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## News Briefing No. 56. April 2013

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*A Digest of Current Social Information*

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### FOODBANKS

Here, to begin, is a subject of paradox. On the one hand a commendable charitable enterprise relieving hunger among those unable to sustain themselves; on the other an indicator of the growing level of abject poverty in this country.

Statistics show an escalating reliance on this last-ditch succour. The government is wont to say that dependence on foodbanks increased ten-fold “under Labour”. But this is disingenuous, in that their provision started from a very low base. Trussell Trust figures indicate that in the year to April 2006 there were 2,814 recipients; and in the five years to April 2010 a total of 92,634 people had been fed. Whereas in the single year ended April 2012 there were 128,697 hungry recipients, more than the earlier five-year total and double the previous year’s total (which I have left out of the reckoning, since it was part Labour, part Coalition). Now foodbanks are opening at the rate of three a week. The Trust expects that in the current year the number will rise to over 290,000. Many recipients are working families and, typically, one third are children. So that something that began in Bulgaria in 1997, and in 2004 was introduced into the UK in a single garden shed and garage, has become a welfare benefit in its own right. While members of Parliament enjoy their subsidised catering, let’s tell it as it is.

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

### PERSONAL INDEPENDENCE PAYMENT (PIP)

This benefit, designed to replace Disability Living Allowance, and being phased in from 8 April 2013, has continued to attract criticism. It is widely seen as simply a cost-cutting exercise, using reassessment against new conditions to reduce the number of beneficiaries. Estimates suggest that by 2018 some 607,000 fewer people will qualify for help. Claimants will initially, and regularly, be reassessed, a task to be shared between Atos Healthcare and Capita Business Services Ltd under contract to the Department for Work and Pensions.

Atos has continued to be impugned for a high level of unsustainable work capability assessments. It argues that it is not responsible for the decision to deny benefits. Similarly, in relation to PIP both companies will be able to claim clean hands in that they are not responsible for the underpinning rules and policy and have not been given mandated targets. Nevertheless, by following the new criteria it is inevitable that a proportion of existing claimants will lose their present entitlement. Many are expected to lose the higher-rate mobility benefit that is currently part of their DLA.

A detailed explanation of the PIP scheme can be found at [www](http://www).

## WELFARE UP-RATING: ANGLICAN BISHOPS ROCK THE BOAT

10 March 2013: In a well-publicised letter to *The Sunday Telegraph*, 43 Anglican bishops, backed by the Most Rev. Justin Welby, due to be enthroned as Archbishop of Canterbury on 21 March, and Dr John Sentamu, the Archbishop of York, called for action to protect children from the government bill to restrict certain benefit increases to 1 per cent over the next three years. This is its full text:

“Next week, members of the House of Lords will debate the Welfare Benefits Up-rating Bill.

“The Bill will mean that for each of the next three years, most financial support for families will increase by no more than 1 per cent, regardless of how much prices rise.

“This is a change that will have a deeply disproportionate impact on families with children, pushing 200,000 children into poverty. A third of all households will be affected by the Bill, but nearly nine out of 10 families with children will be hit.

“These are children and families from all walks of life. The Children’s Society calculates that a single parent with two children, working on an average wage as a nurse would lose £424 a year by 2015. A couple with three children and one earner, on an average wage as a corporal in the British Army, would lose £552 a year by 2015.

“However, the change will hit the poorest the hardest. About 60 per cent of the savings from the uprating cap will come from the poorest third of households. Only 3 per cent will come from the wealthiest third.

“If prices rise faster than expected, children and families will no longer have any protection against this. This transfers the risk of high inflation rates from the Treasury to children and families, which is unacceptable.

“Children and families are already being hit hard by cuts to support, including those to tax credits, maternity benefits, and help with housing costs. They cannot afford this further hardship penalty. We are calling on the House of Lords to take action to protect children from the impact of this Bill.”

In supporting the letter, Archbishop Welby said:

“As a civilised society, we have a duty to support those among us who are vulnerable and in need. When times are hard, that duty should be felt more than ever, not disappear or diminish. It is essential that we have a welfare system that responds to need and recognises the rising costs of food, fuel and housing.

“The current benefits system does that, by ensuring that the support struggling families receive rises with inflation. These changes will mean it is children and families who will pay the price for high inflation, rather than the government.”

Though no fan of the Church of England, I think that the views of its bishops on moral issues – and this is a moral issue – must command respect. In this instance I entirely share them, and not merely in respect of children. In my view, the fact that the government has chosen to restrict the pay of public servants does not justify measures targeted against those on the brink of destitution. I echo Caroline Lucas in branding this bill “cruel and callous”.

The benefits affected by the bill are: Jobseeker’s Allowance; Employment and Support Allowance; Income Support; Elements of Housing Benefit; Maternity Allowance; Sick pay, Maternity pay, Paternity pay and Adoption pay; Couple and lone parent elements of Working Tax Credits; and the child element of the Child Tax Credit.

## CLOSURE OF INDEPENDENT LIVING FUND CHALLENGED

The Independent Living Fund was set up to help severely disabled people to live independently. Though controversially closed to new claimants in 2010, it continues to support nearly 20,000 existing users. The government, however, has since decided that in 2015 the Fund should be wound up and responsibility (and funding) devolved to local authorities under their now well-established arrangements for the allocation of personal budgets, meeting the needs of disabled people through a single unified procedure.

Disability charities oppose this move, arguing that cash-strapped councils are already failing fully to meet the needs of severely disabled people. Now six ILF users are to take the case against closure of the fund to the High Court, claiming that it will undermine progress towards independent living, that the consultation process was flawed, and that the decision breaches the *UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities*.

## CONCERNS OF THE CARE QUALITY COMMISSION (CQC)

12 March 2013: The CQC has found that people with dementia are admitted to hospital more often, stay longer and are much more likely to die there because their medical needs are neglected in care homes and hospitals. The Alzheimer's Society said that 80 per cent of people living in care homes have dementia. Because of basic failings found by the CQC in 52 per cent of primary care trust areas of England, people with dementia often end up having to be admitted to hospital.

19 March 2013: A report by the CQC has found that older people in nearly a fifth of hospitals are not being treated with dignity or afforded the respect and privacy they need, and that the situation appears to be getting worse.

**Go to [www.cqc.org.uk](http://www.cqc.org.uk) for details; reports in *The Guardian* by Denis Campbell and Sarah Boseley respectively.**

## BREAKING BOUNDARIES

13 March 2013: The NHS Alliance, which represents GPs and primary care staff, has produced a 'new manifesto' calling for a fundamental shift in healthcare. The report, *Breaking Boundaries*, argues for 'a paradigm shift in the management of health, wellbeing and all non-urgent care'. Its vision looks to the reconstruction of the NHS on the basis of 24-hour primary care led by GPs and backed by community-based consultants, with hospital care used only as a last resort.

**The report is available at [ww.nhsalliance.org](http://www.nhsalliance.org).**

## UNEQUAL MORTALITY

19 March 2013: The scourge of avoidable deaths is not confined to a few failing NHS hospitals. The report of an inquiry by Bristol University has revealed stark inequalities in mortality rates of people with learning disabilities in south-west England, prompting a call for the creation of a national review body. The inquiry found that, compared with the general population, men with a learning disability died on average 13 years earlier; women 20 years earlier. Overall, 22 per cent of people with a learning disability looked at by the inquiry had died under the age of 50, compared to nine per cent in the general population. It found that 37 per cent of deaths of people with a learning disability were avoidable.

Based on these findings, the mental health charity MENCAP extrapolates that 1,238 children and adults die across England every year "because they are not getting the right health care". These shocking estimates follow a prolonged campaign by MENCAP, which published a report *Death by indifference* in 2007.

**Details at [www.mencap.org.uk/campaigns/take-action/death-indifference](http://www.mencap.org.uk/campaigns/take-action/death-indifference)**

## JOBCENTRE JOUSTS

*The Guardian* (22 March 2013) has reported dubious dealings at our jobcentres. Initially, a leaked email revealed that staff at Walthamstow jobcentre had been warned by managers that they faced disciplinary action unless they increased the number of claimants being taken off jobseeker's allowance. They were told that Walthamstow was 95th out of 109 in a "league table" of London and Home Counties jobcentres. The appearances were that, somewhere in the hierarchy, targets were being set. The Department of Work and Pensions said that it was "urgently investigating" the case, strenuously denied that any central targets for applying sanctions were in place, and said that if a manager had set a local target it was contrary to DWP policy and that steps would be taken to ensure that such targets were removed.

However, fresh evidence quickly emerged (23 March) suggesting that other jobcentres were being given targets to find reasons to withdraw jobseekers allowance. Jobcentre staff contacting *The Guardian* had said that it was "widespread practice" for managers to set targets for removing benefits. It was reported that a separate investigation suggested that pressure was being applied to jobcentre staff around the UK to remove more people from benefit.

Confronted over the initial revelations in the Commons on 22 March, Secretary of State, Iain Duncan Smith gave an absolute commitment that there were no targets for any sanctions whatsoever. Curiously, however, he then went on to say that anybody using those targets would be disciplined.

A further *Guardian* report (27 March) said that it had received more signs of a "targets culture". Internal documents showed evidence of targeting at more than a dozen jobcentres around the country, contradicting the DWP's line that any such practices were isolated. Margaret Hodge, chair of the Public

Accounts Committee, was said to be seeking clarification.

Then, on 29 March, it emerged that *The Guardian* had obtained a DWP national sanctions “scorecard” for January 2013 giving precise information about how jobcentre districts are performing in stopping claimants’ benefits. It includes a column headed “direction of travel”, with red and green arrows showing, district by district, changes on the previous month. Lord Freud responded in the House that this was purely to “correct the anomalies”. Make of that what you will.

It may be felt that I rely too heavily on *The Guardian*. But the fact is, as Polly Toynbee points out, that the readers of other (named) papers “are told nothing”, or rather that they “know a lot about immigrants” and “are protected from inconvenient facts about growing inequality”. I will continue to respect *The Guardian* as a great campaigning newspaper, and will continue to source uncomfortable news from its pages. And this news is very uncomfortable.

### **A BLUEPRINT FOR UNBELIEVERS**

13 March 2013: Alain de Botton has produced a *Manifesto for Atheists*, setting out ten secular virtues: resilience, empathy, patience, sacrifice, politeness, humour, self-awareness, forgiveness, hope, confidence. While a reminder that you can subscribe to moral principles without God is welcome, this initiative troubles me. Aside from the obvious point that these are just ten virtues among many, I fear that creating a template for goodness smacks of secular piety. Having a rule book implies the hand of an unseen adjudicator. One of the many criticisms of religion is its implanting of a sense of guilt. It would be a pity to transfer this negative perception to right-minded atheists. We keep trying, but we are what we are.

But this is a fascinating subject and it would be good to have the views of readers (another virtue).

### **THE ‘BEDROOM TAX’**

26 March 2013: I warned of this impending disaster in *Briefing* no.51 (November 2012). I called it “mean spirited”. Now it is almost upon us. Since its enactment, there have been some well-publicised, fringe concessions to the legislation. And the Department of Work and Pensions, through local papers, has explained the changes to the Housing Benefit entitlements of people of working age living in so-called social housing. This spells out that the benefit will from 1 April be related “to the number of bedrooms you need”. This change is because up to now people have been subsidised for more bedrooms than they actually need. It is intended to encourage claimants “to think about” their accommodation so that they can help the government make the best use of limited social housing, and people currently living in overcrowded housing may be able to move into larger homes. It is also about fairness, in that people who rent from private landlords already receive Housing Benefit in this way.

This explanation fails to explain why some people are entitled to social housing in the first place, and why pensioners with more bedrooms than they strictly need are exempt from the changes. But my quarrel is not with the analysis, but rather the hammer-blow, draconian impact of the reform upon people already suffering privation from other aspects of the Welfare Reform Act 2012. We are talking about people’s homes – domiciles and dwellings in which they have shaped their lives: something that those who own their own homes must surely understand. People in social housing can be encouraged and helped to downsize, but should not be financially coerced in this way. I fear this is just one aspect of a cruel crusade in support of the dogma of a ‘something for nothing’ culture which has trapped people into dependency. Undoubtedly there is, selectively, scope for legitimate criticism of the burgeoning welfare state, but the government’s attempts to force change are heavy-handed. I feel that the coalition has so far failed to grasp the social impact that the bedroom tax and other changes will have, a myopia that may well rebound on them.

The effect upon disabled people is particularly acute. A study by Demos/Scope points out that many of the cuts on disability benefits overlap. It predicts that by 2017-18 around 3.7 million people will have experienced some reduction in benefit, collectively amounting to £28.3 billion (see *Guardian*, 27 March for details). Despite my views on religious belief, in the war of words between Justin Welby and Iain Duncan Smith I am with the Archbishop.

### **A BLAST FROM OUR UNIVERSITIES**

28 March 2013: More than fifty social policy professors have joined in an open letter to the Prime Minister, David Cameron, published in today’s *Guardian*. It calls for the cuts scheduled for 1 April to be reconsidered and for no further public spending cuts targeted on the poorest in our society. It points out

that previous welfare reforms have already meant the equivalent to a loss of 38 per cent of net income for the poorest tenth of households. They compare this to a loss of only 5 per cent for the richest households.

They regard the welfare state as “one of the hallmarks of a civilised society”, dependent on a fair collection and redistribution of resources. They emphasise that misleading rhetoric about those seeking support risks undermining the trust between different sections of society and across generations, one of the key foundations of modern Britain.

### UNIVERSAL CREDIT SCHEME IN TROUBLE?

Despite reassurances from the Department of Work and Pensions and Iain Duncan Smith personally, rumours abound that the introduction of Universal Credit is beset by technical difficulties. The new consolidated benefit was due to be trialled in a number of Lancashire locations from 29 April and rolled out nationally from this October. But you will have heard by now that the piloting exercise will be confined to a single location. The DWP insists that the scheme will nevertheless be introduced in October, but there have been suggestions that the roll-out will be progressive rather than comprehensive. Time will tell if the benefit will be delivered on time, and more importantly whether it will prove to be universally beneficial.

### LINKS FOUND BETWEEN SERVICE IN THE ARMED FORCES AND LATER VIOLENT OFFENDING

In *Briefing* no.19 (March 2010) I discussed the consequences of war, and controversially questioned whether it was desirable that young men and women should indulge in licensed killing and perhaps come to enjoy it. The thought came to me from my partner Ann Darnbrough. In *A Rebellious Disposition* (2007) she included a section on *The Folly of War*, which has the following argument:

“Those who choose the armed services as a career commit to becoming the instruments of their leaders’ simplistic belligerency, prepared to kill other humans without really having a reason for doing so...What they fail to anticipate are the sheer horrors they will face, the deaths of those around them and the wounds they will endure – probably to the end of their lives. In combat, they quickly discover these realities.”

Now researchers from King’s College London, led by Dr. Deirdre MacManus, reporting in *The Lancet*, have revealed detailed findings on the effect of deployment, combat, and post-deployment mental health problems on subsequent offending behaviour. Data from 13,856 randomly selected, serving and ex-serving UK military personnel was linked with national conviction records. The most striking finding, widely reported, was that violent offenders were the most prevalent offender types, particularly in men aged 30 years or younger. And that such younger members of the armed forces were three times more likely to commit violent offences than their peers in the rest of the population. This propensity increased sharply among those who had been involved in combat, when compared with those in non-frontline roles.

The report also noted, however, that recruitment for combat roles has traditionally welcomed individuals of an aggressive disposition, and has frequently drawn on those who are socially disadvantaged, with low educational attainment. Combat increases their inclination for violent behaviour.

A summary is available at [www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PII50140-6736\(13\)60354-2/abstract](http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PII50140-6736(13)60354-2/abstract), and the article can be found in vol.381, issue 9870, pp 907-917, March 2013.

### ASSISTED DYING

I know that I bang on about this subject, but only because I believe that it is the rational way forward. It was interesting that an afternoon TV soap, *Doctors* (BBC1), brought the issue into its story line. The fictional individual who wanted to die was neither elderly, nor terminally ill, but following an accident had very limited bodily functions. Nevertheless he was of sound mind and of crystal-clear determination. Reduced to near-total dependency, he was firm and consistent in preferring to die, but could do so only if helped. At first, his wife went along with a plan to use the adjuvant service of a clinic in Switzerland, but this was not forthcoming. Thereafter, his distraught wife and son, along with his GP, resolutely refused to follow the plot.

I thought the BBC was brave in confronting this dilemma over several episodes, and scrupulously fair in contrasting the emotions of the despondent supplicant and those around him.

### TAXING MATTERS

Good for Polly Toynbee (*Guardian* 22 March 2013). The promised raising of the personal tax allowance

to £10,000 in 2014, trumpeted as taking the lowest paid out of tax, will also extend to people with higher incomes (at present up to £100,000). She points out that The Resolution Foundation has shown that three quarters of the relief goes to the top half of households!

### A POINTED POEM (to relieve the gloom)

Triangular flapjacks if thrown  
May induce an occasional groan  
Teachers have always preferred  
Missiles circular, edge  $\pi r$  squared.

### WE HATE NO. 64: SEXUAL HARASSMENT

*"It's about power, it's a form of bullying...mainly by men...an absolute evil in big organisations."*

Ken Loach on sexual harassment: Question Time, BBCTV, 28 February 2013

*"It [sexual abuse] rests firmly on a base, generally sustained by society at large, of patriarchal authority and power. It is not only an abuse of power, but power to abuse, which can be sustained as though by right."*

Ann Darnbrough and Derek Kinrade: *The Sex Directory* (1988)

Back in *Briefing* no.34 (June 2011) I managed to upset at least one reader by asserting that some rapes are more serious than others, or perhaps by describing them too graphically. I am about to stick my neck out again, not this time in relation to extreme sexual abuse but to inappropriate sexual misconduct of a lesser kind, a scourge currently being taken more seriously, attracting much media speculation, and of near-universal interest.

Let me begin by getting some fundamentals out of the way. It is inherent in the natural order of things that women, some more than others and often without trying, are attractive to most men, and that we usually respond by being attracted. As such we are on thin ice. Something as slight as the beguiling smile of a pretty shop girl or a barmaid can open the door to desire. Most men are vulnerable. They may in consequence be either predatory pests or adept at self-control, but they share a basic instinct (compare if you will Matthew 5/26-27). But hey, one surely has to give some credit to those who, despite carnal temptations, keep their thoughts, their hands, and their acrosomes to themselves, negotiating with caution.

Whether particular behaviour is harassment depends on context. If there was no propositioning and desire there would be no romance and no progeny. Many loving relationships begin with touching and mutual erotic attraction. Women themselves have been known to lead men astray. Poor Don Jose! They may well encourage concupiscence: employing "a delicate suggestion, nothing more", nothing crude or overt, but none the less deliberately seductive. It may be that in such circumstances, *not* to respond constitutes inappropriate behaviour.

What is to hate is rather the prevalence of random *unwanted* intimacy: the hand on knee, bum-pinch or grope in a crowded train or lift; and, even more, the abuse of power by dominant men towards women in inferior positions. The latter tendency has for years been asserted in many settings, notoriously in the theatre, with its legendary 'casting couch'. Let it be admitted that overt sexuality or ready compliance can sometimes be a strategy deployed by women eager to 'get on'. But sometimes it has also been an indispensable requirement, a necessary prerequisite to advancement, a favour suggested by men who have at their disposal the wherewithal to advance or frustrate a woman's promotion or career. And now, as women increasingly have serious ambitions to succeed in politics, there is a suspicion that it may at times be a feature of advancement in parliamentary aspiration.

Thus sexual harassment needs to be seen predominantly as part of a culture of male dominance: the way our society has been structured for far too long. In the corridors of power we still suffer from a gender imbalance, an ingrained belief that men have a God-given disposition to be in charge. It boils down to a profound lack of respect, an intellectual mindset that needs to change. Unsurprisingly, there is an instinct within respected institutions to cover up such matters, and a large measure of hypocrisy, since honest admission inevitably brings disrepute. But that won't do. It isn't right that women should put up with unwanted advances for fear of damaging their careers.

Under equality legislation, sexual discrimination already falls within conduct which can be put to an employment tribunal. More recently, and crucially, the government has signed up (8 June 2012) to the Council of Europe's *Convention on preventing and combating violence against women (CETS no.210)*. Upon ratification by

10 states, including eight member states, this will require signatories to take measures to promote changes in mentality and attitudes, and to enact legislation or introduce other measures to criminalise or impose other sanctions against all forms of violence within its scope. As well as covering the most serious sexual offences, such as forced marriage, stalking, physical and psychological violence, rape and female genital mutilation, the Convention will extend to sexual harassment (Article 40). This rules that “unwanted verbal, non-verbal or physical contact of a sexual nature with the purpose or effect of violating the dignity of a person, in particular when creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or otherwise offensive environment, is subject to criminal or other legal sanction”.

We await progress. At the time of writing, only three states – Albania, Portugal and Turkey – have ratified the treaty, and it remains for the UK to do so and incorporate it into our law. But it is to be hoped that before long there will no longer be an acceptance of the species of acerebral men who, although by now encountering women in every walk of life, still think that a woman’s place is in the home, good for only one thing. Perhaps the best advice for men is that of the bandit Fra Diavolo in Auber and Scribe’s opera of 1830:

“Nous ne demandons rien aux belles,  
L’usage est de les épargner.  
Mais toujours nous recevons d’elles  
ce que leur cœur veut nous donner.”

[We demand nothing from beautiful damsels; the custom is to spare them. But always we accept from them what their heart wishes to bestow.]

Derek Kinrade.