

# not the national information forum

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by encouraging better information provision

## News Briefing No. 58. June 2013

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### NO COMMENT

We are awash with big stories. Despite their importance I feel that the level of media coverage is in some cases such that I should refrain from adding to the medley of discourse, save to acknowledge a rising tide of concern:

- Failing hospitals, not least Accident and Emergency departments
- The Care Bill, widely perceived as inadequate
- Review of the 111 service, said to be “fragile in some places”
- Plans to integrate social and health care by 2018, with a focus on care at home rather than in hospital (except to notice that Liverpool philanthropist William Rathbone (1819-1902), prompted by Mary Robinson’s nursing of his wife during her final illness in 1859, and encouraged by Florence Nightingale, began a programme – district nursing – to care for the sick poor in their own homes)
- Royal College of GPs’ concern over the mental health of carers
- Safe Staffing Alliance calling on the government to review nurse/patient ratios.

### SEXUAL OFFENDING

I wrote about sexual crime in *Briefing no.53* (January 2013), following a report by the Office of the Children’s Commissioner for England which found that sexual exploitation of a detestable kind is rampant. It said that thousands of children, mainly girls, some as young as eleven, are being groomed, raped, abused and trafficked year on year, with devastating results. The inquiry behind the report had discovered 2,409 confirmed victims over 14 months between August 2010 and October 2011, with a further 16,500 at severe risk of abuse. But the detected offences were thought to be probably ‘the tip of the iceberg’, with many victims too frightened to complain.

I followed this up in February with a look at the Crime Survey for England and Wales, which put the average annual number of victims (all ages) of the ‘most serious’ sexual offences (rape or sexual assault) at 85,000 females and 12,000 males. In 90 per cent of such offences, the victim knew the offender.

I return to this subject in the light of the ongoing criminal investigation into historic allegations of the sexual abuse of children by Jimmy Savile over some four decades, and further inquiries involving other celebrities, some connected, some not, and most of them yet to be resolved. Other stories have included a disturbing number of successful prosecutions of mostly British-Asian gangs who have systematically exploited children, revelations of alleged abuse in children’s homes in

North Wales, investigations into suspected sexual abuse at a number of British music schools following the jailing of Michael Brewer, the former music director of Chetham's School of Music, and admissions of sexual misconduct by the broadcaster Stuart Hall.

*The Guardian* of 9 May featured an incisive article by the British journalist Kira Cochrane, in which she referred to the spate of recent convictions and allegations, and asked "how many more of these stories can we take?" She accepted that focusing on race doesn't help to get to the bottom of such cases, but observed that there is a defining characteristic of such perpetrators – they are predominantly male. She was sure that there are many men who have felt just as appalled by these stories as she has been, and concluded: "Let's hear more from them." She makes a fair point. Are my male readers "appalled"? Do they think that the nature and character of the cases in Telford, Rotherham, Oxford and Rochdale have an underlying racial dimension? Should the identities of suspected predators not yet charged be publicised? What, if anything, can be done to stop this abuse?

## LESSONS FROM HISTORY

The respected journalist Francis Wheen, in his *Hoo-Hahs and Passing Frenzies* (2002), argued that one of the greatest derelictions of journalistic duty is the lack of any sense of history: "Lacking historical perspective, we are in danger of knowing everything but learning nothing...As George Santayana pointed out a century ago: 'Progress, far from consisting in change, depends on retentiveness'."

I was reminded of this guidance when reading, for the first time, Thomas Paine's *Agrarian Justice*. This slender essay is the most neglected of his revolutionary canon. First written in Paris in the winter of 1795/1796 (in French) it appeared in an English edition in the following year. Paine advocated the creation of a fund, derived from a tax on inherited property, to provide a social security plan "for meliorating the condition of man". He had previously discussed, elaborately, a plan for social welfare in *Rights of Man* (1790) and now returned to the subject. The details of the plan need not concern us, except to notice that it was intended to help young people ("to enable him or her to begin in the World"), older people ("to enable them to live in Old Age without Wretchedness, and go decently out of the World"), and the 'lame and blind' of any age. It is the reasoning behind the proposed plan that remains of interest.

Paine conceived the new scheme in response to a sermon preached by Richard Watson, Bishop of Llandaff, entitled *The Wisdom and Goodness of God, in having made both Rich and Poor*. Paine, it should be noted, did not deny the existence of God, but declared that "He" did no such thing as to make rich and poor: "He made only *male* and *female* and He gave them the earth for their inheritance". The opening passage of Paine's text is particularly illuminating today:

"To preserve the benefits of what is called civilised life, and to remedy at the same time the evil which it has produced, ought to be considered as one of the first objects of reformed legislation.

Whether that state that is proudly, perhaps erroneously, called civilised, has most promoted or most injured the general happiness of man is a question that may be strongly contested. On one side, the spectator is dazzled by splendid appearances; on the other, he is shocked by extremes of wretchedness; both of which it has erected. The most affluent and the most miserable of the human race are to be found in the countries that are called civilised...

Poverty, therefore, is a thing created by that which is called civilised life."

Later in this remarkable text Paine proposes that the payments under his plan "be made to every person, rich or poor". He concludes with "observations", some of which will, I think, be sympathetically received by today's campaigners:

"It is not charity but a right, not bounty but justice that I am pleading for. The present state of civilization is as odious as it is unjust. It is absolutely the opposite of what it should be, and it is necessary that a revolution should be made in it. The contrast of affluence and wretchedness continually meeting and offending the eye is like dead and living bodies chained together. Though I care as little about riches as any man, I am a friend to riches because they are capable of good.

"I care not how affluent some may be, provided that none be miserable in consequence of it. But it is impossible to enjoy affluence with the felicity it is capable of being enjoyed, while so much misery is mingled in the scene.

"There are, in every country, some magnificent charities established by individuals. It is, however, but little that any individual can do, when the whole extent of the misery to be relieved is considered. He

may satisfy his conscience, but not his heart. He may give all that he has, and that all will relieve but little. It is only by organizing civilization upon such principles as to act like a system of pulleys, that the whole weight of misery can be removed.

“The plan here proposed will reach the whole. It will immediately relieve and take out of view three classes of wretchedness - the blind, the lame, and the aged poor; and it will furnish the rising generation with means to prevent their becoming poor; and it will do this without deranging or interfering with any national measures.

“To show that this will be the case, it is sufficient to observe that the operation and effect of the plan will, in all cases, be the same as if every individual were *voluntarily* to make his will and dispose of his property in the manner here proposed.

“But it is justice, and not charity, that is the principle of the plan. In all great cases it is necessary to have a principle more universally active than charity; and, with respect to justice, it ought not to be left to the choice of detached individuals whether they will do justice or not. Considering, then, the plan on the ground of justice, it ought to be the act of the whole growing spontaneously out of the principles of the revolution, and the reputation of it ought to be national and not individual.”

Well today, of course, we have both a property tax and an inheritance tax, along with social welfare provisions conceived upon similar principles to those advocated by Paine. Yet right now we appear bent on curtailing their scope, while simultaneously enhancing the ‘splendid appearances’ of our nation, so as to extend and reinforce the very social divide which Paine sought to address.

#### “UNIVERSAL” CREDIT AND SELECTIVE DEBIT

The concept of Universal Credit has had a remarkably good press. But it has yet to prove itself. The scaled-down pilot in Ashton-under-Lyne, introduced at the end of April, is hardly an acid test: akin to guiding a rowing boat into a Liverpool dock, or as a *Guardian* leader put it “as if the action in October 1917 had been confined to the outskirts of Omsk”. The fact is that this is a modest scheme, hardly universal, doing little more than to roll up some working age benefits into a single claim. It offers marginal encouragement to work, but also introduces potential hazards in as much that it normally requires online applications and imposes a switch to monthly payments. Around 9 million citizens still lack internet access at home, and notoriously, people on low incomes, paid monthly, usually run out of money before the end of each month: an open door for the purveyors of payday loans.

The new scheme will have little, if any, impact on the scythe being taken to welfare benefits generally, and the consequential drift from disadvantage to destitution. Fresh evidence of this comes from two sources, faithfully reported by *BBC News* and *The Guardian*. **24 April 2013:** Figures from the Trussell Trust indicate that 350,000 people turned to food banks last year, almost triple the numbers in the previous year. **5 May 2013:** A *Which?* survey has found that not only are many households having to cut back on essentials, but reckons that in April one in every five households – some five million overall – borrowed money or used savings to meet food costs. Is this the true measure of compassionate Conservatism?

I have inveighed against the sheer savagery of welfare cuts before and will no doubt do so again. Sarah Teather, a former minister, has said that some families are being targeted over and over again. In the previous issue, and previously, I have argued that a fairer and more effective strategy would be to increase taxation on those who are better off. It was therefore heartening to read a letter from Tom Canham of Hereford (*Guardian*, 11 April 2013) who flagged up the potential *cost* of welfare cuts when we have to respond to: stress and deteriorating physical and mental health, the break-up of families, damage to children’s schooling, unpaid [and unpayable] loans, rent and council tax, repossessed homes, yet more homeless and mentally ill folk on the streets, and an escalation of crime. He anticipated “huge extra costs for health, social services, the police, the courts, councils and other public authorities, and a poorer service from them”. He would rather pay a few more thousand in income tax, and thinks that most better off taxpayers would agree. “Do the rich,” he asks, “have no conscience about the gross inequality in our country?”

What do readers think? (See, for starters, Peter Salter’s Feedback, which somewhat pre-empts my thinking)

#### A REVIEW OF CRIMINAL JUSTICE TREATMENT OF CRASHES

RoadPeace, the charity supporting crash victims and working to reduce road danger, reports that the Department for Transport, with support from the Ministry of Justice, has set up a working group to review

how fatal and serious injury crashes are treated by the criminal justice system, with a primary focus on crashes involving pedestrian and cyclist crashes. The review will include collision investigation, prosecution and sentencing, and the treatment of victims. It will also consider if the law needs to be updated.

**From RoadPeace's spring newsletter, an invaluable source of information, including the case for reform of the judicial response to road crime. More at [www.roadpeace.org](http://www.roadpeace.org). Helpline: 0845 4500 355.**

### **A BLOW TO INDEPENDENT LIVING**

24 April 2013: One of the saddest of recent so-called austerity measures has been the closure of the Independent Living Fund. A legal challenge to this unhappy cataclysm, unfittingly heard in an inaccessible court of the Royal Courts of Justice, failed. An appeal is anticipated.

### **DEMENTIA ADVENTURE**

The Autumn 2012 issue of CAE's *Access by Design* (no.132) has an unusual article on enabling people living with dementia to access outdoor environments. It describes the work of Dementia Adventure, highlighting some of its adventure provision and sharing helpful design-based resources.

**For further information about Dementia Adventure, contact director Neil Mapes, tel: 01245 230 661; e.mail: [neil@dementiaadventure.co.uk](mailto:neil@dementiaadventure.co.uk); website: [www.dementiaadventure.co.uk](http://www.dementiaadventure.co.uk)**

### **SOFT RESPONSE TO VIOLENT CRIME**

30 April 2013: 'Community resolution', including bringing offenders face-to-face with victims, can be an effective strategy in responding to low-level crime and antisocial behaviour. But, according to the shadow home secretary, Yvette Cooper, there has been a steep rise in its use for more serious offences, including knife crimes and domestic violence, as an alternative to prosecution. House of Commons library figures indicate that up to 14 per cent of recorded violent offences are being dealt with in this way. Cooper says that this "risks giving community resolutions a bad name". There is also particular concern about the overuse of cautions in the Metropolitan Police area.

*Guardian*

### **SPECIALISED HOUSING FUND**

From 2013 and the following five years the Department of Health will make available £160 million for specialist housing providers to develop housing to meet the needs of older and disabled people. An extra £80 million will be available during the first two years. The programme is being delivered by the Homes and Communities Agency.

**From CAE's *Access by Design*. For further information go to <http://tinyurl.com/Care-and-support-fund>**

### **INACCESSIBLE PUBLIC TRANSPORT**

New research by the law practice Unity Law has found that much public transport continues to be inaccessible to disabled people. Some 74 per cent of respondents reported difficulties in getting on and off transport and 45 per cent said that they regularly experienced discrimination. 59 per cent described using public transport as unpleasant and a remarkable 39 per cent had received verbal abuse from transport staff. Along with Transport for All, Unity Law consider that a national regulator is needed, funded by the transport industry, but preferably independent from it.

**More at [www.unity-law.co.uk/a2b/](http://www.unity-law.co.uk/a2b/)**

### **SEEKING AGE-FRIENDLY ENVIRONMENTS**

Large numbers of older people live in cities, rarely moving away from the same neighbourhood. But they are very rarely involved in local decision-making. Keele University is collaborating with Manchester City Council and the Beth Johnson Foundation towards the creation of a nationally-recognised consortium to encourage the development of age-friendly environments in urban areas, building on previous work in Manchester.

**From CAE's *Access by Design*. For further information go to <http://tinyurl.com/Age-friendly-consortium>**

### **ACCESSIBLE MOTORING**

*Able*, the disability lifestyle magazine, has produced its first motoring special. It aims to bring together

current thinking about disability motoring. It looks at what to look out for in adapted vehicles, the future of motoring, wheelchair accessible vehicles, the economics of being a 'green' driver, and learning to drive. There are also four pages of car reviews, and guidance from the industry to discover what motor manufacturers have in store for the coming year. And, of course, lots of tempting adverts.

**An annual subscription to Able costs £15 (two years £27.50). From Primas Media, 15-39 Durham Street, Glasgow G41 1BS.**

## THE PENSIONER

I want to pay a warm tribute to this magazine for members of the Civil Service Pensioners' Alliance. The spring issue, as usual, sets a high standard. It shows some interest in the social activities of local branches and groups, but its primary focus is on the important issues that affect pensioners in their everyday lives. Ralph Groves, the Editor and Deputy General Secretary has written *Viewpoint*, a nice piece in the context of "continuing economic gloom", concentrated on the publication of *The Coalition: together in the national interest*. This document summarises where the coalition government has got to in implementing the terms of the Coalition Agreement, and what still needs to be done. The editor focuses on proposed future action of concern to pensioners, noticing in particular the intention "to designate all government transactions as digital", when there are an estimated nine million UK citizens without access to the internet, most of them apparently in older age groups. This sets an appropriately serious tone, and is followed by letters from members raising matters of general concern, followed by a detailed and thoughtful analysis from General Secretary Mike Duggan, *Half-time for the Coalition Government*.

But what I like best are the pages devoted to *Parliamentary Synopsis*, which covers not only Westminster, but the Northern Ireland and Welsh Assemblies and the Scottish Parliament. There is far more, including much-needed guidance on income tax, an article on an enthusiast's 50 years of photography, inflation measures, computer advice, and health matters (the Liverpool Care Pathway and a review of care standards in hospitals). This is a long, balanced and great read, invaluable to members, but also an outstanding contribution to any older person wanting to stay switched on to the tide of events.

**Some information (but not the magazine itself) at [www.cspa.co.uk](http://www.cspa.co.uk)**

## FEEDBACK

From Richard Hornsby: "His strength the more is." [Right on, Richard. I sometimes feel there should be a society for friendship between atheists and Christians. DK]

From Peter Salter: In a recent radio discussion about personal tax rates, a spokeswoman for the TUC said that for those on more than £100,000, when the 20% band and personal allowance was taken into account, these people do not pay at such a high rate as might be thought.

The spokeswoman should have known, if coming to talk about these matters in public, that for every £2 of income above £100,000, £1 of personal allowance is lost. So once income exceeds £119,000, there is no tax-free personal allowance. Also, this type of discussion only features on direct tax. Those on higher incomes will pay more to the Treasury in indirect taxes, such as VAT, Customs & Excise duties, Air Passenger Duty, Insurance Premium Tax etc.

If we are to be taxed more highly at source, then that money is not available for spending, to generate jobs and these other taxes. Is that what the TUC really wants? I emailed them but did not get a response. Imagine if the basic rate of tax was increased by 2% to 22% - a suggestion in a letter in *The Independent* a couple of years ago. That would cost someone just under the higher rate threshold an additional £600 a year. Someone on £20,000 a year would pay over £200 more. I imagine that those who have lost some or all of their Child Benefit are spending less on the High Street - is it any wonder that the economy is in the doldrums.

It is widely understood by the general public that VAT is charged on "luxuries" and not on "essentials". This is put forward by the media, charities and those with an axe to grind. It is not, though, correct and this approach cannot be found in the legislation. Otherwise, why would tyre and brake work at Kwik-Fit be charged to VAT - such expense is vital for road safety and clearly an essential. Or, as one Labour MP put it, "VAT is a tax on cleanliness" when referring to VAT on soap.

Domestic fuel - gas, electricity, coal and fuel-oil is charged to VAT at the reduced rate of 5%. Not a lot of people know this. Many, of course, think these items should be free of VAT.

Finally, I get fed up with drivers moaning about "road tax" and how cyclists do not pay. There is no

such thing as “road tax”. Vehicle Excise Duty is based on pollution levels and some motor vehicles do not pay, including the well-known Prius.

**Peter is trustee/Hon. Treasurer of RoadPeace.**

## **A REFERENDUM ON OUR EU MEMBERSHIP?**

May I just say that I feel the agitation for such a referendum is not motivated by a genuine wish to allow the British public to express its democratic view, but rather by a right-wing hope that a majority can be persuaded to support our withdrawal from the EU. So far as I can tell, the public at large, including me, is not thirsting for a referendum on Europe, nor necessarily equipped to express an informed opinion.

## **GOV.UK**

The Directgov website was replaced by Gov.uk in October 2012. The new website has now won the Design of the Year award for 2013. It has two foundation principles: a simpler, clearer and faster services for users, and savings and innovation for government. All government departments digital information, including Business Link is now provided on the new single domain.

**From CILIPUPDATE, May 2013.**

## **PUBLIC HEALTH**

Did you know that a new body, Public Health England, has been established “to protect and improve the nation’s health and wellbeing, and to reduce inequalities” [presumably regional health inequalities]? It took up its full powers on 1 April 2013.

Responsibility for the ongoing development and support programme for health and wellbeing boards has been devolved from the Department of Health to the Local Government Authority. The LGA is said to be bringing together key national organisations, including Public Health England, the NHS Confederation, the NHS Commissioning Board, the Association of Directors of Public Health and Healthwatch England, to co-operate in offering support to the 152 local health and wellbeing boards. [May I be forgiven for thinking that it all looks elaborate and top heavy]. The Gov.UK website identifies the following priorities:

- Creating a lasting legacy from the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games
- Reducing smoking
- Reducing drugs misuse and dependence
- Reducing harmful drinking
- Helping more people to survive cancer
- Reducing obesity and improving diet
- Giving all children a healthy start in life
- Planning for health emergencies.

PHE is based at Wellington House, 133-155 Waterloo Road, London SE1 8UG, under CEO Duncan Selbie.

## **PSHE EDUCATION**

1 May 2013: An Ofsted press release announces the publication of *Not yet good enough*, a report evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of personal, social, health and economic education (PSHE), and making recommendations on how the subject can be taught well in English schools. It finds that such education required improvement or was inadequate in 40 per cent of schools inspected. The findings are supported by an Ipsos Mori online survey of children and young people.

**Go to [www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/not-yet-good-enough-personal-social-health-and-economic-education-schools](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/not-yet-good-enough-personal-social-health-and-economic-education-schools)**

## **TRIALS OF THE BENEFITS CAP**

2 May 2013: The £26,000 cap on benefits is being trialled in the London borough of Haringey. Already, according to documents obtained by *The Guardian*, its practical effect is being felt. Genesis, a leading social landlord, has written to some tenants warning them that it will need to initiate legal action to terminate leases, with the possibility of court orders forcing eviction within 14 days.

The trial has also been introduced in Enfield, Bromley and Croydon, and is due to be rolled-out nationally later this year. According to *The Guardian*, the Department of Work and Pensions has estimated

that 56,000 households will be affected, with an average weekly benefit loss of £93.

## CHILD POVERTY

7 May 2013: In a new report, IFS R78, the Institute for Fiscal Studies projects that, notwithstanding the introduction of Universal Credit, relative child poverty will be 6 per cent higher at the end of the decade to 2020-21, reversing all of the fall seen over the previous decade. In conclusion it says:

“The Child Poverty Act 2010 sets the UK Government legally binding targets to reduce relative child poverty to 10% and absolute child poverty to 5% by 2020–21. Our 2020–21 projections for these indicators under current policies are 23.5% and 27.2% respectively. It therefore seems almost certain that the targets will be missed by a substantial margin. It is not the case that tax and benefit reforms introduced since 2010–11 have made it impossible for these targets to be hit: even without these changes, they would still have been missed by a considerable distance. We recommend that the UK Government either reveals a credible plan for meeting the targets that it has signed up to, or that it sets different objectives which reflect its view of what is both desirable and achievable and explains how it plans to meet those – ideally, verified using a quantitative modelling exercise such as this one.”

Go to [www.ifs.org.uk/comms/r78.pdf](http://www.ifs.org.uk/comms/r78.pdf) for the full report

## ADULT SOCIAL CARE UNDER THREAT

8 May 2013: The website of the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services (ADASS) carries a range of informed comment on adult social care. Latest output includes a report on dementia which calls into question diagnosis and training, and reflections on the Francis report, pointing out that its findings are not just for the NHS.

Of particular concern is ADASS’s latest annual survey of social care budgets, which indicates a substantial squeeze on services for older people, disabled people, and on fees for care providers. Overall, in the three years since the onset of the current austerity programme, some £2.68 billion “savings” have been made in expenditure on adult social care – some 20 per cent of net spending. But in the next twelve months to April 2014 directors of adult social services are planning further cutbacks of £800 million.

ADASS President, Sandie Keene, says: “gazing into the next two years, without additional investment from that already planned, an already bleak outlook becomes even bleaker.”

Two of the most marked trends indicated by the survey show that some 13 per cent of the further planned savings (£104 million) will result in direct withdrawal of services, while nearly a fifth of councils thought that a reduction of personal budgets would be “highly important”.

More at [www.adass.org.uk](http://www.adass.org.uk); also featured in *The Guardian*, 8 May.

## SOME LANDMARKS

9 May 2013: This was a big news day. Of course, the provisions of the Queen’s speech were reviewed, including the promise of legislation to enact the scaled-back recommendations of the Dilnot report. It was also a day on which Nick Clegg gave unambiguous signs of asserting that, despite remaining within the coalition, the Liberal Democrats have a separate identity and stand ready to oppose some elements of Conservative policy. They seem anxious to claw back some credibility as a political party; but too late I suspect.

Legislation was promised “this month” to impose a duty on social care providers to inform health regulators if they have reason to suspect that their employees might be harming or neglecting older people.

*The Guardian*, always in the vanguard of righteous dissent, launched a lawsuit to overturn the Attorney General’s veto on the disclosure of Prince Charles’s lobbying letters to government ministers. It also reported threats against those who speak out against female genital mutilation (FGM). Research in 2007 (based on information from the 2001 census) had found that “there were at least 66,000 women with FGM estimated to be living in England and Wales”. Around 21,000 girls aged eight or younger were reckoned to be at high risk of FGM and more than 11,000 girls aged nine or over had probably suffered FGM. A fictional case of inflicted FGM has featured on the BBC hospital soap ‘Casualty’.

## ASSISTED DYING

I have received from Dignity in Dying a new and compelling publication under the title *A Matter of Facts*. It collects the key facts relevant to the case for assisted dying:

- Definitions
- Opinion
- Current law
- Present situation
- Numbers
- Safeguards
- Improvements alongside assisted dying
- ‘Slippery slope’
- Concern about undue influence
- Ethics.

Particularly impressive is a foreword by Professor Raymond Tallis, Emeritus Professor of Geriatric Medicine, University of Manchester, significant in that he formerly chaired a leading medical ethics committee that opposed a bill put forward by Lord Joffe to legalise assisted dying for people with terminal illness. He was then personally hostile to the proposed legislation, but now writes “What we did not appreciate was that there was sufficient evidence from countries with assisted dying legislation already in place to show that our concerns were without foundation and that international experience showed that palliative care, though helpful for many patients, was not a panacea...I wish this little book had been available to me when we made that wrong decision. If it had been, I am sure we would have come to a different conclusion – the right one.”

Dignity in Dying also ask me to spread the word about their campaign and do what I can to help recruit new members. So this is my response. Membership is relatively inexpensive: £25 a year or £24 by direct debit (you can, of course, pay more). Contact [info@dignityindying.org.uk](mailto:info@dignityindying.org.uk); tel: 020 7479 7730.

On the same subject, though not from the same source, did you notice that a recent big YouGov poll of religious opinion found large majorities of believers in favour of legalising assisted dying. Only among Baptists and Muslims were there majorities against a change in the law. Predictably, church authorities reacted badly, but ordinary believers have minds of their own. There is a growing conviction that there should be a right to choose when and how to call an end to life: 82 per cent in this poll, including 75 per cent of Catholics. There is, of course, some legitimate concern that vulnerable people might be exploited, a danger which legislation would need to address.

This latest poll reinforces the British Social Attitudes Survey of 2010, which found that 92 per cent of non-religious people and 71 per cent of religious people supported assisted dying.

Lord Falconer tabled the Assisted Dying Bill on 15 May 2013.

## **SOCIAL WORKERS FAILING ADULTS WITH AUTISM**

13 May 2013: The National Autistic Society has found that less than a quarter of people with autism responding to a recent study thought that the social workers with whom they had come into contact had a good understanding of the condition and its impact.

Separate NAS research also found that some 46 per cent of local authorities in England have yet to put training in place to ensure that their community care assessors – the gatekeepers to support for adults with autism – understand the lifelong, disabling condition.

Furthermore, 70 per cent of adults with autism are not getting the help they need from social service departments. As a result they had to rely on parents or friends for support. 7 per cent said they didn’t get help from anyone.

This despite the provisions of the Autism Act 2009 designed to improve support for adults with autism and their families. Various actions to improve autism training have yet to be achieved. This year the coalition government is reviewing the impact of the Act. The Society has launched the ‘Push for Action’ campaign to highlight gaps in support and to urge decision makers to “put the support needs of people with autism front and centre”.

**NAS press release. More at [www.autism.org.uk](http://www.autism.org.uk)**

## **FURTHER CRITICISM OF THE WORK CAPABILITY ASSESSMENT**

Back in February (lest we forget) the Public Accounts Committee reported that the work capability assessment process had a disproportionate impact on the most vulnerable claimants. It found that the standardised ‘tick box’ approach failed adequately to account for rare, variable or mental health conditions

and could lead to greater inaccuracies in decision-making for these claimant groups.

The committee further found that in far too many cases the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) was getting decisions about claimants' fitness for work wrong, at considerable cost to both the taxpayer and the claimant. The Department's decisions were being overturned in 38 per cent of appeals. Such decision-making caused claimants considerable distress, and appeared to be getting worse. This poor decision-making was damaging public confidence and generating a lot of criticism of the DWP's contractor for medical assessments, Atos Healthcare.

Then, the committee put the blame squarely on the DWP, but now (16 May 2013) Greg Wood, a former Royal Navy doctor who resigned from Atos after working as one of its assessors for two and a half years, has alleged that the system is "skewed against the claimant". In an interview with the BBC, Dr Wood said he believed that Atos assessors "are not free to make truly independent recommendations". He felt compelled to speak out because it was "embarrassing to be associated with this shambles".

In a *Guardian* report, Dr Wood is quoted as saying that the attitude drilled into assessors "leans towards finding reasons not to award points...important evidence is frequently missing or never sought in the first place, medical knowledge is twisted and points are often wrongly withheld through the use of an erroneously high standard of proof."

Both Atos and the DWP strenuously refute Dr Wood's claims, said to be "false and damaging". The DWP is also appealing the finding of a judicial review that it had failed to make reasonable adjustments to its tests to ensure that people with mental health problems were treated fairly. And that this failure meant that such claimants were put at a substantial disadvantage.

Details at [www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-22546036](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-22546036), and *Guardian* articles 17 and 23 May 2013.

## **NIGHT SHELTERS MAY FACE CLOSURE**

Also on 16 May 2013, news emerged that the viability of night shelters for homeless people is under threat. Most such shelters rely on the housing benefit entitlement of those who stay overnight. But last year an 'upper tribunal' in Anglesey ruled that the island council was not liable to pay housing benefit to a specific individual to cover the cost of overnight stays at a Holyhead shelter. It held that because the man did not store belongings at the shelter and beds were allocated each night, the shelter could not be regarded as a permanent dwelling.

The Anglesey shelter did not have to close because of this decision, but the ruling has since resulted in the closure of a night shelter in Salford, having been no longer classified as a home. Homeless Link, a membership charity representing and supporting some 500 organisations working with homeless people in the UK, has indicated that another 10 local authorities in England and Wales are reviewing their position on who is legally entitled to benefit.

**Widely reported.**

## **WORK PROGRAMME WOES**

I have previously remarked upon the very limited effectiveness of the government's Work Programme, designed primarily to get long-term unemployed people into work and off benefits. I argued that in the current economic downturn the programme faced a fundamental problem in the paucity of suitable employment opportunities. In February, the Work and Pensions Select Committee reported on the first set of data on job outcomes. This showed that between June 2011 and July 2012 only 3.6 per cent of those referred to the programme moved off benefits and into work, less than a third of the target of 11.9 per cent. The results for 'hard-to-place' people were particularly disappointing, and I concluded it could be inferred that under the system of payment by results it was financially advantageous for contractors to focus on those candidates relatively attractive to employers, and correspondingly to give less attention to those more difficult to place. This tendency has been described as 'creaming and parking'.

On 21 May 2013 the Committee produced a further report. This found that the Work Programme had the potential to work well for "relatively mainstream" jobseekers, but confirmed that it was unlikely to reach the most disadvantaged long-term unemployed people. The Committee's chair, Dame Anne Begg, noticed signs of significant improvement for "mainstream" jobseekers, but found that the programme had proved much less successful in addressing the problems of jobseekers who face more serious obstacles to finding a job: people with disabilities, homeless people, and those with a history of drug or alcohol abuse [surely precisely those the programme was designed to support].

Amelia Gentleman (21 May) and Richard Johnson (22 May) contributed withering articles in *The Guardian*. Johnson observed that the “fundamental flaw is laid bare in the £248m that the committee says the Treasury is clawing back for underspend on the WP in 2012-13: money that was allocated and that contractors haven’t earned.” The latest statistics won’t be available until June.

**I thoroughly recommend the summary, with comments by Dame Anne Begg, at: [www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/work-and-pensions-committee/news/wk-prog-rpt/](http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/work-and-pensions-committee/news/wk-prog-rpt/) .**

## WE HATE NO.66: OLD AGE

*“We do not die wholly at our deaths: we have mouldered away gradually long before. Faculty after faculty, interest after interest, attachment after attachment disappear: we are torn from our selves while living.”*

William Hazlitt: ‘On the Feeling of Immortality in Youth’ (1836)

*“Vex not his ghost: O! let him pass; he hates him that would upon the rack of this tough world stretch him out longer.”*

William Shakespeare: ‘King Lear’ (1603-6)

That there is something unwelcome about old age is evidenced by the number of euphemisms with which we disguise it: later life, third age, elderly, older, senior and so on. But on the whole those who are lucky enough to be healthy feel much as we did sixty years or so ago. We may spend less time preening in front of our bedroom mirrors, fiddling with our hair, but we are apt to think our personality unchanged. We are still sexually drawn to attractive young people, perhaps even more than when we were their age. We fail to see ourselves as others see us and commonly entertain the delusion that we are still ourselves attractive. The brutal reality fully dawns only when people give up their seats to us on the bus, or we catch sight of ourselves on film.

The fact of the matter is that decline has set in much earlier. Obviously the beginning of cellular senescence varies with individuals and their circumstances, but the onset of deterioration (the end of near perfect cellular renewal) is thought to occur between the age range 20 to 35, most noticeably in those making their living through sport. For the rest of us there are various landmarks, such as needing glasses, poorer hearing, failing joints and, as time goes by, reliance on prescription drugs to control such problems as hypertension and heart defects.

All this is perfectly natural. What has changed over recent years is the capacity of medical interventions and scientific progress to slow down the process of ageing and extend longevity. In the UK, as elsewhere, there has been a major shift in life expectancy. The chance of surviving to age 85 has more than doubled over the last three decades, from 14 per cent in 1980-82 to 38 per cent in 2009-11, and is expected to double again by 2030. Life expectancy in the UK averaged out (sorry Peter) at 79.9 years in 2010, and the number of centenarians has nearly quadrupled since 1981. There are already more people in the UK aged 60 and above than there are under the age of 18. Crucially, the number of people aged 65 and over, already over 10 million, is projected to rise by nearly 50 per cent in the next 20 years. Whether all this extra ageing serves any worthwhile purpose is debateable. As the American humorist Josh Billings remarked: “I’ve never known a person to live to 110 or more, and then die, to be remarkable for anything else.” Longevity is commonly seen as a great blessing, but also presents an enormous logistical challenge. It is a time bomb. The gift of added years comes with an expected 32 per cent increase in the number of elderly people with moderate to severe disabilities and up to a 50 per cent rise in over-65s living with chronic diseases, notably arthritis, heart disease, stroke, diabetes and dementia.

On 14 March, a House of Lords select committee, chaired by Lord Filkin, gave a stark warning that the government is “woefully underprepared for ageing”, and that the rapid increase in our elderly population could lead to a series of crises. It reports that big changes are needed in employment practices, pensions, health and social services. The current model of health and social care provision is inadequate. Specifically, a different approach will be needed to integrate our health and social care systems and to support older people in their own homes and in the community, and so avoid needless admissions to hospital. The committee was concerned that the government had not yet properly addressed these problems. It needed to develop a cross-party strategy to consider the wider implication of our ageing society, and called for the early preparation of a White Paper.

David Shenk in *The Forgetting* (2001) conjectures that if doctors back in 1910 had been able to envision

the appalling side effects of medical progress, experienced mostly by people who live into their seventies and beyond, they would have found it very difficult to reconcile with their work. He quotes Hunter College's Harry Moody, who found that: "Modern health care permits growing numbers of people to live to advanced age under circumstances that call into question the meaning of survival." He observes that Olshansky likewise observed that the unprecedented rates of survival into older ages had been accompanied by a rise in frailty and disability in the general population: "a consequence that neither the medical community nor society was prepared for." Shenk goes on to notice that as long ago as 1997 a WHO *State of World Health* report had begun by saying: "Dramatic increases in life expectancy, combined with profound changes in lifestyles, will lead to global epidemics of cancer and other chronic disease in the next two decades. The main result will be a huge increase in human suffering and disability." And scientific research towards even greater longevity goes on. The journal *Nature* reports that US scientists have identified a mechanism within the brains of animals that can be manipulated to extend their lives, but without them suffering problems common in old age.

For the present I see a particularly dismal downside for those who come to suffer from dementia; even more for their families and carers. While it is important to recognise that dementia is not an invariable consequence of old age, nor necessarily confined to older people, its incidence has increased dramatically with our later survival. In these cases, living longer can become an unmitigated curse. In the later stages of the disease sufferers may become disorientated as to time, place and their identity, and, most poignantly, may no longer be able to recognise close relatives and friends; detached from their former lives and the people they hold dear, to all intents and purposes dead though technically still alive. The disease is no respecter of persons, and some famous and gifted sufferers have declined from positions of influence, succumbing to an irreversible loss of their cognitive powers. On 1 May, Radio 5Live ran a phone-in that would have saddened the hardest heart: a collective lament that prompted these brief thoughts.

One-in-three of those of us over 65 will die with dementia. Currently there are thought to be some 820,000 people with some form of the condition in the UK, and many who remain undiagnosed. Their number is expected to double by 2040, and the cost to the Exchequer, currently £23 billion annually, is set to treble. Already, a quarter of hospital beds are occupied by dementia sufferers and 80 per cent of people living in care homes have a form of dementia or severe memory problems. And it will only get worse. Such statistics raise profound questions of medical ethics: a tension between 'quality of life' and 'life at any cost'. Inevitably, at the very least, there will be issues around the merits of medical interventions to extend the lives of people whose quality of life is seen as no longer 'acceptable', but who have passed beyond any capacity to give informed consent either to treatment or its withdrawal. Some of us see such adversity as the 'will of God', believing that 'God' is the only arbiter of life and death issues. Putting it gently, it doesn't say much for the divine will that people should be consigned to a prolonged semi-conscious existence: a cruel god! But those not shackled by such beliefs are equally unable to offer solutions, beyond improving care and alleviating distress as far as possible, while letting 'nature take its course'.

When I last referred to these problems in issue no.38, October 2011 (and I make no apology for returning to it), I quoted Alan Bennett, whose aunt Kathleen had wandered off and perished in a field near the mental hospital to which she had been sent. Such deaths, wrote Bennett, were "better than the ones they would otherwise have died: sitting vacantly in a chair year after year, fed by hand, soiling themselves, waiting without thought or feeling until the decay of the body catches up with the decay of the mind and they can cross the finishing line together. No, to die at the foot of a wall by the verge of the motorway is a better death than that." This time, however, I feel that I should also refer to an alternative perspective. John Bayley, in two books about the last years of caring for his wife, Iris Murdoch, through the affliction of Alzheimer's, found a remarkable consolation in "a kind of merciful indifference, even lightness of heart" as the disease progressed. *The Observer* saw Bayley's first memoir as "the greatest love story of our age". He has come to exemplify endurance: the art of hanging in. But, alas, I don't think we can necessarily expect such a level of dedication in society at large, as loved ones slowly decline towards senility and decrepitude.

Most of us will rejoice that we can live longer, prepared to endure a measure of tribulation along the way, but I wonder if in the great scheme of things the price is already too high. We rightly regard life as precious but are reluctant to accept that death can also be a friend. The reaper is not necessarily grim. He speaks to us through a poem of Matthias Claudius (famously set to music by Schubert, here in the translation of Richard Stokes):

"Give me your hand, you lovely, tender creature!

I am a friend, and do not come to punish,  
Be not afraid! I am not fierce,  
You shall sleep softly in my arms!"

Please, I am anxious to know what readers think.

Derek Kinrade