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Issue

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*A Digest of Current Social Information*

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### ANGLICAN BREAKTHROUGH

21 September : An historic development, easily missed, is the appointment of the Republic of Ireland's first female bishop, Rev. Pat Storey. In the UK, Anglicans in Scotland and Wales can appoint women bishops but have not yet done so. In England, the church is still locked in discord.

### MENTAL HEALTH

23 September: The Mental Health Foundation has published a final report, *Starting Today*, on the future of mental health services. It finds that, at present, services are "straining at the seams". Yet, faced with a growing, and ageing, population, pressures will increase still further. The prevalence of mental disorders is persistently high, while funding constraints are likely to last for many years.

The Foundation also expresses extreme disappointment with a bold headline in *The Sun* which reads '1,200 killed by mental patients'. It points out that people with severe mental health problems are ten times more likely to be victims, rather than perpetrators, of violent crimes. And that sensationalist journalism of this kind contributes to stigma and discrimination, making people in distress less likely to seek support. **More at [www.mentalhealth.org.uk](http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk).**

### LITERACY AT RISK

23 September: Writing for *The Guardian*, children's laureate, Malorie Blackman, criticises the government for failing to stop the closure of libraries, against the provisions of the 1964 Libraries Act. Already at least 347 libraries have been lost during the first two years of this parliamentary term and 400 more are under threat as funding to local authorities is cut. She points to her own indebtedness to her local library, and warns that without libraries, literacy will become "the province of a lucky few". Passing the buck, a DCMS spokesperson responded that library funding was a matter for local authorities.

### BEDROOM TAX

I am reading a swelling tide of criticism against this measure. As Bob Baker comments (*Guardian*, 24 September): "Evidence shows that this shameful rule has already pushed tens of thousands of people into arrears." It is particularly onerous for disabled people. The blind barrister, Surinder Lall, successfully argued at a tribunal that his spare room had never been a bedroom, but had always been where he kept his necessary equipment.



The judge agreed.

## **THE WORK PROGRAMME**

The following statistics were released by the Department of Work and Pensions on 26 September:

**“By all referrals from 1 June 2011 to 30 June 2013**

14.7% of referrals who had spent sufficient time on the programme to do so, achieved a job outcome payment, with 168,000 payments overall.

1.31 million individuals have been referred to the Work Programme.

960,000 sustainment payments were made to providers for 149,000 individual participants.

Nearly two thirds of claimants, who achieved a job outcome payment, remained in employment, in the period covered by this release.

To date almost 14,000 claimants have stayed in sustained employment long enough to qualify for the maximum number of sustainment payments possible.

To date 54,000 claimants returned to Jobcentre Plus after completing 104 weeks on the scheme.”

The disappointing headline figure here is that only 14.7 per cent of claimants under the Work Programme have succeeded in retaining employment for at least six months. The government’s response, announced by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, is a ‘Help to Work’ programme, which will affect anyone on the Work Programme who has failed to find a job after two years. To continue receiving Job Seeker’s Allowance those affected will have to:

- accept a community work placement, or
- attend a job centre every day, or
- undertake further training.

Refusal will result in the loss of a month’s worth of benefit. Subsequent refusal could result in the loss of three months of benefit.

## **A ROUND-UP OF NEWS FROM MAGAZINES AND OTHER MEDIA (IN BRIEF)**

### **The Guardian**

11 October: An estimated 450,000 vulnerable people have been summonsed for failure to pay their council tax.

Polly Toynbee criticises the closure of Sure Start centres, the dismantling of the ‘Every Child Matters’ strategy and the closure of the ContactPoint register.

The royal family is to receive a five per cent increase in financial support in 2014 (to £37.89m). The campaigning organisation, Republic, estimates that expenditure on the royals has increased by 94 per cent in real terms over the last 20 years.

14 October: An International Monetary Fund study suggests that there is scope to raise taxes for highest earners without losing revenue (cf: my remarks in issue 60, ‘We Hate’)

16 October: The Trussell Trust reveals that the use of its food banks has tripled year on year, and calls on the Prime Minister for an official inquiry into the causes of food poverty.

17 October: Office of National Statistics has found that more people are in work than since records began in 1971, but average wages are not keeping up with inflation, particularly in the public sector, and living standards are being eroded. The number of young people out-of-work has changed only marginally at 958,000.

The government is to review the growth of inadequate 15-minute care visits (but see 30 October).

A report from the government appointed Social Mobility Commission says that the working poor have borne the brunt of cuts aimed at reducing the national deficit. Pensioners are said to be getting off lightest (no doubt their votes are seen as crucial).

18 October: British Gas announces a 10 per cent increase in energy prices. No doubt others will follow suit.

Secretary of State for Health, Jeremy Hunt, speaks of “national shame” of “the forgotten million” of older people.

Polly Toynbee writes that the so-called Lobbying Bill threatens to restrict charities' engagement in campaigns or policy debates.

19 October: At least 157,000 of us, including disabled people, carers and others on low incomes have been summonsed for non-payment of council tax, an indication that the poorest are bearing the brunt of government policy to reduce welfare budgets.

Keir Starmer, Director of Public Prosecutions, is to stand down in November. "A job well done," says Zoe Williams.

21 October: Hospitals are to be banned from refusing to investigate patients' complaints if they also intend to sue for damages (Denis Campbell).

A leading scientist has called for an end to the badger cull (Damian Carrington).

A top concern for parents of children starting secondary school is a fear that they will be bullied.

Chris Huhne writes of the dangers of a 'secret state' developing.

Abuses of power must be revealed (Harold Evans).

Protests grow over benefit cuts (letters).

22 October: Co-op loses control of its bank.

Huge quantities of food are discarded by supermarkets (Rebecca Smithers).

The National Trust joins concerns over badger cull (Damian Carrington).

23 October: A growing number of care providers are paying their care workers at rates below the minimum wage. 120 of them are being investigated by HMRC.

John Major breaks ranks with a variety of comments.

The 'Go Home' vans proved a failure [and a PR debacle]. Very few illegal immigrants were prompted to return home.

Psychiatric patients said to be the most vulnerable seen by the NHS, and a soft target for cuts.

Abuse revealed at another care home, Orchard View, with "sub-optimal care" at 14 others. David Brindle argues that care home regulation has a long way to go.

Claire Kober, leader of Haringey Council, criticises the benefits cap.

Carlene Firmin finds that the closure of youth services is impacting on child poverty and resulting in a failure to provide support and opportunity.

24 October: While GDP statistics show growth, most of the economic upturn favours London and the south of England. Elsewhere, apart from Scotland, there has been relative decline. Roughly a quarter of the UK population is responsible for half the growth, with the remaining three-quarters sharing the rest. Correspondingly, the UK's highest earners have prospered, while many on middle incomes are feeling the squeeze. The top 20 per cent of earning households are enjoying 37.5 per cent of Britain's income growth.

Sir David Attenborough adds his voice to criticism of extending the badger cull.

Page 15 has a chart showing causes of all deaths in England and Wales, 2001-12.

25 October: Patient safety said to be under threat at three-quarters of England's hospitals (Care Quality Commission)

NHS Direct to close.

New NHS chief, Simon Stevens, in for "a rude awakening" (Polly Toynbee).

26 October: Delay in the introduction of Personal Independence Payments. Rachel Reeves, shadow Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, says: "First the Work Programme, then the Universal Credit, and now the introduction of the Personal Independence Payments – each failing to go to plan. The delivery problems we are seeing at the Department of Work and Pensions now risk descending into farce."

28 October: Whatever paper you read, you are likely to have noticed (I mention it as a matter of record) that researchers have found that at least 20 genes play a role in the development of late-onset Alzheimer's Disease, double the number previously identified.

Dr Sarah Wollaston MP contributes a refreshingly intelligent contribution on the need to do more to help people with mental illness back into work. Astutely, she finds that the current assessment system is even worse than the GP-based sick note culture it replaced. “There needs to be an earlier and more thoughtful input from the ‘decision makers’ in appraising the evidence from all those who have been involved in a person’s care – be they GPs, psychiatrists or psychiatric nurses, or carers.” She adds: “Perhaps if remuneration for the assessors, Atos, was penalised according to the number of successful appeals, the company might be more likely to get its decisions right in the first place.”

29 October: Polly Toynbee attacks the government’s disability cuts as brutal: fusing ideology and idiocy. She argues that they not only smear the vulnerable, but make no economic sense. In particular, she challenges the assertion that Disability Living Allowance is “spiralling out of control”, offering rational explanations for the growth in the number of claimants. And much more.

A review of the NHS complaints system calls for a radical overhaul of the way that complaints are handled.

30 October: The Court of Appeal rules against Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt’s intended cutting of maternity and accident & emergency services at Lewisham hospital, finding that he had acted illegally.

A survey of homecare services by *The Guardian* and the Department of Health exposes “deep misgivings about the way care is delivered to people in their own homes”. Not so much with carers, as with the assessment of needs by local authorities. 73 per cent of respondents said lack of time was the greatest challenge, while 69 per cent wanted a greater role for family and friends in combating loneliness and isolation.

### **All Together Now!**

The October/November issue raises two major issues for disabled people. Firstly, that roughly half of all disabled people (and some four million older people) are not connected to the internet. Moreover, that mainstream technology devices are largely inaccessible. Scope’s CEO, Richard Hawkes, says: “there is still huge untapped potential for mainstream devices to support disabled people better”.

The second ‘big issue’ is raised by Sir Bert Massie, who notices that the disability movement has become fragmented and seems largely powerless to prevent hostile government cutbacks. He points to the need for a national mass organisation of disabled people, and suggests that Disability Rights UK could lead the way forward. Until recently it has not sought to become a mass membership organisation, but this is changing. It now wants disabled people to join in large numbers, to provide the resources and political clout to make sure the voices of disabled people are heard in the corridors of power. Its website is [www.disabilityrightsuk.org](http://www.disabilityrightsuk.org), with a button that says ‘Join Us’.

**Ed:** It should also be noted that, as part of the government’s disability strategy, the Office for Disability Issues (ODI) has set up the Disability Action Alliance (DAA), to bring together organisations of disabled people with counterparts from the public, voluntary and private sectors. The aim is said to be one of working in partnership to deliver actions at national and local level. Details of the ODI strategy and how the government intends to implement it can be found at <http://odi.dwp.gov.uk/fulfilling-potential/index.php>. Information about the DAA is at [www.disabilityactionalliance.org.uk](http://www.disabilityactionalliance.org.uk). It would be interesting to have Sir Bert’s views.

**Liberty’s** autumn issue is particularly incensed about the surveillance of our private communications. It sees privacy as a fundamental human right, arguing that we are citizens, not suspects. But how else, I wonder, can the security services guard against the potential terrorists among us? And how does this kind of surveillance differ in principle from the growing use of CCTV cameras, which spy on us all?

**Forward**, the magazine of the Spinal Injuries Association, has in its October issue news of research into fuel poverty among disabled people by the Centre for Consumers and Essential Services, based at the University of Leicester. Since 2007, SIA has been campaigning to get winter fuel payments extended to people under 65 who need extra heating to manage their condition. Mike Hutchins, SIA’s Public Affairs Officer, comments that it is good to see that at last there seems to be a move to recognise this issue and attempt to deal with it. I would add that most disabled people need such help rather more than some affluent older people.

The report can be found at: [www2.le.ac.uk/departments/law/research](http://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/law/research). Click on 'Centre for Consumers and Essential Services', then 'Publications', and finally 'The Energy Penalty – Disability and Fuel Poverty'.

## FEEDBACK

**From Lindy Williams:**

I don't always have time to read your briefings but do find them interesting and encouraging, in a time of dire political activity. A couple of things occurred to me that could perhaps be added to your writings.

Firstly, it seems appalling that the private companies which provide public services are not subject to the Freedom of Information Act. I cannot think of any other activity where a person does not know how her/his money is being spent, or at least cannot find out. I shall be writing to Liberty about this as it is likely to be something of interest, if it's not on their books already.

The second thing is quite urgent - and I feel sure you will know about it. It concerns the giving of our medical records to the NHS Health and Social Care Information Centre (HSCIC) and where the default position is that this will happen, the onus being on us to tell our GPs if we want to opt out. This could, at a pinch, be workable, but in this instance there is no individual notification, so if you happen neither to have been recently to your doctor nor looked at the practice website, you may well not know anything about this. I feel this should be subject to judicial review (but not for much longer if that creepy Grayling has his way, but that is another story), since I cannot see how it does not constitute a breach of privacy for this to go ahead. It is all rather urgent as there is a deadline and I suspect that once on the system, your record will be permanently there. Even the ghastly Daily Mail ranted about this (18 August). Whilst some people may be quite happy to have all their personal details shared with a variety of 'carefully vetted' firms (ahem), I feel it should not be incumbent upon anyone to have to object to an automatic delving into their medical record. It is important to clarify that objecting will not prevent your details from being sent by GPs to medics who are treating you.

The only reason I know about it is that I opted out of the original, and shambolic, 'Summary Care Record' so got a letter from the practice. The letter is obviously written by a higher authority and is highly misleading, in that it tells me identification would be impossible, whereas the accompanying leaflet makes it pretty clear that this is untrue.

The HSCIC website <http://www.hscic.gov.uk/dles> states:

### **“What is the Data Linkage and Extract Service?”**

“The Health and Social Care Information Centre handles three different types of patient level data:

1. De-identified data for publication - data that can be publicly disclosed as it has been anonymised and there is a low risk of individuals being identified.
2. De-identified data for limited disclosure or access - data that has been through a process of pseudonymisation; however there remains a risk of individuals being identified.
3. Personal confidential data - data in which individuals are identified, or there is a high risk of individuals being identified”.

This is interesting. For details of Board members see: Health <http://www.hscic.gov.uk/our-board>. There are two people from Tribal, someone from defence industry and someone from the Wigmore Hall. Much though I admire the Wigmore Hall administration, I doubt it would qualify for owt to do with data protection. Maybe I am wrong there. The following website is useful in giving the facts: <http://medconfidential.org/>.

That is quite enough from me for now. I shall be making noise about the above, though I realise it may make extra work for overworked GPs who are fast becoming demoralised with Jeremy wotsit getting at them constantly.

**Ed: Lindy is quite right. The 'Summary Care Record' contains three pieces of information:**

- medicines you take
- allergies you have
- any medicines that make you ill.

**You can choose not to have an SCR, but unless you specifically exercise that choice you are in.**

**See [www.nhscarerecords.nhs.uk](http://www.nhscarerecords.nhs.uk).**

DK

### From A.N.Other

Thanks again for the full and informative News Briefing 62. These days I am rarely able to keep up on such matters as you cover, and my memory is increasingly poor, so it is a valuable digest.

### From John D Beasley

As a social worker in London's East End for over 20 years I worked with many people who were harmed by alcohol. Since taking early retirement I have continued to work with alcoholics. People who went to prison have been in my home, including a murderer.

Britain's biggest drug problem is caused by alcohol. As someone who loves playing cricket at the age of almost 69 [now there], I have benefited in many ways from having consumed no alcohol since I was thirteen – and every week I have lots of fun.

A major national campaign should be launched to highlight the option – and many advantages – of healthy and safe alcohol-free lifestyles.

### A SENSE OF PROPORTION

Figures released by the Office for National Statistics show that 59 per cent of the British population professes to be Christian, compared to five per cent Muslim and 25 per cent no religion. It is interesting that Joseph Haydn's *Dictionary of Dates* (1853) quotes an assessment of 1836 which, assuming the global population to be one thousand and fifty millions, broke down as follows:

Jews	4,500,000
Christians	225,000,000
Mahometans	155,000,000
Idolaters	665,500,000

By this reckoning over 63 per cent of the world's people did not belong to any one of the major religions.

By the way, the ONS also projects that by 2040 some 160,000 of us will be centenarians.

### PRE HEATING OVENS

In *Briefing* no.38 (October 2011) I raised a question as to whether it was really necessary to pre-heat cooking appliances before cooking begins, except in the case of certain bakery products. I now have this response from the Food Standards Agency:

“The Food Standards Agency would always advise consumers to follow the manufacturer's cooking or storage instructions on the packaging, including advice about pre-heating ovens, before cooking a product. The manufacturer will have carried out testing of the product (including shelf life testing, cooking times and storing times) and so the manufacturer is best placed to advise on the cooking times and temperatures of their given product. These tests will have been based on using a pre-heated oven, and so this is what should be followed in the home.

We would advise against simply adjusting the cooking times as to do this correctly would depend on a number of variables, how large/how many of the product you are cooking, whether the product is frozen/chilled/at room temperature when you put it in the oven, the density of the food, the type of container you are cooking the food in etc. All these variables would affect how long it takes the core of the food to reach and be held at 70oC for 2 minutes (or similar time temperature combination), the cooking necessary to kill any pathogenic bacteria that may be in the product.

For more information on food preparation and cooking please visit:

<http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/homehygiene/Pages/Foodhygiene.aspx>”

### DEMENTIA RESEARCH

Ahead of a G8 Dementia Summit on 11 December 2013, the Department of Health is inviting views on dementia research. The summit will focus on how the UK and other G8 countries can lead efforts to prevent, delay and effectively treat dementia.

The engagement is not only for scientists and doctors but also those who live and work with people with dementia.

Go to <https://socialcare.blog.gov.uk>

## HEALTH CARE AFTER HOSPITAL

The 'Society' section of *The Guardian* (11 September) highlights the fact that patients leaving hospital who have continuing healthcare needs should be assessed before discharge, under NHS guidance. The cost of such continuing care should be met by the NHS. This encompasses any out-of-hospital care where the primary need for the care is deemed to be a health need.

## PLANS TO DENY BENEFITS TO YOUNG PEOPLE

2 October 2013: The Prime Minister signalled plans to withdraw housing benefit and jobseeker's allowance from many 18-24-year-olds not in work, education or training. Wasn't it Saint Paul who said "If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat" (Epistle to the Thessalonians, 3.10)? And wasn't it Lenin who took this up in his *The State and Revolution* (1917), espousing the view that in a socialist state, if fit for work, only those individuals who were productive could be given access to the fruits of consumption? And wasn't this codified in the Soviet Constitution of 1936?

## ROYAL COLLEGE OF GENERAL PRACTITIONERS (RCGP) ALLEGE A £400 MILLION 'BLACK HOLE' IN NHS FUNDS.

3 October 2013: The latest figures compiled by the RCGP, a network of more than 44,000 family doctors, are said to show that general practitioners are facing a £400 million 'black hole' as a result of swingeing cuts to general practice over the past three years – almost the equivalent of the Government's recent cash injection into A&E. At its annual conference at Harrogate it was claimed that the amount spent in general practice per person in England has dropped by 7% in real terms between 2010 and 2013, due to a combination of funding cuts and population growth.

For the third year running, GP surgeries in England have suffered a decrease in resources, while the amount of money going to hospitals has continued to rise. In 2012/13, real terms investment in general practice fell to £8,459m from £8,865m in 2009/10.

Over 90% of patient contacts within the NHS are carried out in general practice, yet the sector receives only 9% of the NHS budget. The College is warning that the cumulative effects of year on year decreases in funding are now having a disastrous effect on patient care and it is calling on the Government for major investment in general practice in order to protect patient services and safety.

RCGP Chair Dr Clare Gerada said: "Our figures should send out a warning to Government and the rest of the NHS that we will soon have a catastrophe on our hands if urgent action is not taken to reverse the decline in funding for general practice and provide GPs with an appropriate amount to spend on each patient every year."

Full report at [www.rcgp.org.uk](http://www.rcgp.org.uk)

## SOCIALISM

The *Daily Mail's* provocative remarks about Ralph Miliband at least stimulated a discussion around political values, and the media response enlightened the contrast between right and left. Best of all, I felt, was a piece by Priyamvada Gopal (*Guardian*, 3 October). "Ralph Miliband," he pointed out, "was not a patriot because he served in the navy. He was a lover of this country and its people precisely because he understood that institutions like the monarchy and the House of Lords symbolise and perpetuate inequality, and that militarism usually encourages the poor to die defending the interests of the privileged...Ralph Miliband would also have found his son's claim that capitalism can be 'made to work for working people' incoherent, and wilfully ignorant of how capitalism actually works."

I think you will find it's worth searching out and reading the whole article: a timely reminder that press freedom should have its limits.

## ILLEGAL ABORTION

7 October 2013: In last month's *Briefing* I mentioned a *Daily Telegraph* investigation which had alleged that two doctors had agreed to arrange abortions based on the unwanted gender of the unborn child. It was reported that, despite evidence provided, it had been decided that prosecution would not be in the public interest, and that the reasoning for this would be explained later. Keir Starmer QC, Director of Public Prosecutions, has now provided that explanation. I will not attempt to condense his complex statement, but a salient point is that, at present, in assessing the risk to the mental or physical health of the patient, "there is no generally accepted approach among the medical profession". Moreover, although the law requires two

doctors to 'sign-off' a termination, this can be done without either doctor seeing or examining the pregnant woman. *The Telegraph* further reports that after its investigation the Care Quality Commission had carried out a series of inspections at abortion clinics and had found that a practice of pre-signing abortion forms was widespread. It is at least clear that legal guidance in this area needs urgently to be reviewed and updated.

### **CARE VISITS**

7 October: In advance of consideration of the Care Bill in the House of Lords, Leonard Cheshire Disability has published a report *Ending 15 Minute Care*. It finds that local authorities, strapped for cash, are increasingly using shorter care visits to disabled and older people, and claims overwhelming public support against this trend.

[www.lcdisability.org](http://www.lcdisability.org)

### **ATHEISTS WELCOME**

8 October: From 1 January 2014, anyone wanting to become a Scout will no longer have to promise to do their duty to God. They will simply pledge to uphold Scout values, observe its law, do their duty to the Queen and help others. That's fine; that's inclusive. The older I get, while my atheism remains rock solid, the more I look to a friendly relationship with people of faith. Visiting my wife in hospital has been an object lesson. One of the patients, a 92 year old woman, frequently distressed, was visited by her Roman Catholic priest. All at once she became animated and loquacious, and when he left she put her hands together in prayer. I felt that her faith was misplaced, but by God it was effective.

I expressed my strictly personal view about end-of-life care in *Innovations in Information*, vol.13, no.2, 2007 under the title 'Petering Out'. My recent experience in visiting hospital has caused me to reread that short essay. I can only say that seeing women I don't know kept alive when all prospect of a meaningful life is over has served only to reinforce my view. But I can't think that way about Ann.

### **BADGERS ESCAPE**

8 October: The badger cull, never a good idea, has been a flop even on its own terms, with fewer than half of the targeted badgers being killed. This could mean that the escaping badgers may well spread bovine TB even further.

### **PRIME MINISTER'S QUESTIONS**

9 October: Don't you think that this exchange has deteriorated into farce? Ed Miliband asks questions directed at the coalition's perceived vulnerabilities. David Cameron scarcely ever answers a question directly or constructively, but rather loudly attacks Labour's past record on the issue in question. All very discouraging.

### **A DAMNING VIEW FROM THE RED CROSS**

10 October: *The Guardian* exclusively reports a critique from the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. It pessimistically describes Europe as sinking into a protracted period of deepening poverty, mass unemployment, social exclusion, greater inequality and collective despair as a consequence of austerity policies.

### **THE DETERIORATION OF PUBLIC SERVICES**

The government's focus on austerity (rather than tax increases) to reduce the national debt is, of course, having dire consequences for many individuals at the bottom of the pecking order. But there is also a wider toll in the impoverishment of public services. In this and previous issues I have instanced the abatement of legal aid, cracks in the great NHS edifice, particularly in A&E departments, stresses and strains in mental health services, shortages in the funding of GPs, widespread library closures, with other local authority services under increasing strain, and persistent concern about the quality of care services, not least the curtailment of the duration of home visits.

To these dismal findings must now be added the reported chaotic shortcomings in the Home Office's 'e-borders' programme, and misgivings about the detection of fraud in the food industry. The National Audit Office has drawn attention to the fact that in the last two years the number of public analysts has fallen from 40 to 29, and four of 13 laboratories have been closed. And, perhaps worst of all, the OECD has found

depressing levels of achievement in literacy and numeracy, particularly among 16-24-year-olds. Save the Children reckons that thousands of children are failing at school, falling behind in the three 'Rs' by the age of seven, and that at the present rate reading will be 'a closed book' to around half a million young people by 2020. Britain is near the bottom of the league in basic proficiencies, deficiencies surely linked to growing problems of social inequality. As W.S. Gilbert put it: "The task of filling up the list I'd rather leave to you".

Yet the government remains antagonistic to increasing taxation from those able, and often willing, to pay more. The IMF has now weighed in with criticism of unchecked corporate tax avoidance. It also advocates a long hard look at whether those on higher incomes should contribute more to the reduction of deficits, and cautions against the regressive growth of indirect taxation which bears down more heavily on the less well off.

## WE HATE NO.71: ELOQUENCE

*"...when did simple eloquence ever convince a majority?"*

Horace Walpole: letter to Lady Ossary, 9 February 1787, in Correspondence (Yale ed.), vol.33

*"Prends l'éloquence et tords-lui le cou."*

Paul Verlaine: 'Jadis et naguère' (1844)

*"If there were an ancestor I should feel shame in recalling it would rather be [than an ape] a man – a man of restless and versatile intellect – who, not content with an equivocal success in his own sphere of activity, plunges into scientific questions with which he has no real acquaintance, only to obscure them by an aimless rhetoric, and distract the attention of his hearers from the real point at issue by eloquent digressions and skilled appeals to religious prejudice."*

Leonard Huxley: 'Life and Letters of Thomas Henry Huxley' (1900), quoting THL's response to a question from Bishop Samuel Wilberforce as to his claim to descent from a monkey.

The party conferences have come and gone, and many of us are asking ourselves which of the leaders' speeches was the most impressive. I won't attempt to answer that; rather I would caution that it is content rather than eloquence that matters. Eloquence is the stock-in-trade of most politicians, but is no guide to sincerity, feasibility or principle. Hitler was eloquent but deranged; while today Obama is strong on oratory but limited in what he can achieve. The Oxford Dictionary defines 'eloquence' as fluent, forcible, and apt use of language, but also as rhetoric, which is characterised as being "expressed with a view to persuasive or impressive effect, artificial or extravagant in language". Thomas Carlyle recognised this in himself, accepting that he was "little other than a red-tape talking machine, and unhappy bag of parliamentary eloquence". And the converse is true: those who speak soberly may nevertheless have something important to say. Did not even Moses say: "O my Lord, I am not eloquent, neither heretofore, nor since thou hast spoken unto thy servant; but I am slow of speech, and of a slow tongue." (Exodus 4.10)

I was reminded of these distinctions on hearing the speeches of the party leaders. Cameron, articulate rather than eloquent, said: "Think of all we've achieved together"; whereas the reality is a nation more economically divided than since the days of Queen Victoria. And this: "We know that profit, wealth creation, tax cuts, enterprise...are not dirty, elitist words – they're not the problem", said, apparently, without any recognition that if unfettered these drivers can go on stoking inequality.

Ed Miliband made some ambitious promises, not least "If we win the election [in] 2015 the next Labour government will freeze gas and electricity prices until the start of 2017", this to be followed by regulation. Sounds good, but the promised standstill period is a mere 20 months, and might not energy companies bump up prices again before the election?

Nick Clegg, habitually short of eloquence, claimed: "And just think of what we have achieved in three short years." I fear that the electorate will focus on what the party has failed to achieve, and on a stupendous broken promise. There is an impression that Clegg does not mind which way the wind blows so long as his party can stay in government.

The most personable leader, I felt, was Nigel Farage. His was a cards-on-the-table speech. It was unfortunate (or prescient) that he said: "We have some [members] who make public pronouncements that I would not always choose myself"; swiftly confirmed when one of them facetiously referred to women as sluts.

Journalists and headline writers can also venture into a kind of eloquence, supremely it seems in the *Daily Mail*. Its recent "The man who hated Britain" and later reference to a 'legacy of evil' broke all bounds.

Ralph Miliband, like me, disliked some aspects of our political direction and some of our institutions. At the age of 17 he wrote in his diary that the English were “perhaps the most nationalist people in the world.” I wrote in much the same vein at the age of 10! Neither of us ever hated Britain. I wrote in *Briefing* no.23 (July 2010): “There is nothing wrong with honestly and rationally opposing the status quo”, and that some sections of the press were “in tune with an unhealthy appetite for sensation among large swathes of the British public”. Richard Hoggart, in his *The Uses of Literacy* (1957) observed that the freedom from official interference that we enjoy, coupled with the tolerance we are happy to show, seem to allow “cultural developments as dangerous in their own way as those we are shocked at in totalitarian societies”. In the present context I simply argue that eloquence in writing has its boundaries and is not to be trusted.

Some preachers are also given to eloquence, and are loathe to accept that theologians may have got it wrong – entirely. My youthful perception was shaped by J. Oswald Sanders’ *Heresies ancient and modern* (1948). Francis Bacon had taken a similar line: “The greatest vicissitude of things is the vicissitude of sects. True religion is built upon a rock; all others are tossed upon the waves of time”. My assessment, then and now, was that these commentators censured outlandish sects as deviant from an orthodoxy that might itself be specious. I concluded that some prophets are falsier than others.

But much of this is relatively harmless. Those of a certain age will remember Billy Graham and his extraordinary benign influence. Let me confine myself to sinister sects and extremist prophets. Here we are on really dangerous territory in that some dynamic clerics can and do persuade ordinary folk into radical religious movements and bizarre, sometimes evil, practices. Charles Kimball in *When religion becomes evil* (2008) observes: “Closer inspection of particular sects helps clarify how charismatic leadership, the impulse to withdraw from society, and unwavering commitment to compelling ideas and teachings can work together to bring disaster on adherents and those around them.” I would merely add that it is also apparent that latter-day jihadist preachers can lead uncritical followers into terrorist atrocities.

Very little of modern excess is new. If you care to read William Lecky’s *History of European Morals* (1911) you will find a wonderful account of the philosophic rhetoricians, who gathered around themselves all that was most brilliant in Roman or Athenian society. They were “a kind of itinerant lecturers”, and very influential, travelling from city to city, delivering harangues that were often received with the keenest interest. “For the most part, says Lecky, “neither their characters nor their talents appear to have deserved much respect.” A number of ancient writers noticed their “vanity and rapacity, and their success was a striking proof of the decadence of public taste”. They had “cultivated the histrionic part of oratory” and presented themselves with the utmost care, determining the different kinds of action appropriate for each form of eloquence. Their subjects varied and they were ingenious in delivery when, for example, “defending some glaring paradox or sophism, [ ] debating some intricate case of law or morals” or pleading for the remission of taxes. Many of the most eminent became wealthy and, as in our own time, became in great measure the educators of the people, contributing to public form and taste. But, as today, they could, according to Petronius, have an “injurious influence upon eloquence”.

This prompts two final thoughts: beware the ‘gift of the gab’, and consign eloquence to ‘Strictly Come Dancing’, where it truly belongs.

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