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A Digest of Current Social Information

News Briefing No. 62. October 2013

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BENEFIT CHEATS MAY FACE UP TO 10 YEARS IN JAIL

16 September 2013: This new guidance from the Director of Public Prosecutions, Keir Starmer QC, has been wrongly construed in some places: as though benefit fraud is being singled out for harsh punishment. That would be seen as politically motivated and discriminatory. The CPS's strategy is merely one of bringing welfare cheating into line with other offences under the Fraud Act. Up to now, benefit frauds involving less than £20,000 have been automatically tried in magistrates' courts, limited to sentences of only 12 months for multiple offences (six months for a single offence). Above that threshold, cases might be brought under social security legislation, with a maximum penalty of seven years imprisonment.

The flaws I see in the new guidance are that in dealing with cheating benefit claimants prison will often be more costly than the amounts defrauded and may not deter people who may feel that they would be better off in jail.

HARD TIMES

4 September 2013: Prime Minister's Questions returned today and was marked, I thought, by an air of self congratulation, complacency, even smugness, on the Tory side. The prevailing theme on that side of the House was that economic recovery was at last on the way. Times may still be tough, but there are 'green shoots' that promise a return to prosperity. Well, that may be true for some of us, but it certainly isn't for those at the lower end of society, who are struggling to make ends meet and face a winter without the resources to do so. *The Guardian* leader for 9 September is headed 'Green shoots for whom?' Osborne et al may be happy with plan A, but in my view it has already gone too far.

10 September 2013: In his speech to the Trades Union Congress Ed Miliband, Labour leader, also disparaged the nature of Britain's economic recovery, referring to: "1.4 million people, more than ever before, desperate for full-time work but able only to get part-time work. It is not their recovery. And all the millions of people who are seeing their living standards falling year on year under this government: it is not their recovery either. It is a recovery for a few. It is an unfair recovery. An unequal recovery."

MILITARY INTERVENTION

28 August 2013: I began compiling this 62nd *Briefing* as Parliament was about to debate the merits of military intervention against the Syrian government. It was somewhat reassuring that there should be a debate at



all, and gratifying that Labour ensured a cautious approach. By pure coincidence, in the course of researching the setting up of a local volunteer force in the 1850s, I came across the following comments in a training manual for volunteer riflemen published by John Boucher:

“War is the endemical disease of nations...as old as the history of the human race; and until the culture of mankind attains to such perfection as to admit of the creation of a supreme tribunal vested with the power to judge and decide between nations, or rather upon their differences and quarrels, wars will ever arise, and armies be raised and maintained.”

Boucher goes on to notice that nothing has yet prevailed against those with power:

with their misplaced ambition and blindness for plunging into war, on the most vain, frivolous and unjust pretences.”

(from the introduction to *The Volunteer Rifleman, and the Rifle*, originally written in 1853, but taken from the 1860 edition.)

POVERTY-ON-SEA

5 August 2013 (missed from my last Briefing): The headline is from the *Daily Telegraph*, reporting a warning from The Centre for Social Justice that some coastal resorts are being used to accommodate vulnerable people reliant on state benefits. The CSJ was told that “some councils in high cost areas” are taking advantage of cheap accommodation in seaside towns. So that resorts already in decline have become ‘dumping grounds’, further depressing their desirability and perpetuating the cycle.

Of 20 neighbourhoods with the highest levels of working-age people on out-of-work benefits, seven are in once attractive coastal towns. The CSJ report, *Turning the Tide*, examines five of them: Rhyl, Margate, Clacton, Great Yarmouth and Blackpool. Jaywick Sands, south of Clacton, is identified as Britain’s most deprived area.

A pity about historic resorts becoming landfill for down-and-outs, but the greater concern, surely, is that people are being ‘dumped’ at all.

FEEDBACK

From John Vincent: I liked this issue too, especially the piece on class: I thought that Owen Jones’s book was brilliant up to a point – the point where he got stuck, for me at least, was how working class people/values should be portrayed positively today. This may sound odd (!) but one of the most interesting pieces on class that I’ve seen recently was the two-part TV series by Paul O’Grady (apparently reduced from three because it became ‘too political’ for the BBC!) – he did begin to tackle what it means to identify as working class today, with an emphasis on values... Incidentally, the Equality Act did originally include class, but it was the first area to be cut out by the coalition.

IDEAS FOR A LABOUR MANIFESTO

14 August 2013 (also missed): In a letter to *The Guardian*, John Walton suggested a number of key policies that were particularly well received:

- repeal the coalition’s NHS legislation and start again
- impose effective regulation of privatised utilities, capping their profits and prices
- take the railways back into public ownership as their franchises end
- abandon PFI and find ways to terminate existing contracts
- stop privatising
- cap rents in the private sector
- begin a social housing programme
- make the living wage mandatory
- stop persecuting the unemployed and disabled, and sack Atos
- clear out “the Augean stables” of HMRC
- start collecting taxes from the rich
- shift taxation from basic income and consumption towards property
- abandon Trident and new aircraft carriers
- convert shipyards and nuclear weapons facilities to producing green energy
- stop fracking
- invest in home insulation

- mount a full investigation into the illicit activities of the police and special branch
- ban lobbying and remove private interests from direct influence on government
- implement Leveson.

On 20 August, Caroline Lucas MP pointed out that almost all these proposals are already established Green Party policy. Ms Lucas thus achieved the contortion of appearing on page 1 (picture of her arrest at the Balcombe fracking protest) and the letters page of the same issue of *The Guardian*.

GENERAL PRACTITIONERS UNDER PRESSURE

17 August 2103: A survey by the Royal College of General Practitioners reveals that nearly half of GP respondents have already cut back on the services they provide for patients, and over 70 per cent predict longer waiting times for appointments within the next two years. More than 80 per cent said that they now have insufficient resources to provide high quality patient care.

Particularly disturbing is the fact that four out of every five GPs expressed concern that it will become increasingly difficult to deliver continuity of care to vulnerable elderly people. And 72 per cent of GPs in England said that the amount of time they can give to frontline patient care has already been reduced as a result of the new clinical commissioning responsibilities they have been given.

The survey is the latest in a series highlighting a growing crisis in general practice.

RCGP press release.

SUPPORT FOR A 'LIVING WAGE'

24 August 2013 (still catching up): Speaking in Edinburgh, leader of the Opposition, Ed Miliband, pledged the introduction of a national living wage as a priority for the next Labour government.

HIGH EARNERS IN THE NHS

At the other end of the scale, executives with NHS England are doing rather well. 48 of them earn more than the Prime Minister's annual salary of £142,500, and no fewer than 291 get more than £100,000. It is claimed that the number of managers in senior roles has been significantly reduced, but it appears that fat salaries still abound.

A ROUND-UP FROM MAGAZINES (AND MESSAGES) RECEIVED

Able, September/October 2013: Topically, given that Billy Connolly has been diagnosed with early stage Parkinson's Disease, this issue brings hope that a cure is "one step closer" thanks to stem cell research at the University of Bedfordshire. There is also a timely reminder that the achievements of a number of disabled people pre-dated recent sporting success: that "the broad field of human endeavour has had its fair share of disabled people that [sic] have helped to shape the world we live in". Some of them are featured, with photographs, accompanied by a discussion as to whether their disabilities were inspirational or simply something they defiantly overcame. The reader is asked if their "top pick" was missed. Well, yes, mine would be the great violinist Itzhak Perlman.

Not to be missed in a wider context is lengthy coverage about pain. And much more stimulating information. Superb!

Campaign (Dignity in Dying), no.3, 2013: A concise account of everything that is happening in the campaign for assisted dying, attracting more and more hi-profile supporters. Outstanding is an article by Paul Chamberlain, a retired chartered accountant who has progressive motor neurone disease. He spells out his present options: potentially a very unpleasant death, a journey to Switzerland for help to die, or an amateur attempt at suicide. He argues that there should be a fourth way: a certain and peaceful death, with a drug provided by a doctor, at home and surrounded by his family. "It would," he says, "be of enormous comfort to me and my family if a peaceful end was available when the time is right for me."

No less persuasive is Alva de Chiro's account of her proposal at the AGM of the Townswomen's Guild to "support a change in the law to allow for terminally ill, mentally competent people to have a right to an assisted death". Somewhat to her surprise the resolution won their support.

CILIPUpdate, September 2013: While mainly of interest to library professionals, this issue has

two articles of wide and significant interest. In one, Peter Chapman makes the case for the continued preservation of printed copies of official documents, in addition to their publication on the internet. Peter is co-ordinator of the Scoop (Standing Committee on Official Communications) project 'Print Still Matters'. The same, I think, applies to many publications of historic interest.

In the second feature, Megan Roberts imparts her own experience of social media, and the impact it has had on her own career. As she says: "We're bombarded with messages about how important social media is – or how irrelevant it is – depending on who's doing the bombarding."

NB magazine (RNIB), September/October 2013: Leads on two shocking reports released by RNIB which reveal that people with sight loss are facing alarming hurdles in attempting to access social care and rehabilitation services. Access to such services is said to be "facing a crisis". Some local authorities are offering no rehabilitation service at all for newly registered and blind people, or are waiting until they are assessed for funded care. Editor Olufunmi Majekodunmi comments: "If the current situation continues – and as one of the reports so chillingly puts it – in less than a decade, no blind or partially sighted person will receive any form of care and support from their local authority." The magazine announces and spells out a campaign to restore and improve services.

Later in this definitive periodical Matt Davies provides an overview of the progress of the Children and Families Bill and the Care Bill. The former bill promises major changes to Special Educational Needs provision, including the replacement of 'statements' with Education Health and Care Plans. The government will be consulting on a code of practice to underpin the proposed changes, and RNIB encourages professional, parents, carers and campaigners to respond.

The Week, 24 August 2013: I was particularly interested in a piece on page 14, drawn from *Telegraph.co.uk*, in which Sean Thomas argues that belief in God confers remarkable health benefits. Believers, he claims, live healthier and more fulfilled lives, have better mental health, and give more to charity. Suspecting that he might be right, I returned to Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*. And lo, Professor Dawkins accepts that many people who concede that God probably doesn't exist and is not necessary for morality still assert a psychological or emotional need for a god (p.352). But, he points out, none of this reliance on a supreme being contributes "the tiniest jot or tittle of evidence that religious belief is true". As usual, however, *The Week's* selection of reports has made me think. Having thought, I believe we are here concerned with a placebo effect and a developmental inadequacy in the human psyche.

The Pensioner, Civil Service Pensioners' Alliance, Autumn 2013: This is a big read that tackles the issues of the day head-on and in detail. Because its members espouse a range of political views, it steers clear of ideology, but embraces controversy, and reports the nitty-gritty of policy developments. Thus there are well-crafted reports on major business in parliament, the devolved assemblies and the 'pensioners' parliament', as well as exposure of other topics vital to the lives of older people (such as Age UK's campaign 'Care in Crisis'). The agenda of the Alliance's AGM, with its raft of motions including organisation, pensions, care, health and taxation, shows an organisation in rude and vibrant health.

NIQAB HELD TO BE INAPPROPRIATE IN COURT PROCEEDINGS

24 August 2013: In *Briefing* no 12, August 2009, I suggested, with Ann, that thinking Muslims should abandon the burqa, quoting Nicolas Sarkozy's view that "we can't accept women prisoners behind a screen, cut off from all social life, deprived of all identity." The French president wasn't thinking in a judicial sense, but in a recent case a British court has narrowly reiterated the principle. Judge Peter Murphy rejected a submission that, because of her religion, the defendant was not prepared to lower her veil while men were in the room. He held that the principle of open justice overrode the woman's religious beliefs: "It is necessary for this court to be satisfied that they can recognise the defendant." The case was adjourned for further legal argument over whether or not the defendant should have to remove her veil.

16 September: You will by now be aware that the judge wisely ruled that the defendant should uncover her face while giving evidence.

See *The Guardian* for detailed argument.

THE LIVES OF OLDER PEOPLE

The 2011 census revealed that 14 per cent of pensioners in England and Wales were providing unpaid care. 9.2 per cent of residents of the two countries were aged 65 or over (a million more than in 2001), 10 per cent of whom were employed or were seeking work.

Office of National Statistics

WHO CARES?

17 September 2013: The sad fate of Gloria Foster provides yet one more example of what a *Guardian* leader calls “a bureaucratic catastrophe” of breakdown in home care provision. A report into the circumstances of her death finds that social workers failed to make alternative arrangements for 81-year-old Mrs Foster when the agency on which she had depended, Carefirst24, was raided by the UK Border Agency and closed down. Living alone at home, Mrs Foster died after being left unattended, forgotten and without food or medication for nine days. Given the scale of needs across the country, and the widespread inadequacies in local authority financing, regulation and leadership, along with the kind of workforce generally devoted to home care, the leader writer infers that there is a wider problem and that councils are increasingly remote from the level of service provided in their name.

ROUND ABOUT A POUND A WEEK

27 August 2013: Polly Toynbee’s *Guardian* column is always interesting, but never more so than her recollection of the book that changed her: Pember Reeves’ *Round About a Pound a Week*. Her comments are easily missed, but significant. As she concludes: “This remarkable book is a good reminder of how far we came, but a reminder too that the argument never changes: is poverty caused by fecklessness and ‘dependency’, or by sub-survival rates of pay?” The public mood, reflected in the vote against military intervention in Syria, gives hope that the tide may be turning; that Britain may yet again become a bastion of compassion.

LETTERS AND E.MAILS TO THE GUARDIAN

This page, under the heading ‘Reply’, is always a delight; that of 28 August exceptionally so. There you can find:

- clarification of the legal boundaries around military action against the Syrian government.
- recognition of the difficulty of loving one’s neighbour as oneself, with a reminder of Rabbi Hillel’s alternative: ‘What is hateful to you, do not do to another’.
- a call on Lord Sacks to “explain why it is only since the Enlightenment that we have seen the abolition of slavery and child labour, the establishment of universal education, healthcare and social security, and the drafting of anti-discrimination legislation – none of which were present as recently as 500 years ago when the only secularists around were in the closet or being burnt at the stake.”
- a reminder that Martin Luther King also said “America has given the Negro people a bad cheque marked ‘insufficient funds’, an assertion that was not true then and is not true now in relation to the poorest citizens of the UK (of every ethnic origin).

OFT DECISION IN MOBILITY SCOOTERS CASE

5 August 2013: The OFT issued a decision finding that Roma Medical Aids Limited (Roma), a manufacturer of mobility scooters based in Bridgend, Wales, and some of its online retailers, had breached competition law.

The OFT found that Roma had entered into arrangements with seven UK-wide online retailers which prevented them from selling Roma-branded mobility scooters online and from advertising their prices online. The OFT found that these practices, which prevented, restricted or distorted competition in the supply of mobility scooters in the UK between 2011-12, limited consumers’ choice and obstructed their ability to compare prices and get value for money.

Cavendish Elithorn, OFT Senior Director, Goods and Consumer Group, said: “Mobility scooters by definition tend to be sold to vulnerable consumers who may have trouble visiting a number of stores. Our 2011 market study into mobility aids found that mobility scooters in general can vary in price by over £1000 for the identical product and we have even seen price differences of £3000. It is therefore vitally important that consumers can use all the advantages of the internet to get a good price on this essential product and that innovative and efficient companies should not be prevented from winning new customers.”

The OFT estimated that the value of the UK mobility aids sector in 2011 was between £430 million and £510 million. The investigation of concerns in this sector continues.

OFT News

NATIONAL GROUP TO TACKLE SEXUAL VIOLENCE

5 August 2013: The government has set up a national group to tackle sexual violence against children and vulnerable people. The group brings together experts to co-ordinate and implement learning from recent inquiries into historic sexual abuse and current sexual violence prevention issues.

The group will work to improve cross-government delivery, identify problems and solutions, and act swiftly to resolve them. It has already identified nine key areas for action, and is prioritising action to prevent abuse happening in the first place, protect children online, make sure the police can identify and deal with problems, and ensure victims are at the heart of the criminal justice system.

Both historical cases into child abuse and recent cases of organised child sexual exploitation raise a number of important issues for the government, social services, the police, the criminal justice system and others. Membership of the national group includes key partners such as the police, the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS), government departments and, very importantly, experts such as the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP), Barnados, Rape Crisis and the NSPCC.

NHS England published *Securing excellence in commissioning sexual assault services for people who experience sexual violence* on 13 June 2013. This aims to support commissioners in delivering a consistent, high quality approach to the delivery of services to secure the best outcomes for victims of sexual assault and rape.

Department of Health press release

ASSISTED DYING

As a result of rescheduling of second reading debates, Lord Falconer's Assisted Dying Bill may not be taken in the current parliamentary year. As a precaution, the bill has also been tabled for the 2014-15 year.

The arguments for assisted dying have now been brought together in a book to be published on 31 January 2014, edited by Lesley Close and Jo Cartwright. It will then be available from Peter Owen Publishers, 81 Ridge Road, London N8 9NP, tel: 020 8350 1775, e.mail: info@peterowen.com.

18 September 2013: Professor Stephen Hawking, previously opposed to assisted dying, has come round to believe that terminally ill people in great pain should have the right to choose to end their lives, subject to appropriate safeguards, and that those who help them to die should be free from prosecution.

Guardian

See also the magazine *Campaign* touched on above.

DEMENTIA LINKED TO HIGH BLOOD SUGAR

A new study has linked high blood sugar levels to an increased risk of developing dementia in later life, with or without diabetes.

New England Journal of Medicine, 7 August 2013

ATTITUDES TO DISABLED PEOPLE

29 August 2013: A poll of 1,000 disabled people by Opinium, on behalf of Scope, found that 81 per cent of disabled respondents had not noticed any improvement in attitudes to them since the Paralympics; indeed 22 per cent thought they were getting worse. 84 per cent thought that the language used in connection with state benefits was responsible for a negative shift in public perception. It appears that the enthusiasm for high-achieving disabled sports stars has not translated to the way less dynamic disabled people are seen. (Conversely, however, British Paralympic Association figures show a significant increase in participation in disability sport.)

The poll also revealed that nearly one in five disabled respondents had either experienced hostile or threatening behaviour, or had even been attacked.

www.scope.org.uk/news

PUBLIC SERVICES AND POLITICIANS ARE FAILING TO TACKLE GAY PEOPLE'S FEAR OF DISCRIMINATION

29 August 2013: New polling commissioned by the charity Stonewall shows that lesbian, gay and bisexual people are still expecting to face discrimination in almost all walks of life. Published in a report *Gay*

in Britain, the research indicates that, in spite of huge advances in legal equality, people still expect to face poor treatment from schools, hospitals and police forces because of their sexual orientation.

Almost half of 2,092 gay people surveyed across England, Scotland and Wales by YouGov in October 2012 expect to be treated less fairly than a heterosexual person when applying to adopt a child. 70 per cent expect barriers to their becoming a school governor, and 61 per cent believe children of gay parents will be bullied in primary school.

These concerns are reflected across other public services, with a third of gay people expecting worse treatment in a care home, and one in five believing they would be treated less fairly by a judge. Nine in ten say they have never been consulted about their needs by local service providers.

Stonewall's Chief Executive, Ben Summerskill, said: "Completion of our work on marriage means that one strand of Stonewall's domestic focus – legislative equality – is effectively complete. But this polling demonstrates starkly that changing laws doesn't change attitudes and lives overnight.

"Gay taxpayers contribute £40bn every year to the cost of Britain's public services. They should be able to have confidence that they'll receive the services they need when accessing schools, hospitals or policing. It's time the needs of this country's 3.7 million lesbian, gay and bisexual people, both as citizens and service-users, were properly met."

You can read the full report at www.stonewall.org.uk/gayinbritain.

PARKINSON'S DISEASE

Jessica Kingsley has been kind enough to send me two new books about this nasty disease:

Positively Parkinson's by Ann Andrews (£9.99) and *Can I tell you about Parkinson's Disease?* By Alan M.Hultquist (£7.99).

I don't think these titles should be seen as in competition, in that their style is quite different. Both authors write from personal experience, but Ann's coverage is wider and more detailed, dealing thoroughly with symptoms, diagnosis, research and treatment, along with practical advice on commonplace issues and a final summing up in note form. There is also a superb index.

Alan's approach, however, written through the eyes of someone who has the disease, has the merit of simplicity. His book could be read by an intelligent child as much as an adult. He is clear that it is not intended as a source of medical advice, but he systematically explains the common signs and problems associated with PD, what it feels like and how others can help. His bibliography ("Some helpful books") is broken down according to the age ranges to which they are suited.

Both books have recommended organisations and websites.

THE GUARDIAN LEADS THE FIELD

3 September 2013: I rely heavily on *The Guardian*. And rightly so. Figures released by National Readership Survey Print and Digital Data (NRSPADD) show that the Guardian News and Media's print and digital titles remain the most read quality newspaper combination in Britain for daily, weekly and monthly reach. *The Guardian* and *Observer* are read by just over 12.7 million people a month, compared with their nearest competitor, *The Telegraph*, at 11 million.

According to an Ofcom analysis, *The Guardian's* print and online readership is now bigger than *The Times* and *Independent* put together. *The Guardian's* website gained an average of one and a half million unique visitors between May 2012 and May 2013, overtaking the *Daily Mail*.

Moreover, Ofcom's recent Communications Market Report found that *The Guardian* and *Observer* are the most trustworthy, accurate and reliable newspapers in the UK.

NATIONAL AUDIT OFFICE CRITICAL OF UNIVERSAL CREDIT PROGRAMME

5 September 2013:

"Universal Credit plans were driven by an ambitious timescale, and this led to the adoption of a new approach. The programme suffered from weak management and ineffective control."

The National Audit Office has revealed its conclusion that the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) has not achieved value for money in its early implementation of Universal Credit. It confirms that the DWP cannot yet assess the value of the systems it spent over £300 million to develop, and has been forced to delay the national roll-out of the programme to claimants.

Today's report concludes that the DWP was overly ambitious in both the timetable and scope of the

programme. It took risks to try to meet the short timescale and used a new project management approach which it had never before used on a programme of this size and complexity. It was unable to explain how it originally decided on its ambitious plans or evaluated their feasibility.

Given the tight timescale, unfamiliar project management approach and lack of a detailed plan, it was critical that the DWP should have good progress information and effective controls. In practice, it did not have any adequate measures of progress. In early 2013, it was forced to stop work on its plans for national roll-out and to reassess its options for the future. The NAO believes that the programme still has potential to create significant benefits for society, but that the DWP must scale back its delivery ambition and set out realistic plans.

Over 70 per cent of the £425 million spent to date has been on IT systems. The DWP, however, has already written off £34 million of its new IT systems and does not yet know if they will support national roll-out. The existing systems offer limited functionality. For instance, the current IT system lacks a component to identify potentially fraudulent claims so that the DWP has to rely on multiple manual checks on claims and payments. Such checks will not be feasible or adequate once the system is running nationally. Problems with the IT system have delayed national roll-out of the programme.

The consequence is that the DWP will not introduce Universal Credit for all new claims nationally in October 2013 as planned, and is now reconsidering its plans for full roll-out. Instead, it will extend the pilots to six more sites with these new sites taking on only the simplest claims. Delays to the roll-out will reduce the expected benefits of reform and – if the Department maintains a 2017 completion date – increase risks by requiring the rapid migration of a large volume of claimants.

The NAO found that the Department took some action at the end of 2012 to resolve problems, but was unable to address the underlying issues effectively. The source of many problems has been the absence of a detailed view of how Universal Credit is meant to work. In addition, poor control and decision-making undermined confidence in the programme and contributed to a lack of progress. The Department has particularly lacked IT expertise and senior leadership, with frequent changes in senior management.

The NAO's full report is available on www.nao.org.uk. It prompted a vigorous Opposition attack in the House of Commons. Liam Byrne drew attention to previous assurances from Iain Duncan Smith that the reforms were going smoothly and referred to "shambolic financial control" and "ineffective oversight". Nevertheless, IDS continued to insist (apparently very loudly) that the new system would be delivered "on time and on budget".

See also *The Guardian* leader 'Soldier on', 5 September 2013.

FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION (FMG) SO FAR UNPUNISHED

6 September 2013: Keir Starmer QC, Director of Public Prosecutions, revealed that the likelihood of a first UK prosecution for FMG is close. The Crown Prosecution Service is now considering whether to bring charges in five cases. The plain fact, however, is that while there have been 100 convictions in France, there has not been a successful UK prosecution since FMG was made a criminal offence 28 years ago. This despite an estimate in 2007 that FMG had been inflicted on 66,000 women in England and Wales. Mr Starmer said that very few victims of the crime come forward, and that those that do are often "very unwilling" to give evidence.

BBC News

LEGAL AID

6 September 2013: Plans to introduce competitive tendering in criminal cases are to be scrapped following demonstrations by lawyers. But the government is still seeking to achieve savings of £220 million and intends to withdraw legal aid for prisoners, who will have to rely on the prison complaints system. It will also persist with restricting legal aid in criminal cases to those with an annual disposable income below £37,500 and having less than £3,000 to spend after paying household bills.

A VISION FOR A FAIRER SOCIETY

6 September 2013: *The Guardian* carries an article by Frances O'Grady, General Secretary of the Trades Union Congress, calling into question the government's economic strategy. Matthew Taylor quotes her as saying that Ed Miliband "has the potential to transform Britain if he is prepared to square up to powerful vested interests and set out...a compelling vision for the sort of society Labour wants to create." The UK,

she argues, is at a crossroads and faces “a stark choice between years of spiralling inequality and low wages, and a fairer, more prosperous society built on decent jobs and a fairer split between wages and profits.” Elsewhere in this issue Polly Toynbee comments “If, since its introduction in 1999, the minimum wage had kept pace with the FTSE 100 directors, it would be £19 an hour.”

MARINA HYDE ON IAIN DUNCAN SMITH

The Guardian, 7 September 2013: Interesting.

ILLEGAL ABORTION

9 September 2013: *The Daily Telegraph* reports that two doctors who agreed to arrange abortions based on the unwanted gender of the unborn child are not to be prosecuted. The doctors were said to have been filmed in an undercover investigation as being willing to arrange terminations purely because the women concerned did not want to have a baby girl.

Prosecution was said not to be in the public interest. *BBC News* reported that Keir Starmer QC, Director of Public Prosecutions, described the decision as “very difficult and finely balanced”. The reasoning will be explained later, but appears to be based on the fact that no terminations were shown to have taken place, and that the General Medical Council was seen as better placed to deal with such issues.

In the meantime, Jeremy Hunt, the Health Secretary, has written to the attorney-general, expressing his concern, and asking for clarification of the grounds for the CPS decision.

ZERO-HOUR CONTRACTS

10 September 2013: In his speech to the TUC (which I admired) Ed Miliband undertook to curb the scourge of zero-hour contracts. In my last *Briefing* I compared such contracts to the brutal system used to take on dockers in the 1930s. Since then, I have been struck by some remarks of Charles Greville in February 1832. Commenting on abject poverty among “the lowest and most wretched classes”, he noticed that workmen “live by casual labour, are employed by the hour, and often get not more than four or five hours employment in the course of the week”. Friedrich Engels, in his *The Condition of the Working Class in London* (c.1844), observing the deplorable living conditions inflicted on many workers, saw them as “an affront to human dignity”. He added: “It is equally incontestable that every working man without exception may well suffer a similar fate *through no fault of his own and despite all his efforts to keep his head above water*” (my italics). Let’s not return to those days.

CORPORATE TAX AVOIDANCE

I referred to this drain on Britain’s resources in *Briefing* no.60 (August 2013). It is an important, if complex, subject in as much as recovery of such lost revenue might be seen as preferable to ‘bashing the weak’ (as Michael Meacher has put it). I do not renege on anything I said there, but must apologise for neglecting to draw attention to a debate on the subject that occupied the House of Commons for some time on 7 January 2013. This can be read, as usual, on the Parliament website, but can also be watched ‘live’. Readers may draw some hope from the final remarks of David Gauke, Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury: “the government are fully committed to ensuring that everyone contributes to reducing the deficit by paying their fair share of tax, and we are determined to clamp down on the minority who engage in tax avoidance.

He went on to announce that the government is bringing in a general anti-abuse rule, following the advice of a committee led by Graham Aaronson. He is a distinguished tax QC, and his committee comprised a number of distinguished figures from the tax world. “They recommended measures that focused on the abusive end of the matter. We believe that that will not have the disadvantages of the proposals suggested by the right hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Mr Meacher), which would create uncertainty for ordinary taxpayers.”

Michael Meacher, it should be added, as a private member, introduced the *General Anti Tax-avoidance Principle Bill 2012/13* on 20 June 2012. It failed to complete its passage through Parliament before the end of the session and therefore made no further progress.

Since then, the law firm Farrer & Co has advised that business leaders cannot claim that it is their fiduciary duty to shareholders to avoid tax (*Guardian*, 9 September 2013).

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY VALUE?

Knowing my interest in historical recordings, Maurice Glassman, former chair of the National Information Forum, has sent me a cutting from *The Times* reporting an auction of Sir Paul Getty's fabulous collection of 78s. The star item, in monetary terms, was an extremely rare 1905 Fonotipia recording of Victor Capoul singing the *Berceuse* from Godard's *Jocelyn*, a role he created in 1888. Capoul, celebrated in his heyday, was 66 at the time of the recording and almost stone deaf, having left the stage some 13 years earlier. The recording, which was not commercially published, is described thus by Michael Scott in his *The Record of Singing*: "It would be stretching a point to suggest that his voice remained untouched by the hand of time, in fact very little of it remains at all".

Yet Capoul's recording was estimated to fetch £4,000 (I don't know what it did finally sell for), whereas other consummate versions, including a charming rendition by Tino Rossi, can still be obtained for a few pounds. Which is the better value?

SOCIAL MOBILITY

The Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, chaired by the Rt. Hon. Alan Milburn, was set up to "monitor the progress of government and others in improving social mobility and reducing child poverty in the United Kingdom". On 10 September it published a report, *Social Mobility – the next steps*, which notices, among other things, that over half of working age adults in poverty and two thirds of children in poverty are in households where at least one adult works". It puts forward a plan to help the government combat low pay and raise living standards.

Summary and full report at www.gov.uk/government/organisations/social-mobility-and-child-poverty-commission.

DEMON DRINK

11 September 2013: *The Independent* features an interview with Alastair Campbell, who describes Britain as a problem-drinking country. Having himself previously succumbed to excessive drinking, he now inveighs against "the normalisation of alcohol at all levels of society". His latest novel, *My name is...*, focuses on the catastrophic experience of Hannah, a teenage alcoholic.

This contrition follows statistics showing that alcohol-related liver conditions accounted for almost 17,000 hospital admissions in England in 2011/12, 1,000 up on the previous year. The charity Alcohol Concern refers to Britain's 'drinking culture'. Though not anti-alcohol, it observes that while some of us can enjoy alcohol modestly and within recommended guidelines, for others it can be a devastating addiction which effectively destroys their lives. It estimates that over 1.6 million people in the UK are living with such an addiction.

BEDROOM TAX

11 September 2013: Raquel Rolnik, the United Nations rapporteur on housing, told *The Guardian* that Britain's previously good record on housing was being eroded by a failure to provide enough affordable social housing, and by the impact of welfare reform. She said that she was particularly concerned by the impact of 'bedroom tax', a policy affecting "the most vulnerable, the most fragile, the people who are on the fringes of coping with everyday life". The country was "going backwards in the protection and promotion of the human right to housing". Her immediate recommendation was that the bedroom tax should be abolished.

12 September 2013: Grant Shapps, Conservative Party Chairman, responded angrily, firing off a formal complaint to UN secretary general Ban Ki-moon. But the specialist housing charity Shelter welcomed Rolnik's findings, having found from first-hand experience that the effects of the measure are deeply damaging. And Bob Baker, director of The Simon Community called upon the government "to reconsider this ill-thought-out policy before we are humiliated by being called before the European Court of Human Rights." In a letter to *The Guardian* he wrote: "To demand that a tenant in social housing move to a smaller property when no such property is available is Kafkaesque". On the same day, columnist Zoe Williams commented: "the bedroom tax policy has, from its outset, been riven with injustice, irrationality, perverse incentives and unintended consequences – tainted with social conditioning and the cleansing of whole areas of poverty."

My take on the 'spare room subsidy' is that while a theoretical case can be made to discourage the continued provision of scarce social housing in excess of a family's strict needs – typically where children

have flown the nest – policy must also take account of the fact that the issue concerns people’s established homes. I think the government’s present stance is insensitive and draconian. By coincidence I recently came across a piece by the political diarist Charles Greville, written in 1832. He describes the abject privation of poor working men in London: “huddled and crowded together by families in the same room”. Is that our direction of travel?

19 September 2013: *The Independent* reports that it has obtained statistics under the Freedom of Information Act that since April some one third of council tenants and tens of thousands in housing association accommodation have been pushed into rent arrears. It claims that 50,000 people are now facing the possibility of eviction.

20 September 2013: *The Guardian’s* leader compares the bedroom tax to the misconceived poll tax as “an unjust attack on some of the most vulnerable in society”.

Ed Miliband has since announced that Labour, if elected, would repeal this legislation. Might the coalition see the light even sooner?

NHS NATIONAL PATIENT RECORD SYSTEM A COSTLY FAVOUR

18 September 2013: The Public Accounts Committee has revealed that the abandoned NHS database has involved a loss of nearly £10 billion, to which must be added the cost of new, alternative regional IT systems. These too are said to have also been badly managed and plagued with contractual disputes.

Guardian

PATIENTS COULD BE CARED FOR AT HOME RATHER THAN IN HOSPITAL

The Future Hospital Commission was established by the Royal College of Physicians to review all aspects of the design and delivery of inpatient hospital care. In a report published on 12 September the Commission advocates that, in future, care should come to acutely ill patients, rather than moving them around the hospital; particularly in the case of elderly and frail patients. Otherwise, it argues, hospitals are unlikely to survive.

This is one of 50 recommendations aimed at improving care for acute medical patients, which are said to “put the patient experience and the concept of ‘clinician citizenship’ back into the very heart of healthcare”. It is matched by a radical restructuring of the wards where acutely ill patients are treated, and a new organisational and management structure in which responsibilities for acutely ill medical patients will stretch out from the hospital into the wider community, developing the idea of a local healthcare system.

You can access the full report, *Future Hospitals: Caring for medical patients*, at www.rcplondon.ac.uk/node/9373.

RECALLING DISCREDITED MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT

At the last general election all three of the main parties undertook to establish a system to allow the recall of MPs found guilty of financial misconduct or who have engaged in serious wrongdoing. Included in the Coalition’s *Programme for Government* was a commitment to bring forward early legislation to this end. A draft bill was published in December 2011 by the Deputy Prime Minister, and the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee completed its scrutiny on 28 June 2012.

The government has produced a detailed response. It concludes that it is important to take time to find the best possible approach, but that it remains committed to introducing a mechanism for the recall of MPs. It will “consider further the committee’s recommendations alongside detailed and careful consultation with our stakeholders in determining our policy on recall.” I fear that we should not hold our breath.

Parliament website

WE HATE NO.70: WELFARE REFORM

“The most immediately pressing day-to-day issue [is] the socially devastating impact of the government slashing away at the means of the poorest in our communities...in a society where there are at least five workers chasing every job vacancy, and far more in many areas, where one in five workers earns less than a living wage, where one in ten are working fewer hours than they want to, where 37 per cent of people have no savings that they can turn to in an emergency, and where there are more than 13 million people living below the poverty line...Consider this, in the world’s sixth largest economy one fifth of the population do not have enough money to live on, and this after the year when the richest 10 per cent of people got richer.”

Natalie Bennett, Green Party leader, speech to the party's autumn conference.

I have, of course, frequently expressed my misgivings about welfare reform over the years. Now in this series I want to put on record a summation of my views. It is not that I oppose reform. In several editions of *Directory for Disabled People*, Ann and I urged reform. In the eighth edition, for example, written at the beginning of the Blair years, we commented in our introduction on a benefits system “intended to help, designed to frustrate, and dominated by the necessity of keeping the lid on public expenditure.” We found ourselves much in tune with the report of the Social Security Advisory Committee, *Social security provision for disability: a case for change?* (1997). Validating four principles that had informed an earlier report in 1988, the Committee suggested that “the system has grown so complex, as a result of incremental changes designed to enhance the targeting of benefits, that the fundamental principles which should determine the nature of the provision that the State should make in this area have become obscured.” The report concluded that rather than attempting further tinkering at the margins, “it is now timely to review and restate what these principles should be and, having done so, to try and build a more coherent and comprehensible structure for the future.”

At that time, our focus was on a need for greater simplicity, far from any reduction in the level of benefits. We were legitimately concerned that the claim forms were overlong and that the process of establishing entitlement too elaborate. So, in that sense, there was a clear need for reform. But we also recognised that the overall level of expenditure needed to be kept in check. I still accept those basic precepts. The government, through the Department of Work and Pensions, is entitled to try to combat not only fraud, but also, in what might be seen as an inversion of tax avoidance, reliance on state benefits by people able to be self-reliant but making no effort to fend for themselves.

But – and I want to express this simply – I think it is important not to be over zealous or unreasonable in following such objectives; lest in pruning the trees you kill them. I believe in two fundamental principles: that in determining individual entitlement it is better to err on the side of allowing claimants the benefit of genuine doubt, and that in a progressive state an enlightened government should accept that the cost of social security will always be considerable, tending to need enhancement as the extent of unmet need is revealed.

That's all.

Derek Kinrade