needs to be a substantial shake-up in how the Department manages this contract and in its processes for improving the quality of decision making.”

Margaret Hodge was speaking as the Committee published its 23rd Report of this Session which, on the basis of evidence from Citizens Advice, Disability UK and the Department for Work and Pensions, examined the contract management of medical services.

The full text of the report is available at: www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201213/cmselect/cmpubacc/744/74405.htm. The following summary is taken from the parliament website.

The Department for Work and Pensions (the Department) relies on medical assessments to help its decision makers reach an appropriate decision on a claimant's entitlement to a range of benefits. Work Capability Assessments are used to assess new applications for Employment and Support Allowance and to reassess existing recipients of Incapacity Benefit. This is damaging public confidence and generating much criticism of ATOS, but most of the problems lie firmly within the DWP. The Department has outsourced this

work since 1998 and in 2011-12 paid its contractor, Atos Healthcare, £112.4 million to carry out 738,000 assessments. From April 2013, a new medical assessment will be introduced for the Personal Independence Payment.

The Work Capability Assessment process is designed to support a fair and objective decision by the Department about whether a claimant is fit for work, but in far too many cases the Department is getting these decisions wrong at considerable cost to both the taxpayer and the claimant. The Department's decisions were overturned in 38% of appeals, casting doubt on the accuracy of its decision-making.

Poor decision-making causes claimants considerable distress, and the position appears to be getting worse, with Citizens Advice reporting an 83% increase in the number of people asking for support on appeals in the last year alone. We found the Department to be unduly complacent about the number of decisions upheld by the tribunal and believe that the Department should ensure that its processes are delivering accurate decision-making and minimising distress to claimants.

The Work Capability Assessment process has a disproportionate impact on the most vulnerable claimants. The standardised "tick-box" approach fails to adequately account for rare, variable or mental health conditions and this can lead to greater inaccuracies in decision-making for these particular claimant groups. We welcome the efforts made to improve the process and encourage the Department to continue to review the operation of the work capability assessment for vulnerable groups.

The Department does not know the full cost of the overall decision-making process. Its processes have financial effects across government, for example, in the National Health Service, and high levels of appeals increase the Department's own administrative costs yet it has not assessed the overall cost to the taxpayer. Without this information the Department will be unable to assess the value for money of its decision-making processes.

The Department is currently dependent on one supplier to undertake all medical assessments. In the 14 years since the service was outsourced, the Department has never awarded the contract to a new supplier; it has only ever changed hands due to a company takeover. The inability of the Department to develop a competitive market for medical assessment providers has left it vulnerable, with limited leverage to remedy poor performance.

The Department is not using all the mechanisms it has at its disposal to manage the contract for medical assessments effectively. We saw no evidence that the Department was applying sufficient rigour or challenge to ATOS given the vulnerability of many of its clients, the size of the contracts and its role as a near monopoly supplier. We are concerned that the profitability of the contract may be disproportionate to the limited risks which the contractor bears.

The Department's evidence was not always consistent with the views expressed by our other witnesses. We heard different interpretations of statistics such as the proportion of successful appeals, the accuracy of decision-making and on whether overall contract performance is improving.

As a result the Committee was unable to arrive at a clear conclusion about whether the overall performance is improving and we recommend that the National Audit Office should provide a further report focussing on up-to-date performance data.

PRISONS

Strange that the idea of super-prisons, rubbished by the Conservative party in general and David Cameron in particular while in opposition, is now being strenuously contemplated by the present justice secretary.

GOOD FOULS

I was taken aback to hear Robbie Savage on Radio5Live refer to "a good foul" during a football debate. This, as I understand it, is where a player deliberately breaks the rules for the benefit of the team while willing to accept the penalty: sometimes called a 'professional' foul. Where is this going, and how can it be reconciled to ethical standards in other sports? I recall a snooker player owning up to inadvertently touching a ball when no-one had noticed, and a golfer honestly declaring that mistakenly he had more than the permitted number of clubs in his bag. If we follow Savage's concept, the idea of 'playing the game' takes on a whole new meaning.

57 VARIETIES

With 57 MPs the LibDems seem to me to have something of an affinity with Heinz products. Not only do they speak with different voices, but much of what they try to do turns out to be hot air.

UNEMPLOYMENT

In *News Briefing* no.54 (Strange Disharmony of Contrasts) I pondered on the apparent mismatch between job losses resulting from high profile business failures and the reported rise in employment. I asked whether the new jobs were real jobs. Early in February, the usually reticent BBC (Radio 5Live Investigates) suggested one possibility. It had been told that some advisers in 10 of the commissioned work programme agencies had been telling clients that they would be better off representing themselves as self-employed and claiming working tax credit. They might, it had been suggested, sell things on e.bay and do a bit of ironing. The possibility, it appeared, was that they might thus be accepted as having been found work, a success which, if it lasted six months, could entitle the agency to a bonus from the 'payment by results' scheme. I thought the evidence presented was rather thin, but troubling.

Of similar concern was an article carried by *The Guardian* on 16 January to the effect that more than a fifth of 510,000 jobs claimed to have been created in the past year related to people, largely unpaid, on government work schemes, including tens of thousands still claiming jobseeker's allowance. Shiv Malik and James Ball based their article on Office of National Statistics figures, and say they include unpaid workers doing voluntary and mandatory work experience in supermarkets and charity shops. And that many more tens of thousands with no jobs, training or pay, who attend job-hunt workshops as part of a DWP programme are also counted as employed. They have always been so counted, but last year their numbers increased dramatically.

FEEDBACK

Richard Lansdown writes in response to my asking whether TV was being dumbed down:

I get very cross when people say there is nothing but rubbish on television. Is Panorama rubbish? Are the news broadcasts on various channels rubbish? OK, to declare an interest: my son makes television documentaries. To test my theory that there is plenty of high quality on the main channels (BBC One, Two, Three and Four, ITV and Channel Four) I looked at what I might have watched just last Saturday and Sunday: Dads' Army: a repeat but still well worth watching. The Story of Music. The Natural World. Tennis from Australia. Prisoner no A26188. The Wonders of Life. Profile of Dave Brubeck. That added up to ten and a half hours.

One really does not have to look very far.

Lindy Williams writes about 'One Billion Rising'

I heard about this organisation on Channel 4 news this evening (8 February). On Thursday 14th February there are to be demonstrations throughout the world to draw attention to, and call for an end to violence against women. This is particularly timely in relation to the much-publicised case in India a few weeks ago and now an equally brutal case in South Africa. But these are the ones we know about: in some parts of the world such events are routine. You can see the Channel 4 news interview here: <http://www.channel4.com/news/thandie-newton-violence-against-women-is-a-pandemic>

Here is the website. Please pass this information on to any friends and colleagues who may be interested (but please don't include my email address, because of increased risk of viruses: it is not that I mind people having my address): <http://www.onebillionrising.org/pages/about-one-billion-rising>

EASY NEWS

Easy News is said to be the first newspaper specifically designed to be accessible for people with learning disabilities. It will be published every two months and will be available in print and online. An audio version will also be available on CD and online. The initiative is a response to a finding that for every ten people with learning disabilities, five never read newspapers and three of those who do find them hard to understand. To sign up for an online or print copy please e.mail easynews@unitedresponse.org.uk.

More at www.unitedresponse.org.uk.

ALL ABOUT DRUGS

The Who Cares? Trust produces guidance for young people in care, their carers and social workers. Its

latest offering is *Who Cares? about drugs*. As well as providing information about the drugs scene, it gives a list of relevant organisations, helplines and useful websites for further support and information. Price (single copy) £4.75; discounts for orders of 10 or more.

From Kemp House, 152-160 City Road, London EC1V 2NP; tel: 020 7251 3117; e.mail: mailbox@thewhocarestrust.org.uk

LIBRARIANS

There are now more volunteers working in the UK's public libraries than professional staff, according to a recent survey from the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy.

From *CILIP Update*, January 2013.

CONSUMER ADVICE FROM THE OFFICE OF FAIR TRADING

The OFT has developed two short consumer advice sheets: one for homebuyers and a separate one for home sellers. They provide:

- an overview of some of the consumer protection law with which estate agents must comply
- advice on what buyers and sellers can do to make the process run smoothly
- details on where to go for further help.

The advice sheets can be downloaded from the OFT website: www.offt.gov.uk/OFTwork/estate-agents/consumer-advice-sheets.

RETIREMENT HOMES TRANSFER FEES

The Office of Fair Trading has updated details of progress of its investigation of these transfer fees. However, the OFT points out that its work is ongoing and intentions could change.

Go to: www.offt.gov.uk/OFTwork/consumer-enforcement/consumer-enforcement-current/retirement-homes/

THE CONSEQUENCES OF ECONOMIC PLAN A

Even if I wanted to be impartial, it would be difficult to be so in the present political climate. So stark and pervasive is the impact of current social reforms and those to come that it is impossible not to take sides. The extent of 'blue water' between the main political parties has become nothing short of a flood. The consequences of an obsessive focus on cost-saving as an absolute priority, though not yet universally acknowledged, are depressingly evident on every side.

Let me begin with the UK's suicide rate. ONS figures for 2011, released in January, showed a rise of 7.8 per cent on 2010 (a rise of 437 to 6,045).

Then consider homelessness. Accurate statistics are notoriously difficult to compute, but taking only the number of people accepted as homeless after applying for assistance, the total for 2011 was over 14 per cent up on 2010 (a rise of 6,120 to 48,510). The increase in households accepted as homeless after having their homes repossessed was even larger at 44 per cent. But these figures exclude large numbers of people displaced from their homes and living with friends, in hostels or on the streets. Rough sleeping is on the rise. And these are not simply statistics. They are people – people who die early and are far more likely than the rest of us to be the victims of violence.

Another indicator of mounting destitution is the number of people unable to pay their water bills. Although water is still the one utility service which cannot be cut off, this does not extinguish the customer's liability. Major debt advisers, notably Citizens Advice, report increasing numbers of people seeking help with this problem. The number of those accepted onto the government-backed Watersure tariffs was reported to have risen by 38 per cent from 2010 levels, and 2.4 million households are now said to be in difficulty, prompting a recent announcement that water companies will be allowed to reduce bills for their most vulnerable customers. [But this is just tinkering at the edges and fails to address the fundamental reasons for poverty].

A particular consequence of austerity is hunger. I have previously referred to the increasing reliance on food banks. There are also signs that the number of people, especially asylum seekers, stealing food is rising. *The Guardian* (26 January) reports that charities and police are saying that, as living costs rise and incomes shrink, 'stealing to eat' is becoming more prevalent, particularly in deprived areas. Dependence on

food banks has also hugely increased.

I need also to refer to an affliction to come. A new analysis by Gingerbread and The Children's Society finds that "more than a quarter of a million (265,000) young or disabled single parents, already almost twice as likely to live in poverty, will have their support dramatically cut under universal credit reforms". The report, *Single parents and the Universal Credit: singled out?*, reveals that they could lose "hundreds, or even thousands, of pounds a year".

Finally, let me further reflect on the effects of austerity in the slashing of local authority funding. According to the Local Government Association councils have borne the brunt of cuts in public spending. That brunt has been intensified by the fact that the retrenchment has not been equally applied across England and Wales. A *Guardian* analysis (14 November) found that the abatements had been "targeted towards deprived areas" with average cuts of £160 per head, whereas councils "least affected...largely in the well-heeled south" lost only an average of £16 a head. This inequality of dispensation has been exacerbated by the trend towards 'localisation', allowing councils to pass on impoverishment in different ways according to their particular choice of priorities. Thus in various parts of the country we are witnessing the loss of services seen by some local authorities as frivolous and disposable, particularly libraries and the arts.

I paint a bleak picture, by no means comprehensive, yet austerity has only just begun. And it isn't producing growth. We have had our AAA credit rating downgraded by one agency, but a more important question is whether this is really the kind of a country that the populace at large would wish to create?

EQUALITY TAKES A HIT

In *Briefing* January 2013 (no.53) I remarked that there were ominous signs that the Equality and Human Rights Commission, and to some extent the equality agenda, was ripe to be sacrificed. And lo, the contraction has come to pass. The heady days when Bert Massey and his Disability Rights Commission fought a dedicated campaign to secure disabled people's rights are a distant memory. The EHRC has moved physically to less prestigious accommodation with a budget trimmed to £17m a year, roughly a quarter of when it was questionably created in 2007. The governing body has also been slimmed down, and its staff more than halved from the original strength. It is difficult not to think that, having failed to inspire, the objective is now to pay lip service to equality rather than fight for it. After all, one doesn't want rights getting in the way of business prosperity.

READING WELL, BOOKS ON PRESCRIPTION

This encouraging project, tested in Warwickshire (*Briefing* no.52, December 2012), is now being rolled out across England's libraries and GP practices. The scheme is based on a Welsh initiative, the brainchild of Professor Neil Frude. Essentially it rests on research showing that well-chosen self-help reading can play a positive part in treating mental health problems.

An inspiring, well-referenced article on the wider therapeutic benefits of reading appeared in *CILIPUpdate*, December 2012.

For the evidence base, go to <http://readingagency.org.uk/adults/impact/research/reading-well-books-on-prescription-scheme-evidence-base.htm>

CHURCH FOR ATHEISTS

In my personal assault on belief in God (*Briefing*, no.52, December 2012) I tempered my views with the thought that atheists miss out on community. I was therefore heartened to read of an atheist gathering in a former Islington church where the pews are full and rocking (*Guardian*, 4 February). But disappointed that Andrew Copson, chief executive of the British Humanist Association, was sceptical of the enterprise, recalling that a wave of atheist churches were formed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which came to nothing. He concedes, however, that there is now a strong entertainment element. Even if our 'God' is no more than a moral imperative, any congregation is surely to be welcomed.

RESEARCH TO PREVENT THE ONSET OF ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE

Halting the onset of Alzheimer's disease is the aim of a major new two-year trial.

The ground-breaking study signals a move away from treating the symptoms of Alzheimer's to stopping the symptoms occurring in the first place.

With a long list of failed attempts at finding a cure for Alzheimer's, much interest is now being placed

on preventive measures for this memory-robbing condition affecting 19 million people worldwide.

There have been only three drug approvals for Alzheimer's in over 100 attempts since 1998 and there remains an enormous unmet need in the treatment of the disease as the medication currently on the market provides only a moderate improvement in a patient's functionality.

If successful, the research at Washington University School of medicine could lead to a big breakthrough in the approach to treatment. But experts are warning that there are significant obstacles to be overcome if the study is not to result in simply another false dawn for Alzheimer's treatment.

The landmark Dominantly Inherited Alzheimer's Network (DIAN) study involves a head-to-head comparison of various Alzheimer drug candidates on 160 individuals with inherited gene mutations that typically lead to early disease onset.

From *All Together Now!*, December/January 2013.

WHEELCHAIR DANCING

The Wheelchair Dance Sport Association wants to build up its work by co-operating with organisations to develop and promote the sport within local communities. The Association offers support and training to help train individuals to become instructors. This can be aimed at enabling children to become more involved in the sport within a school or community environment, through workshops or regional and local competitions. Membership is available both to those who want to compete or help the sport to grow.

More at www.wdsauk.co.uk, or e.mail: patrick@wdsauk.co.uk; tel: 0300 111 3045

DEMENTIA FRIENDS: A VOLUNTEERING OPPORTUNITY

There are approaching 700,000 people with dementia in England, of whom around 62 per cent have Alzheimer's Disease. The condition mostly (but not exclusively) affects older people. Those aged over 84 are said to have a one-in-six chance of developing the disease.

A national initiative funded by government and run by the Alzheimer's Society is seeking to recruit one million volunteers to improve understanding of dementia and its effects and provide support in their communities. They can be involved either as 'friends' or 'champions'. Friends learn a little more about what it's like to live with dementia, and then to turn that understanding into action. Champions encourage others to make a positive difference to people living with dementia.

Volunteers, who become part of a growing network, receive training and ongoing support as they need it.

More at www.dementiafriends.org.uk; the Alzheimer's Society has a helpline at 0300 222 1122

WE HATE NO. 63: HOLIDAYS

"Englishmen detest a siesta."

Noel Coward: song 'Mad Dogs and Englishmen'

"A highways agency warning said anyone travelling in icy conditions should take a shovel, blankets, sleeping bag, extra clothing, including a scarf, hat, gloves, 24-hour supply of food and drink, de-icer, rock salt, torch, tow rope, petrol can, first aid kit and jump leads...I looked a right prat on the bus this morning."

Chris Bazeley

I was somewhat ambiguous in expressing my thoughts on idleness in 'We Hate' no.47 (November 2011). Since then I have received wiser counsel (thank you Ruth), to emphasise that indolence must be measured in relation to the questionable worth of industry. The work ethic is not without its defects: notably that a great deal of work serves no valuable purpose. I have also been assailed by a right-wing attack on our so-called 'something for nothing' culture: an unmitigated evil to be rooted out so that everyone of working age who can remotely be said to be fit must be forced into work – or at least pushed into mandatory, unpaid 'work experience', or into relentlessly seeking work – even if there is an insufficiency of work and too few employers willing to take on our society's misfits.

Work can be at its best fulfilling (or, as Iain Duncan Smith puts it, "transformational"), but as I have said before it can also be dull, grinding and monotonous: a system endured only to earn a living. It is in this negative context that holidays have come to be regarded as generally a good thing: a brief antidote to the misery of toil. Criticism of holidays is rare. I have had to turn to the novelist George Gissing (1857-1903), in a letter of May 1892 to his sister, for an alternative perspective:

“It is Bank Holiday today, and the streets are overcrowded with swarms of people. Never is so clearly to be seen the vulgarity of the people as at these holiday times. Their notion of a holiday is to rush in crowds to some sweltering place, such as the Crystal Palace, and there sit and drink and quarrel themselves into stupidity. Miserable children are lugged about, yelling at the top of their voices, and beaten because they yell. Troops of hideous creatures drive wildly about the town in gigs, donkey-carts, cabbage-carts, dirt-carts, and think it enjoyment. The pleasure of peace and quietness, of rest for body and mind, is not understood. Thousands are tempted by cheap trips to go off for the day to the seaside, and succeed in wearying themselves to death, for the sake of eating a meal in a Margate Coffee-shop, and getting five minutes’ glimpse of the sea through eyes blinded with dirt and perspiration. Places like Hampstead Heath and the various parks and commons are packed with screeching drunkards, one general mass of dust and heat and rage and exhaustion. Yet this is the best kind of holiday the people are capable of.

It is utterly absurd, this idea of setting aside single days for great public holidays. It will never do anything but harm. What we want is a general shortening of working hours all the year round, so that, for instance, all labour would be over at 4 o’clock in the afternoon. Then the idea of hours of leisure would become familiar to the people and they would learn to make some sensible use of them. Of course this is impossible so long as we work for working’s sake. All the world’s work – all that is really necessary for the health and comfort and even luxury of mankind – could be performed in three or four hours each day. There is so much labour just because there is so much money-grubbing. Every man has to fight for a living with his neighbour, and the grocer who keeps his shop open till half an hour after midnight has an advantage over him who closes at twelve. Work in itself is *not an end; only a means*, but we nowadays make it an end, and three-fourths of the world cannot understand anything else.”

If Gissing were writing today (which admittedly would be difficult) he might be even more appalled that single-day holidays have stretched to weeks, and trips to local watering holes and associated computation have been extended to foreign parts and package deals. The scene he depicts has now been transferred to notorious centres of revelry. There are, it is true, also some worthy exploratory holidays, extending our experience away from home. Yet, withal, most holidays, particularly those to foreign parts, have become frenetic and stressful, with a fair part of the traveller’s time spent queuing for a visa, wrestling with strange money and languages, carrying luggage to and from airports, checking-in, passing through security, and sitting around waiting for flights. To my mind, the worst kind are those temptingly advertised with pictures of exotic locations, the listed attractions invariable ending with “the services of an experienced tour manager”. Now who in their right mind would want to trail in the wake of a guide, being shown the wonders of the world as distinct from discovering them. Ann and I succumbed to this experience just once, and found ourselves thrust into the company of a small army of touring culture-vultures. Admittedly we were tourists ourselves, but we had travelled to experience the exotic strangeness of a foreign environment, not the familiar habits of our own kind.

We saw an extreme example of this kind of holiday when backpacking in Nepal. We had taken a tram (yes, a tram) from Kathmandu to Bhaktapur, and had walked through mediaeval fields to quietly marvel at its wondrous centre, when a sleek, modern coach arrived. It disgorged a party of well-clad tourists who likewise collectively marvelled at the glorious spectacle. Five minutes later, after obambulating a while, and a brief talk from their leader, they departed like a swarm of bees for the next spectacle on their itinerary.

I am not saying that all holidays are futile. They can be exciting, eudemonic, instructive, inspiring and memorable. Seeing the sun rise over Everest from Dulakel, coming upon the Himalayas on the road from Gorakhpur, emerging from trees to see (and hear) the mighty Victoria Falls, finding the Apennines by accident. I question rather holidays that are organised and programmed: routinely spent as a slice of time away from work, closed to serendipity, yielding no obvious benefit and quickly forgotten.

I am indebted to J.A.R.Pimlott’s *The Englishman’s Holiday* (1947) for insights into how this passion for diversion, be it frolicsome or studious, has come to be ingrained into the national psyche. Before the 16th century such a concept barely existed beyond pilgrimages and religious festivals (the precursors of today’s bank holidays). Gradually, however, the fashion for travel and tourism was taken up by wealthy people, notably by way of the European Grand Tour, initiated in the time of Elizabeth 1, aimed at broadening the education of young men destined for government service, but also taken up by our literary celebrities. Then came a revival of the idea that mineral water had healing properties, leading to the restoration of spas where

people could not only 'take the waters' but pass their time in pleasurable amusements. Having survived the Puritan revolution, they reached the height of their popularity in the 18th century, the supposed benefits eventually extending beyond the spa towns to the seaside, reviving a Roman tradition. This too was extolled as beneficial to health, propelling a growth in our popular coastal 'resorts'. Paradoxically it was the grinding near-slavery of labour during the industrial revolution that extended the annual break to the working classes as a relief from the harsh rigours of their lives, a social phenomenon firmly establishing the rite of the annual holiday.

But do such breaks actually confer any lasting benefits? A Dutch researcher, Jessica de Bloom, who looked at the experience of 96 holiday makers, found "while they came back refreshed, these benefits disappeared during their first week back at work, and within two weeks they felt as tired as when they set out" (*Daily Mail*, 2 August 2011, which interpreted this as "precious little to show for their time away other than large credit card bills"). The same issue of the *Mail* revealed that a review of research published by the British Psychological Society warned that going on holiday can actually make you ill.

So don't you just hate this fraught, inordinately expensive, follow-my-leader, escapist ritual? Not to mention the threats of terrorists, pirates, beggars, con-artists, yellow fever and ghastly weather. Now where did I leave my passport?

Derek Kinrade