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VOTES FOR PRISONERS

I was encouraged to read a letter in *The Guardian* (19 June) opposing the government's stance on votes for prisoners. I had felt lonely on this issue, but here was a conglomerate of distinguished academics (including Lord Woolf) arguing that people in prison should not be automatically disenfranchised. What is worrying is that there should be such a difference of opinion between these savants and the vast majority of MPs. No-one, I think, is arguing that the likes of Dale Cregan should keep the vote, but a blanket ban on all prisoners is retrograde.

MISLEADING STATISTICS

Back in *Innovations in Information* (vol.11, no.3, 2005) I wrote about "the dark purveyors of 'spin': at best imparting a favourable bias to a bald and unconvincing narrative, at worst dealing in outright deceit." You will know that such dark arts have not gone away, allegedly most recently manifested in the misuse of false statistics by government departments. In a trenchant article (*Guardian*, 1 June 2013) Peter Wilby, former editor of the *New Statesman*, attacks such mendacity, citing party press releases and the departments concerned with work and pensions, health and education, and quoting Andrew Dilnot, Head of the UK Statistics Authority, in support. Selectivity and mistakes have always been possible but, Wilby asserts, the examples he gives "are surely deliberate attempts to mislead the public". This is no gentle rebuke. "The quotation of statistics," Wilby argues, "is fundamental to modern political debate...Without some faith in ministers' veracity, public trust in democracy withers still further." Politicians, he points out, have resigned for submitting false expense claims, receiving favours from lobbyists, and other deceit, but "telling untruths about official figures is somehow regarded less seriously". He thinks it is time that Dilnot was given the power to punish.

UNIVERSAL CREDIT SCHEME IN DANGER OF FAILING?

Almost submerged by the news surrounding the murder of Lee Rigby was the revelation of the publication of a Cabinet Office review of major government projects. This rates ongoing projects from red (8) to green (32). The findings, coming from the Major Projects Authority, gives an amber-red, cautionary status to no fewer than 23 projects, including Crossrail and HS2. Similarly branded are several DWP projects: the Universal Credit programme, its fraud and error detection work and plans to introduce Personal Independence Payments.

The DWP says that this assessment of Universal Credit is out of date, and that the scheme is now on track for a national rollout in October.



It adds “these updates are all part of responsible project management – helping us spot risks in advance and then deal with them.” Time will tell.

Guardian, 25 May 2013

OUT-OF-HOURS HEALTH CARE

The same issue of *The Guardian* carried news that GP delegates to the annual conference of the British Medical Association, after an impassioned debate, had almost unanimously rejected a call to take back responsibility for providing out-of-hours care. A motion criticising Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt for misrepresentation of GPs to the public and press was defeated 60/40, but in another vote plans for surgeries to open seven days a week, emanating from NHS medical director Sir Bruce Keogh, were rejected.

MARK BRIDGER: DOES THE PUNISHMENT FIT THE CRIME?

I imagine that the whole-life sentence handed down to Mark Bridger for his horrible crime will generally be seen as just and appropriate. But a bit of me wonders whether imprisonment without hope of release is itself inhumane. Previously, the European Court of Human Rights has ruled that because whole-life orders are imposed by a judge only after consideration of the facts of each case, and because there is a provision allowing whole-life prisoners to apply to the Home Secretary for compassionate release [on grounds of great age or infirmity], such sentences do not breach the human rights of the prisoner. Yet I cannot help thinking that perhaps the penalty of life imprisonment is, by reason of its irredeemable protraction, much harsher than would be that of death by execution. It also requires significant expenditure to keep Bridger alive, including that for indefinite, round-the-clock protection from other prisoners.

WHIT-WOO

You may think that wolf-whistling is a relatively modern expression of sexual admiration. Not so. I came across the following passage in Chekhov's *My Life* (1896, translated by Constance Garnett):

“The navvies usually congregated about the taverns and the market-place; they drank, ate, and used bad language, and pursued with shrill whistles every woman of light behaviour who passed by.”

According to Wikipedia, the practice originates from the general call made by boatswain's pipes.

SIGNS OF THE TIMES

- Recourse to foodbanks in 2012/13 was three times that of the previous year (see below).
- A lengthy report by the British Medical Association, *Growing up in the UK*, says that cuts to child benefit, closure of SureStart centres and regressive tax policies are hitting families. Some progress has been made but the BMA is concerned that those improvements are likely to be reversed. It finds that the care provided by UK child health centres is inferior in many regards to that in comparable European countries (<http://bma.org.uk>)
- There is mounting concern about the quality of care services. Despite many good examples across the sector, the performance of some commercial care providers is poor, calling into question whether outsourcing care to for-profit agencies is the ideal model. Care workers are said commonly to subsist at or below the minimum wage level, with visiting staff routinely tagged to track their performance. David Behan, the new CEO of the Care Quality Commission accepts that there is “too much poor care”, and the CQC has also identified reluctance among those receiving care to speak out about deficiencies in services, and has found that providers do not respond well when people do complain (see, in particular, the BBC's *Panorama*, 17 June 2013 and *The Guardian*, 14 June 2013).
- Homelessness has risen for the third successive year, reaching a five-year high, mainly because of cuts to housing benefit. Councils increasingly rely on temporary B&B accommodation. There is particular concern about 16 and 17-year-olds. A Homeless Link report, *No Excuses* (21 June 2013) has found that across 161 councils there were 14,000 approaches in 2012/13 by young people in this age range, many of whom are not being properly housed or assessed by councils (<http://homeless.org.uk>).
- The ‘bedroom tax’ seems to be the most reviled measure since the infamous poll tax. Already, councils are reporting increasing numbers of social tenants with rent arrears. Under the Universal Credit system housing benefit will be paid to tenants rather than their social landlords, thus creating a fresh potential for rent default (see ‘All Together Now! below).
- The National Audit Office has warned that nearly one in eight councils is in danger of being unable

to balance its budget, and nearly one in 10 is under “high financial stress”. In a report published on 7 June the Public Accounts Committee (PAC), observed that local government is halfway through funding reductions of £7.6 billion (between 2011-15). Authorities are also having to cope with reforms to business rates and council tax benefits. In the PAC’s view, the Department for Communities and Local Government has not yet properly understood the implications of these cuts. Hardest hit, so far, have been those authorities where needs for local services are greatest. In some areas, while funding continues to be cut, the demand for services is increasing. If this trend continues there is a risk that the worst-affected councils will be unable to meet their statutory obligations, and serious questions will arise about the viability of some councils

(www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmselect/cmpublic/134/13402.htm).

FOOD POVERTY IN BRITAIN

I last commented on this aspect of life in modern Britain in *Briefing no.56*, April 2013. The Trussell Trust had reported that in the year to April 2012 the number of people having to rely on foodbanks for emergency handouts had reached 128,697, double the total for the previous year. But more recent statistics are even more alarming. The Trust says that in 2012/13 nearly 347,000 people had to solicit at least three days emergency food, approaching triple the total for the previous year. 36.6 per cent of them were children. The number of foodbanks providing help went up by 76 per cent. And demand is thought likely to go on increasing.

These figures follow a report from Kellogg’s released on 5 March that a survey conducted in association with the Centre for Economics and Business Research had found that at least 4.7 million British citizens could be described as being in food poverty. Chris Mould, Executive Chairman of the Trussell Trust, says:

“The sheer volume of people who are turning to foodbanks because they can’t afford food is a wake-up call to the nation that we cannot ignore the hunger on our doorstep. Politicians across the political spectrum urgently need to recognise the real extent of UK food poverty and create fresh policies that better address its underlying causes. This is more important than ever as the impact of the biggest reforms to the welfare state since it began start to take effect. Since April 1st we have already seen increasing numbers of people in crisis being sent to foodbanks with nowhere else to go.”

A recent report, *Walking the Breadline*, from Church Action on Poverty and Oxfam, carries a similar message. It concludes:

“There is clear evidence that the benefit sanctions regime has gone too far and is leading to destitution, hardship and hunger on a large scale.”

From one point of view the foodbank statistics can be seen as the ‘big society’ at its best. But can they not also be regarded as a crushing indictment of the direction of the government’s current economic strategy?

THE TRUTH ABOUT DEMENTIA

Ruth Milligan concurs with my remarks about dementia in the last issue. So, co-incidentally, did Liz Young in a passionate letter to *The Sunday Times*. She dared say that many people “would rather end their lives than suffer the pitiful state of later-stage dementia, when no matter how kind and expert the care, every shred of one’s dignity is ripped away.” But from her own experience the difficulty is that by the time people are showing signs of dementia they no longer accept that there is anything wrong with them, and will insist to professionals that they’re fine. Any previous plans to surrender their lives are forgotten, along with the mental capacity to carry them out.

A ROUND-UP FROM MAGAZINES RECEIVED (a feature I intend to retain)

All Together Now! (June-July 2013) has a piece in Sir Bert Massie’s ‘Sounding Off’ series, headed ‘Bedroom Tax Mess’. Massie has impeccable credentials: former chair of the Disability Rights Commission and for many years a trustee of a national housing association. He says, unequivocally, that the ‘bedroom tax’ makes no sense and should be dropped. The policy is ill-conceived and “will fail because housing associations lack one-bedroom dwellings to which to transfer people”. He goes on to predict that “people

deemed to be under-occupying will have their benefits cut and will accumulate rent arrears”, and traces “this mess” back to a decision of John Major’s government in the 90s to switch funding away from building houses to the payment of housing benefit.

Forward (no.115, June 2013), from the Spinal Injuries Association, extols “the ingenuity of vehicle conversions that allow SCI people to drive again” and has extensive coverage of motoring matters, not least the thirtieth Mobility Roadshow, 27-29 June. But I was disappointed by the manner of its reporting of the ‘bedroom tax’, changes of council tax benefits, personal independence payments and its implications for Motability eligibility: factual and accurate, but oddly accepting.

Disability Now (now online at www.disabilitynow.org.uk) carries an article by Peter White, responding to a critical blog by the *Telegraph*’s Brendan O’Neill on the issue of ‘fitness for work’. Peter is troubled as to whether the impression left by Brendan about the ‘fit for work’ tag bears any relevance to the current labour situation. He argues, as a disabled person, that the issue is not whether “we” are fit for work, but whether current work is fit for “us”. Contrasting the approach to this question in the immediate post-war years (which I well remember) to today’s situation, Peter contends that the current work capability assessment is “more like a gym regime designed by the most bullying of PE teachers with an apparent total disregard between forms of disability”, alongside “a labour market which is just about as unfriendly to disabled people as it can be.” He concludes that if we want to save money keeping people off benefits, someone has to spend money creating jobs that disabled people can do.

Liberty’s spring issue included the following message:

“Since the shocking death of Drummer Lee Rigby in Woolwich last week there have been some calls to resurrect the ‘Snoopers’ Charter’ with the Home Secretary leaving the door open to potentially reviving the Communications Data Bill. This is a cynical and opportunistic response to a horrendous attack – the case in no way demonstrates the need for the Charter.

“As reported in the *Independent* yesterday (28 May), the Bill which would “allow police and the security services unprecedented access to people’s internet communications would not have helped prevent the murder of Lee Rigby, MI5 officers have indicated”

“At times of tragedy, the last things to recycle are discredited ideas that leave us no safer and less free. Rest assured should the Communications Data Bill make an unwanted return we will once again fight against these intrusive proposals.”

The Pensioner (no.253, summer 2013), the magazine of The Civil Service Pensioners’ Alliance, reports that because the Alliance had “major differences of policy” with the National Pensioner’s Convention (NPC) its executive committee has finally decided to propose to this year’s AGM that ‘additional financial assistance’ to the NPC should cease with effect from 31 December 2013, and be redirected into other campaign activities. Over the years 2007 to 2012 such assistance had amounted to around £120,000. To non-members of the Alliance this proposal may seem a purely internal matter, but it could be seen as a microcosm of a political divide in the ranks of senior citizens: the NPC associating itself with “far left” political causes in opposition to the coalition government, and prepared to generate direct action; the Alliance, often seen as right-wing, seeking to change government policies rather than opposing governments - favouring the adoption of “practical and realistic objectives” focused on issues of direct concern to pensioners.

Access by Design (no.133, winter 2012), from the Centre for Accessible Environments, raises “the burning issue”: The Department for Communities and Local Government have begun consulting on proposed changes to the Building Regulations, including [the famous] Part M. As the regulations set the minimum performance standards that building is expected to meet in areas such as accessibility and safety, amongst others, there is growing concern that proposals to simplify some of the standards may impede the work of access professionals, and reverse years of expertly informed and thorough measures. Or will proposed changes ensure standards are more user-friendly? This issue also has an interesting article on the meaning of the term ‘disability’.

Able (May/June 2013) is hugely informative and largely avoids controversy, focusing on inclusivity.

There is even a column by Esther McVey MP, Minister for Disabled People. But it also says that its website at Ablemagazine.co.uk, updated every hour of the day, will “keep your finger on the pulse of disability news”. This is all very positive and not entirely neutral. Currently (4 June), there is a piece that acknowledges that cuts can push some people to thoughts of suicide (this alongside a photograph of a group of protesters). With the launch of its new iPhone and iPad app, it claims to be “the first and only disability magazine in the world to be made available via iTunes. An archive of past issues, as well as its latest offerings, is available. None the less, I’m keeping my books and 78s.

NB (no.86, May/June 2013), the magazine of the RNIB, confines itself to matters of concern to eye health and sight loss professionals. In that context it has a challenging piece on the Work Capability Assessment (WCA), noting that if unable to find work and deemed ineligible for Employment and Support Allowance, blind or partially sighted people will receive only Job Seekers Allowance, which for a single person means that they receive £28 a week less. NB points out: “There are serious problems with how blind and partially sighted people are dealt with in the WCA. For example, someone who cannot understand a hazard in the workplace (and therefore is at risk if faced with a safety hazard) scores points, but a blind person, who can understand, but not see the hazard scores no points, even though also at risk.” It hopes that Dr Paul Litchfield, recently appointed as a new independent reviewer of the WCA will tackle the unfairness of how it treats sight loss.

The Week (no.920, 18 May 2013). This regular magazine summarises the best of the British and foreign media in a way, and to an extent, that I can only envy. If you can’t afford a good daily paper, or want to expand your purview of the press, this is a must. In this particular issue don’t miss the reviews of Richard Holmes’ *Falling Upwards: How we took to the air*, and Alan Johnson’s autobiography of his childhood *This Boy*. The review ends with the wish “that all politicians could be like Alan Johnson – or better still, like his sister, the heroine of this deeply moving and unforgettable memoir.”

Journal of Radical History (vol.11, no 4, 2013) comes from the Thomas Paine Society, and is therefore an invaluable source of often out-of-the-way information about the great radical thinker. It is, in itself, an indication of the importance of Paine that a journal continues to be devoted to the life and works of a citizen who died over 200 years ago. This issue contrasts Paine and William Cobbett, the 250th anniversary of whose birth (9 March 1763) was celebrated this year.

The Bulletin (May/June 2013), from The British Polio Fellowship, reports a Parliamentary Diaspora Event on polio eradication held on the 23 April. Part of the *End of Polio* campaign, it brought together MPs, Rotary International, the UK Department for International Development and diaspora groups. On the following day, the government pledged an extra £300 million over the next six years for polio eradication, including the cost of vaccinating more than 360 million children.

CILIPUpdate (April 2013), from the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals, reports proposals for rebranding, not least, I am pleased to see, for a change of name. CEO Annie Mauger argues that the existing CILIP brand is neither clear nor recognisable, because the name is tricky and has no meaning on its own. “It doesn’t work, so let’s fix it,” she urges. Other content includes the reporting of an important plea for the government to do more to protect heritage and artefacts in war zones. The UK signed up to the 1954 *Hague Convention on the Protection of Cultural Property in the event of Armed Conflict*, but successive UK governments have so far failed to pass laws to make it legally binding. A petition has been created at <http://bit.ly/137CSUB>.

OFT News (online)

The issue of 7 June includes comment from David Fisher, a senior official. He says, at www.oft.gov.uk/news-and-updates/ofthinks/, that barely a day passes without stories about problems created by payday loans for some of the most vulnerable people in our society. Tackling them, says David, is a priority for the OFT. Three payday lenders have already had their consumer credit licences revoked, and all such lenders – over 200 of them – have been told that they risk losing their licences if they fail to put things right. David acknowledges that the Public Accounts Committee has criticised the OFT’s approach to regulating consumer

credit markets, but points out that that the Office operates under legislative constraints. From April 2014, regulation of consumer credit will pass to the Financial Conduct Authority, which has more resources and more powers than the OFT.

Elsewhere in the newsletter there is a piece on the challenge faced by government, regulators and contracting authorities as to how to facilitate the “orderly exit” of failing public service providers in a way that minimises disruption and protects service users.

THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMAS

In a letter to *The Times*, Pippa Kelly, styling herself a pedant, brings out the distinction between ‘finding inspiration in cooking his family and his dog’ and ‘finding inspiration in cooking, his family and his dog’. In my formative years, I recall my father pointing out to me a similar error in writing: ‘I bought some buns, sat on the steps of St George’s Hall and ate them’. This along with his advice not to say ‘I never did nothing’. Thanks dad. Nothing pedantic there.

FEEDBACK

From Maurice Glassman, former chair of the Forum: “With regard to ‘We Hate’ no.66, Old Age.

Now in my eighty-eighth year, and probably one of your more elderly readers, I am fortunate in being able to say that Isabella and I are still coping, and generally enjoying life, tho’ our trips to exhibitions, theatre, concerts and such are now fairly rare occurrences (‘Is the pain worth the gain?...’). It is not the expectation of death which is the problem, although there is concern about the possible impact on family, but it is the manner of dying. So I hope that the parliamentary ‘assisted dying’ proposals are successful.”

From John Beasley, Editor ‘Peckham Society News’: “Derek rightly comments on the importance of public health. Britain’s biggest drug problem is caused by alcohol, yet many people are not aware that it is a drug. As someone who has consumed no alcohol sine the age of 13 and who still loves playing cricket at 68, I am convinced that there would be a reduction in problems caused by alcohol if there was a national campaign to make people aware of the option and many benefits of healthy and safe alcohol-free lifestyles - and that a huge amount of fun can be enjoyed without drinking any alcohol.

“On a different subject raised in June’s News Briefing, I must say as an active church member who has a very low pain threshold, I wish there was a law which allowed a medical doctor to prescribe a fatal dose of a drug at the request of someone suffering pain that could not be stopped in any other way.”

DIGITAL DISADVANTAGE

The May issue of *CILIPUpdate* says that the government’s ‘Digital by default’ agenda advocates that services should be designed first for the web, but that there is still a sizeable minority of people in the UK who are digitally excluded. In the first quarter of 2012, 8.12 million adults (16.1 per cent) had never used the internet, including 3.35 million people aged 75 years and over and 4.04 million disabled adults. Of people in employment, those on lower incomes are less likely to use the internet.

CILIP highlights the important role of librarians in supporting people “as they take their first tentative steps online.”

ACCIDENT AND EMERGENCY DEPARTMENTS CLOSE TO “CLIFF EDGE”

21 May 2013: The Guardian Healthcare Professionals Network blog and the BBC reported a statement issued by Mike Farrar, CEO of the NHS Confederation, ahead of his appearance at a Commons Health Committee. He said that pressures on A&Es were growing, arguing that “we are getting closer and closer to the cliff edge”. If admissions continued to increase at the rate they have been doing over the last decade, it would be impossible for hospital services to cope, despite the heroic efforts of staff to date. But the ‘blame game’ as to which parts of the NHS are at fault does not help. Farrar is quoted as saying:

“There is no use in pointing the finger at patients, or any one part of the system when in reality it is a perfect storm of different mounting pressures causing our problems - GPs, hospitals, NHS 111, the ambulance service and social care. These pressures have been compounded by three years of major structural reforms, a lack of honesty about the situation we face, and the service not being able to respond quickly enough to the financial pressures it faces. The problems that longer waiting times in A&E highlight are an inability of the service to manage the flow of patients across and between our organisations. In particular, it reveals the imbalance of

investment in primary, community and social care compared to hospital care. This runs contrary to the strategy that governments, NHS leaders, the public and patients all feel to be essential for a sustainable NHS. People may march on the streets to protect local hospital services but the vast majority would rather stay healthy and remain living independently with the support of primary and social care for as long as possible. This depends on getting the balance as well as the level of investment in services right. If we don't, many people will experience the prospect of waiting longer again for the care they need."

Farrar called for urgent action to bring all parts of the service together to ensure patients have access to "the right services, in the right place at the right time".

PUBLIC HEALTH IN ENGLAND

3 June 2013: *The Guardian* reports that Sir Liam Donaldson, professor of health policy at London's Imperial College and patient safety envoy for the World Health Organisation, has expressed concern that Britain is "falling behind in matters of public health". But I have it from a trusted source that the sector is alive and kicking.

One interesting initiative from Public Health England (PHE) is the publication of variations in mortality rates across the country (<http://longerlives.phe.org.uk>). The website allows local people to see easily how their areas perform on early deaths from the major four killers: cancer, heart disease/stroke, lung disease and liver disease, and how this varies across the country. Using a traffic-light rating system, it ranks areas showing those performing above average in tackling avoidable deaths as green, and exposes the worst that need to do more as red.

The website contains a range of data that, for the first time, allows people easily to compare an area's mortality performance against those with similar populations, incomes and levels of health. Overall it shows that the north of England has a higher risk of early death than the south, but when comparing areas of a similar socio-economic status it reveals a more complex picture. Some areas do well on most measures, but some have concerning scores for just one or two conditions.

The data and website will provide local areas with information to help them understand their own position and better target efforts to improve the public's health.

Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt said: "This shocking variation in early and unnecessary deaths means people's lives are needlessly cut short, and that cannot continue unchecked. I want areas to use the data released today to identify local public health challenges like smoking, drinking and obesity and to take action to help achieve our ambition for saving 30,000 lives a year by 2020.

"Being more transparent will also allow professionals and the public to see how their local area is performing over time, allowing them to intervene and make improvements happen.

"Efforts to improve public health, such as smoking cessation, improved diet and early diagnosis, could dramatically reduce the 103,000 avoidable premature deaths in England every year.

"Experts believe a person's likelihood of dying prematurely from one of the top four killers varies widely between local authorities due to differences in risk factors, such as obesity, alcohol and smoking, and socioeconomic determinants [does he mean poverty?]."

Professor John Newton, Chief Knowledge Officer at PHE, said: "Longer Lives comes at a time when the health and care system is undergoing great change and will support local government in its new role as the champion for their public's health.

"Deaths in England under age 75 place us seventh out of 17 European countries for men and 15th for women, and must improve. For premature deaths caused by lung disease, we are 16th, and figures for liver disease deaths are worsening compared with European improvement.

"Longer Lives is an initiative presenting a clear picture of health in local areas – where it is good and bad – so everyone involved can consider and agree how to make improvements from a common basis of knowledge. The data is provided alongside evidence of what needs to be done as well as case studies and will increase in scope and richness.

"Working with their Clinical Commissioning Group partners through health and wellbeing boards, local councils have a pivotal role in leading the local health and care system to improve the health of their local communities.

"Local councils were given responsibility for public health in April 2013 as part of a move to empower local areas to make real change. To help them deliver these improvements the government has given them £5.46bn of ring-fenced funding over the next two years.

“By bringing together the data on premature deaths it is hoped that local councils will be able to gain insight into the situations they have inherited, allowing them to identify areas of concern and take action.”

There are wide variations across the country. For example, the divergence between extremes for early death from lung disease is more than as fourfold: 13.7 per 100,000 in Bromley, South London against 62 per 100,000 in Blackpool. Overall, premature mortality varies from 200.3 per 100,000 (Wokingham) to 455 per 100,000 (Manchester). Local authorities and the NHS are challenged to respond accordingly through better health interventions and action to encourage healthy lifestyles. PHE says that two-thirds of the country's 150,000 annual deaths are potentially avoidable.

For more information contact the Department of Health on 020 7210 4990 or Public Health England on 020 7654 8400.

REMEMBERING AN EARLIER STRUGGLE

4 June 2013: This was the centenary of Emily Davison's fatal and foolhardy protest in pursuit of women's suffrage at the Epsom Derby. She had previously been jailed nine times and force-fed on 49 occasions. It is now widely believed that she was not contemplating suicide, but died when attempting to attach a sash to King George V's horse Anmer.

Reports of this historic debacle sent me scurrying to listen again to my 1908 gramophone record of Christabel Pankhurst, recorded on 18 December, only a few hours after her release from Holloway Prison. This is part of what she said nearly 105 years ago:

“Women have not been able to bring pressure to bear upon the government, and government responds only to pressure. Men got the vote not by persuading but by alarming the legislators. Similar vigorous methods must be adopted by women. The excesses of men must be avoided, yet great determination must be shown... repressive legislation makes protest at public meetings an offence, but imprisonment will not deter women from [] the vote. Deputation to Parliament involves arrest and imprisonment, yet more deputations will go to the House of Commons.

“The present Liberal government professes to believe in democratic government, yet they refuse to carry out their principles in the case of women. They must be compelled by a united and determined women's movement to do justice in this matter.”

Ms. Pankhurst, with her mother Emmeline, had formed the Women's Social and Political Union in 1903. She explained some of her thoughts and objectives in an interview with E.M.Evors in *Hearth and Home*, 10 November 1910 (*The Penguin Book of Interviews*, 1994). I particularly liked this extract:

“The fact is, men are afraid of change, although when the changes are made they accept them without any fuss. Look at the changes that have come to women in the last hundred years. And yet men like us still. They would not like us to be the fainting, weeping, weak-minded creatures we used once to be. They like us as we are now.”

I think I would have liked Christabel. A message here, I think, to be similarly active in campaigning for social change today.

MORE HEALTH ISSUES

6-7 June 2013: Detailed coverage of the recent NHS Confederation annual conference in Liverpool can be found at www.guardian.co.uk/healthcare-network. The following summary is highly selective (this being a briefing).

Commenting on the pressures on Accident and Emergency departments, Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt said that the underlying causes need to be looked at; addressing the needs of the heaviest users of the NHS: vulnerable older people. A plan for such patients, looking at emergency care, is being conducted by Sir Bruce Keogh. It should be concluded by the autumn and implemented by next April. Hunt also called for action to tackle the performance variation between hospitals: “still much too high” and calling for a new inspection regime. He went on to say that coverage of the A&E pressures and the Mid Staffs scandal could give the impression of “an NHS on the brink”, but he does not see the NHS as facing a crisis. Rather, the challenges it faces are the same worldwide: financial pressure, the demands of an ageing population, and shifting the focus from care to prevention.

Sir David Nicholson, Chief Executive NHS England, who is to retire in March 2014, said that the NHS, having been given “a huge mountain to climb”, had made remarkable progress. He was incensed at those who criticised GPs, and spoke of a “wasted two years” following the 2010 General Election, spent

on reorganisation. “We cannot let the tyranny of the electoral cycle stop us from making the real and fundamental changes that we need to make to the NHS.” He went on to say that it is for healthcare leaders, rather than politicians, to think about a long-term plan to give the NHS stability, engaging the whole population in these important issues. For him, the most important thing to come out of the Francis report is the need to listen to patients and then do something about it.

On day two, Andy Burnham, Shadow Health Secretary, introduced his vision of a person-centred integrated health and social care service. Labour [if elected] would have to repeal the shoddy legislation brought in by the coalition, which was “not worthy of the NHS”. He argued that the system needs a complete overhaul – a full integration, merging health and social care, with home as the default setting for care. In a panel discussion he contended that within the Department of Health social care, mental health and health operate in silos. Comments in response included the fact that it would be difficult to bring together healthcare (free at the point of delivery) and social care (means tested).

But the idea that healthcare is free is mistaken. It is financed from taxation, including National Insurance. I think that in bringing health and social care together we should be aiming, at least as regards basic provision, to meet the cost from the Exchequer. Not easy, and inevitably requiring a significant increase in taxes.

As to making home the default setting for care, has Burnham taken account of the recently reported deficiencies in the services provided by some commercial providers?

And while we are considering this overdue merger, isn't it time similarly to accept that the social and medical models of disability are *both* valid and compatible, not opposing ideologies?]

WE HATE NO. 67: FAITH SCHOOLS

“There is a real danger that the growth in faith schools today will be blamed in 30 years’ time for the social disharmony then. It is not too late to reverse that trend, if we want a society that has diversity within unity, not at the expense of it.”

Rabbi Dr Jonathan Romain

“...in a climate that is increasingly unfavourable to these [Christian] beliefs, it is a mistake to try to impose them on children, and to make them the basis of moral training. The moral education of children is much too important a matter to be built on such foundations.”

Margaret Knight: ‘Morals without religion and other essays’ (1955), from a BBC Home Service broadcast, January 1955.

This is not an attack upon faith, and my feelings are of profound regret rather than hatred. People are entitled to believe anything they wish, however unlikely. My argument is that the propagation of belief systems has no place in our schools; that education is more properly directed to information that encourages open thought and questioning, not the indoctrination of young minds with narrow, sectarian doctrines. As Francis Westoby put it, some years ago, in a letter to *The Guardian*: “inhibiting their ability to think clearly about social and ethical problems, and to reach reasoned judgments about the natural world”. I am convinced that the encouragement of faith schools and their growth in this country, though generally seen as an expression of British tolerance and acceptance of diversity is in reality divisive.

I believe that subscribing to and promulgating traditional dogma and thinking within only a closed religious box does nothing for cross-cultural understanding and community cohesion. Moreover, and in particular, that beliefs which identify homosexuality as a sin and relegate women to institutional inferiority are not conducive to social progress. Integration and equality are generally accepted as desirable objectives, but some schools rooted in traditional values, although teaching the national curriculum and often setting good academic standards, appear also to be set on a different course, seeking to avoid what they see as cross-contamination, distancing their scholars from peers outside the faith and by implication encouraging the idea that their religious beliefs set them apart from and superior to the rest of society, in a special relationship with their God.

Of course, faith schools are not necessarily radical or fanatical. I attended a Church of England primary school in Toxteth where my only contact with religious ideas was a very occasional, wholly mysterious service in an adjacent church named after the obscure St. Silas. I cannot recall any classes in religious education. And today I accept that not all schools, although established by people of faith, are primarily

bent on religious indoctrination. But the danger is that some faith schools can be breeding grounds for deep-seated prejudice, passing the bigotry, eccentricity and social isolation of one generation to the next. A More4News inquiry, some while ago, found that many faith schools, some of them state funded, still taught creationism!

There is an argument that it is a fundamental human right to be able to choose to educate your child in accordance with your own religious beliefs. But as someone close to me put it: “That supposes a right to pass on any tosh they see fit”. I would have said, less directly, that it ignores the right of children not to be brain-washed with the outlandish views of their parents.

Yet the determination of sectarian leaders to preserve their esoteric faith within families is intense and has indeed been encouraged by government; notwithstanding the challenge it presents to enlightened and broad educational principles: even to the point of tolerating the selection of staff and pupils according to their particular religious affiliations.

Roughly one third of our schools are now faith schools. As Polly Toynbee has commented, while pews empty, faith schools multiply. It is a curious paradox that while surveys and polls indicate that the population of the UK is increasingly secular, there is an inverse growth of schools of a religious character. Our coalition government demonstrated its intention to stoke this contradiction from the outset, announcing that it would “work with faith groups to enable more faith schools”. And the Department for Education has just announced (22 May 2013) approval of 102 new ‘free’ schools due to open from September 2014. They include 25 new religious schools. According to the British Humanist Society (BHA), in Northern Ireland more than 92 per cent of children attend either a Protestant or Catholic schools and there are no plans for change. In England almost all voluntary schools are said to have a religious character, as are 34 per cent of state schools. Their number has increased in recent years as successive governments have responded to the influence of religious groups in state-funded education, predominantly from the Church of England.

BHA’s aspiration, which I share, is simple. It wants pupils from all different backgrounds educated together in a shared environment, rather than separated according to the religious beliefs of their parents. An ongoing campaign seeks four basic aims:

- to end religious discrimination in school admissions.
- to end religious discrimination in school employment.
- to achieve progressive reform of the school curriculum, including religious, scientific and PSHE (personal, social, health and economic) education.
- to replace mandatory religious collective worship with inclusive assemblies.

At present, faith schools are allowed to discriminate to varying extents in their admissions, recruitment and employment policies. Many give preference to children from families that share their religion, or at the least who otherwise are religious believers. I regard this as discriminatory, inevitably leading to segregation within communities. It has also been asserted that the policies of some faith schools are such as to admit fewer children from poorer families – those entitled to free school meals. An article in *The Guardian* (5 March 2013), headed ‘Church schools shun poorest pupils’, declared that by shunning the poorest pupils in their area England’s faith schools failed to mirror their local communities. A similar exclusivity can obtain in matters of recruitment and employment: a rejection of applicants of no religion or the ‘wrong’ religion.

Most faith schools are allowed to frame their own syllabus for religious education and, unsurprisingly, often aim to instruct children in the doctrine and practices of a particular religion. Nor is this aspect of the curriculum subject to Ofsted inspection. They are also free to teach PSHE subjects from a religious perspective. This includes sex education. The BHA is particularly concerned that sex and relationship components – if included at all – may be taught in ways that are homophobic and gender discriminatory, violate human rights principles, or are otherwise inadequate (notably in relation to contraception and abortion).

I am very much in favour of diversity. We should be free to follow different political and cultural traditions – or not. But education is a special case. I believe that our children should be instructed from a broad, factual base, not narrowly and selectively directed along lines of esoteric, exceptional – and personal - beliefs.