

not the national information forum

But still working for the inclusion of disabled and other disadvantaged people
by encouraging better information provision

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Issue

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A Digest of Current Social Information

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MATRIMONY

I recently came across Aristotle's advice on matrimony, surprisingly included in his *A Treatise on Government*. In summary: as to what time and in what situation it is proper that citizens should engage in the nuptial contract to ensure the physical well-being of their offspring. The first consideration is their time of life, so that they may grow old at 'the same part of time' (for, as Florrie Forde put it, 'youth doth not mate with age'). Then that the 'bodily powers' of the parties should not be different, that is to say, the man being able to have children, but the woman too old to bear them; or, on the contrary, the woman young enough to produce children, but the man too old to be a father; for, says Aristotle, "from such a situation discords and disputes continually arise." Next, there ought not to be too great an interval between the children and their parents: "for when there is, the parent can receive no benefit from his child's affection, or the child any advantage from his father's protection." Nor should the difference in years be too little, as great inconveniences may arise from it, such as preventing proper reverence being shown to a father by a boy who considers himself as nearly equal in age, and also from the disputes that result in family economics.

There is more from Aristotle, but I will leave it at that.

LIBERTY'S 80TH ANNIVERSARY CONFERENCE AND AGM

Liberty was founded in 1934, committed then as now to protecting civil liberties and promoting human rights. If any distinction is to be drawn between the organisation today and eighty years ago it is that its present role is now more directed to the preservation of rights thought already to have been won. A question and answer session at the beginning of the conference gave a clear indication of where members' current concerns lie: first and foremost with the threat to the Human Rights Act and the basic protection it enshrines. With so much negativity about it is surely right to respond ("counter attack") by stressing the positive benefits of the legislation.

Then the Q and A turned to whether the time has come to extend the franchise to 16 and 17-year-olds? No vote was taken, but the feelings of the audience were clearly well-disposed to such a change, for reasons that will be familiar. As Shami Chakrabarti had said, it will soon become necessary for the next generation to keep up the fight.

Another member wondered what had happened to student protest. Owen Jones argued that it is alive and well, but suffering under increasing suppression and harsh policing. There is a glaring need for new 'politics of



hope’.

The next questioner wondered, as I do, whether the benefits of technology are diminished by the extent to which communications are open to surveillance. Mass, random, blanket surveillance is a matter of grave concern. It was interesting to learn that Liberty intends to sue GCHQ.

The focus then turned to the impact on justice of legal aid cuts. Given that Liberty is well provided with legal expertise there could be only one answer. But on this and other toxic limitations it was thought regrettable that people tend to engage with the issues only if and when they are personally threatened. Thus Nigel Evans has awakened to realities the hard, and expensive, way.

Finally, conference considered the immigration debate, which was seen as toxic and politically driven rather than intelligent. The coalition’s policies seem calculated to undermine the human rights of foreign nationals and their families.

On all such issues Liberty is the voice of sanity, well respected and impressively run. But the overriding message is ‘Join us to be heard’. New members and the money their subscriptions provide are needed, it was said, to sustain active campaigning against assaults on our fundamental freedoms. Members were asked to try to recruit at least one new member, given that Liberty already has the tacit support of so many of our friends. This is my heartfelt plea to those of you who are in harmony with Liberty’s aims but who have yet to give this practical expression.

FROM THE HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE INFORMATION CENTRE

Films promote information sharing to protect children

Mark Osterloh, 15 April 2014

The Social Care News blog will always promote initiatives designed to protect vulnerable and young children. When that initiative involves a call for better information sharing we are especially keen. Those working in – or using – care services have long expressed frustration around the barriers and uncertainties involved in sharing legitimate concerns about an individual’s welfare.

To this end, NHS England and the Health and Social Care Information Centre (HSCIC) have launched a series of short films to promote the benefits of the Child Protection – Information Sharing project (CP-IS).

Supported by Department of Health, CP-IS helps NHS staff give a higher level of protection to children who present in unscheduled care settings. It does this by helping local social services share child protection information with the NHS at a national level for the first time.

Using animations and interviews with NHS staff, social workers and the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC), the films demonstrate the very real difference an information sharing solution can make to the lives of children at risk of cruelty.

Contact cpis@hscic.gov.uk to find out more.

HEARD ON RADIO 5 LIVE

“Anyone who thinks they know what is going on in Northern Ireland is confused.”

COMMENT IN ‘THE GUIDE’

‘Pick of the Day’ for 18 April included the first broadcast of BBC Young Musician of the Year 2014, observing “Something of a rarity on British television: a talent show featuring the actually talented.” [My thought precisely.]

A ROUND UP OF MAGAZINES AND OTHER MEDIA

Access by Design, Autumn 2013: Belatedly I came upon this excellent issue (perhaps it arrived late). Among a treasury of expert guidance I was particularly taken by the news that the Equality and Human Rights Commission has responded to a review of the Public Sector Equality Duty with the following statement: “We entirely share the objectives of ensuring the PSED is implemented effectively and with minimum costs and bureaucracy, and meets required standards on data collection”. The EHRC believes that the best way to cure bureaucracy is to publish a statutory code which would provide clarity on legislative requirements. I take the view that red tape is not necessarily bureaucratic: that it can often hold things together and flag up the importance of necessary duties and controls. It worries me that (also reported in this CAE issue) around 6,500 regulations are currently expected to undergo Red Tape Challenge scrutiny.

All Together Now!

The April/May issue has a sensational account, with photographs, of how, back in 1974, four young friends journeyed from Ellesmere Port to Kathmandu in an old Bedford minibus. One of them was Tom Dowling, the distinguished editor of 'All Together Now!', then hirsute, just out of his teens, and in search of adventure. Through Europe, Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India and Nepal the quartet realised a 'once in a lifetime' experience. But this happy trip was to end in tragedy, for on the return journey, on a dark and deserted Iranian highway, the travellers were set upon by two hooded bandits. One of the attackers' bullets penetrated Tom's back, severing his spinal cord and leaving him paralysed from the chest.

Yet this was only the beginning of an incredible story, for Tom's spirit soon emerged undimmed. Six months later he was back at his job with the Liverpool Echo, where his work as a journalist and his experience of the isolation of disability combined to inspire his passionate lifetime commitment to helping disabled readers by the provision of information. In 1983 the Echo launched his 'I Can Do That' column, later developed into a stand-alone paper that ran for seven years. It was when that paper closed in 2004 that Tom determined to set up 'All Together Now', backed by generous sponsors and his own positive, indomitable ethos. It has become, in the words of Sir Bert Massie, "more than just a newspaper – it is the key that opens a thousand doors." No wonder Ann so admired Tom. They were totally on the same wavelength, building achievement from adversity.

Elsewhere in this issue a court victory is reported which has been said to create a legal precedent for the provision of free places in theatres and sporting venues for carers of disabled ticket holders. 'All Together Now!' goes on to notice that the money spent on seeking treatments for hearing loss is only one-tenth of that devoted to sight loss. Bert Massie then comments that thousands of people are suffering undue distress because of the government's delays in deciding the future of the Independent Living Fund. On another page Sir Bert stresses the importance of information, but argues that its role is frequently underestimated; while in his regular column he warns that budget proposals to cash in their pension savings may have unforeseen consequences for people needing care.

An important judgment in the Supreme Court found that a man lacking the mental capacity to make his own decisions who had been removed from his mother's home and put into the care of Social Services had effectively been deprived of his liberty. As such, the court ruled that the man should have regular independent reviews of his situation.

'All Together Now!' also draws attention to plans to set legal driving limits for certain drugs, and reports that the manifesto of the European Disability Forum asserts that millions of disabled people have been thrown into poverty and social exclusion by the European Union's attempts to recover from the economic crisis. And much, much more. So many disability magazines confine themselves to information about a particular disability, social events and fundraising; writing as though everything in the garden is rosy. 'All Together Now!' tells it as it is.

CILIP Update, April: This journal for the library, information and knowledge management community reports that the Department of Health has contracted PTFS Europe to create an online repository for its huge collection of circulars and guidance documents. Records back to the 1970s will be made available as part of its library service.

Also featured is news of a recent equality award to one of Britain's unsung information champions, John Vincent. For many years John has worked assiduously for social justice and against social exclusion. 'The Network' (www.seapn.org.uk) keeps people in libraries, museums, galleries, cultural and heritage organisations and concerned individuals up-to-date with current, easily missed, information across initiatives relevant to a wide range of disadvantaged groups. In 2001 he was part of a team that published the UK's first review of public libraries and social exclusion under the questioning title *Open to All?* This year he has produced his monumental *LGBT People and cultural and the UK Cultural Sector*. John, like Sir Bert Massie mentioned above, is one of those who believes in the key importance of information, and who has kept this vital faith alive and well. His common cause with the now defunct National Information Forum is deeply felt by one who is not yet quite defunct.

The April issue also comments on the publication of the government's proposals for changes to copyright law, yet to be endorsed in Parliament, but fails to mention what is being proposed. I think it may be of interest to add what is said on the Intellectual Property website, (www.ipo.gov.uk):

“The government is making a series of small but important changes to copyright law to make it better suited for the digital age. These changes will affect how you can use content like books, music, films and photographs. They will also introduce greater freedoms in copyright law to allow third parties to use copyright works for a variety of economically and/or socially valuable purposes without the need to seek permission from copyright owners. Protections for the interests of copyright owners and creators are built in to the proposed changes.

“The government is committed to achieving strong, sustainable and balanced growth that is shared across the country and between industries. These changes are the result of extensive consultation with all interested parties. They will come into force on 1 June 2014.”

Also particularly valuable are several pages on the work of the Internet Watch Foundation, on a service offering unfiltered and untracked internet searches, and on managing internet access in public libraries and the issues raised by filtering.

Forward: The April issue takes a pragmatic view of welfare reform, noticing that over the last few years both the Spinal Injuries Association and the support organisation Aspire have actively reported back to the government on its reform plans: “There is overwhelming concern about these changes and the significant impact they will have on the lives of spinal cord injured people. But, whatever we might think about these changes, they are here to stay and have started to be implemented.” [Perhaps a spoonful of sugar will make the medicine go down?]

It takes a similar view of going into a nursing home. While acknowledging that it is a ‘no-go’ topic for most people with spinal cord injuries, it fatalistically argues that “as people’s circumstances change, the idea is gradually becoming more acceptable and more of a reality [which] doesn’t necessarily have to be feared.” [Well, perhaps, but sad. I would still like to think that we should do everything possible to avoid it! Shouldn’t SIA be striving to do all it can to encourage and help members to continue to live at home? What has become of SIA’s old fighting spirit?]

The Guardian

2 April: Keir Starmer, former Director of Public Prosecutions, has started to draft a ‘victims’ law’, in an effort to reform the way that victims are treated in the judicial process.

The Guardian wins newspaper and website of the year awards for its reporting of government surveillance, along with awards for a number of its journalists.

The Liberal Democrat president, Tim Farron, is about to announce the withdrawal of his party’s support for the bedroom tax, acknowledging that it has caused “huge social problems”. [Nevertheless only two LibDem peers voted against the tax during a subsequent Lords’ debate].

A report from the cross-party Work and Pensions Committee is critical of the government’s programme of welfare reform, with its steep budget cuts (many yet to take effect) and harsher eligibility rules. Especially the bedroom tax, which they call “a blunt instrument”.

3 April: A King’s Fund report suggests that the current health and social care systems are no longer fit for purpose, and that more patient charges may need to be introduced. Social care, in particular, is said to be already “in crisis”, with another on the horizon for the NHS, at least in terms of finance.

4 April: Plans to extend the badger cull have been dropped following a report which found that two pilot shots were neither effective nor humane.

5 April: Sir Richard Thompson, President of the Royal College of Physicians, tells *The Guardian* that hospital doctors are facing ‘absolutely destructive’ caseloads. The report is supplemented by an analysis by Denis Campbell.

Maria Miller, Culture Secretary, is said to have “attempted to threaten and frustrate” an inquiry by the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards. [Ms Miller is a former Minister for Disabled People.]

7 April: Capita, a private company contracted to process claims for Personal Independence Payments, is reported as needing Civil Service support to clear a huge backlog.

9 April: Hannah Lambie-Mumford, a Sheffield University researcher, finds that welfare reforms are central to the huge increase in the number of impoverished people turning to food banks.

Sue Marshall comments that Employment and Support Allowance “is failing on every level”. A report from Spartacus, a network of disability campaigners, finds that ESA, the Work Programme and the workplace itself is preventing disabled people from finding employment, reaching their full potential, and is failing to save money.

10 April: A report by the Institute for Fiscal Studies and the Sutton Trust estimates that the average university student will leave university more than £44,000 in debt, and that the majority of undergraduates now at university will be paying off their student loans into their 40s and 50s. Large numbers will repay more than they borrowed, but most will not return their loan in full.

11 April: The Office for National Statistics admits that net immigration to the UK between 2001 and 2011 was 346,000 higher than previously calculated, because surveys missed out on a substantial number of passengers using some new regional routes.

The life of Richard Hoggart, rather than his death at the age of 95, receives the honour it deserves. [I was an ex-scholarship boy when *The Uses of Literacy* came out, and was one of those profoundly influenced by its “warning of a gradual process of cultural debasement”. A salutary reminder too (though not one I need) that dementia is no respecter of persons.]

Public Health England estimates that long-term exposure to pollution causes 28,869 deaths a year in the UK, with the worst effects in London, particularly in Kensington and Chelsea.

Polly Toynbee goes for Iain Duncan Smith, with a blow by blow account of the “bungled reforms to the disability benefits system”. This should be required reading for voters (particularly in Chingford), but apparently only *The Mirror* and *The Guardian* are interested.

Harriet Harman argues that UKIP will be the main beneficiary if politicians fail to take action to stop the perception that MPs are “splashing about on expenses” and getting drunk in bars subsidised by taxpayers.

The former Deputy Speaker, from personal experience, has finally woken up to the fact that people wrongly charged with criminal behaviour pay a heavy price both mentally and financially, [and lack effective redress].

15 April: *The Guardian* wins Pulitzer prize, jointly with the *Washington Post*, for its reporting of Edward Snowden’s surveillance revelations.

16 April: 45 Anglican bishops [the *Church Times* says 42] and 600 church leaders have signed a letter, [to be delivered today], calling on the Coalition leaders to tackle the causes of food poverty. This initiative is mirrored by data from the Trussel Trust, revealing a 163 per cent increase from the previous year in the number of people receiving food parcels in 2013-14. The DWP argues that there may have been an element of double counting, but the Trust says, conversely, that the total demand has been understated, in that it did not include people helped by other food providers and those who could not or refused to access such help.

Rashida Manjoo, a UN investigator into violence against women, says that she was denied access to Yarl’s Wood immigration detention centre, which holds about 400 women, on instructions from “the highest levels of the Home Office”. Commenting on sexual “marketisation” in the UK of women’s and girls’ bodies, she said that it was more ‘in-your-face’ than in other countries she had visited. [That comment is certain to be resented].

17 April: Researchers from the Wellcome Trust Sanger Institute have “discovered an elusive protein that allows eggs and sperm to join together”. Their work may improve fertility treatments and facilitate the development of new contraceptives.

18 April: Andrew Brown comments that Justin Welby “now looks like the best archbishop of Canterbury the Church of England could possibly have.” [Even those of us who have no religion would agree with that.] Brown observes that he has managed “to get the whole country talking about loan sharks and thinking of the Church of England as an organisation more concerned with the evils of payday lending than of sex”.

Polly Toynbee, Vice President of the British Humanist Association, reacts to the Prime Minister's Easter message (and to a card from the Conservative Christian Fellowship). Not to be missed.

20 April: The Archbishop of Canterbury used his Easter sermon to highlight, among other things, the plight of Britain's poorest citizens: "In this country, even as the economy improves, there is weeping in broken families, in people ashamed to seek help from food banks, or frightened by debt."

21 April: Gillian Guy, CEO of Citizens Advice, is quoted as saying that the emergency financial support system is in crisis. The Guardian has found that in England councils are sitting on £67m of the £136m allocated to local welfare schemes. A leading article sharpens this sorry story by linking it to the abolition of the Social Fund: government [I say] washing its hands of taking responsibility for the alleviation of destitution by passing the buck to local authorities.

22 April: A report by Oxfam and the New Policy Institute finds that welfare cuts have made 1.75 million of the UK's poorest families even poorer. [This is hardly revelatory, but the media and the church are catching up to the fact that in this "Christian country" we are drifting towards the kind of inequality redolent of Victorian society. The DWP, meanwhile, sticks to its mantra, begun under Labour, that its policies are fair and that work is the best way out of poverty. It is looking increasingly thin.]

One of the co-authors of a new report commissioned by NHS Improving Quality asserts that at least 1,000 hospital patients in England die every month from acute kidney failure due to poor care, and that the deaths are avoidable. The annual cost to the NHS is said to be £1bn, more than is spent on breast, lung and bowel cancer combined.

Laurie Penny, who once sought to encourage gifted but disadvantaged pupils into university, now holds that university education is "about fashioning yourself into a walking CV to compete for a stagnant pool of graduate jobs that are paid less in real terms every year, and taking on a rotten amount of debt in the process". Desperation rather than aspiration.

Nick Clegg asks "Where do you want to live, Great Britain or little England?"

23 April: Frances Ryan enunciates the increasing victimisation of disabled people, noticing that they:

- are twice as likely to live in poverty
- face the reality of extra living costs or inability to work, a disadvantage compounded by the coalition government
- have experienced greater inequality through policies such as the bedroom tax and cuts to council tax benefit
- have endured cuts slashing support, or have been made to jump through punitive, flawed hoops, dressed up as reform; something exemplified by the deadly work capability assessment.

She goes on to argue that these assessments are part of a wider, systemic disease; that the Work Programme fails more than 93 per cent of those it is charged to help find work, who are punished by an unfair sanction system. Poverty, she claims, has been rebranded as personal failure.

25 April: Frank Field MP and Tim Thornton, Bishop of Truro, announce that the all-party parliamentary group on hunger and food poverty, which they both chair, has established an inquiry and is inviting evidence. Details at www.foodpovertyinquiry.org.

28 April: Labour has released figures for 2014 which show a trebling of the number of English hospitals (compared to 2013) identified by the regulator as not providing safe and appropriate care. They represent 20 per cent of hospitals inspected.

In a compelling article Chris Huhne argues that the common idea that greater inequality is a price worth paying for economic growth may have had its day, and that rising inequality actually slows down growth. [Huhne's evidence-based case chimes very much with my own instinct that in seeking fiscal and social well-being higher taxes for the wealthy are much preferable to austerity imposed on the poor.]

29 April: Cancer Research UK reports significant improvement in cancer survival rates. Life expectancy

varies across different cancers, but The Guardian provides statistics for selected cancers and for overall cancers for three periods since 1971.

According to Keir Starmer, the conviction of Max Clifford shows that celebrities are not above the law and that in dealing with sexual offences time cannot limit justice.

30 April: Tom Clark and Gabriella Elgenius devote a full page to what – from Edinburgh to Essex – they heard about “how the bedroom tax, personal capability assessments, and the newly unrebated council tax, were leading to missed meals, fears of eviction and strained relationships”. But the article also stresses how these strains breed resentment, often against those in the same boat, encouraged by a political message differentiating between strivers and skivers.

There is also more on how, according to a report from the Prison Reform Trust, the ban on parcels and books being sent to prisoners is putting supportive relationships and rehabilitation at risk.

The Week, 19 April: has a fascinating digest headed ‘Women in Westminster’. The conclusion is that there are too few, particularly at cabinet level, and that the “Palace of Westminster is a deeply sexist place”. It also notices that Euan, Son of Blair, is rumoured to be contemplating standing as MP for Bootle, one of the safest of Labour’s seats.

More in tune with this briefing it provides a full page summary of the issues surrounding the capture and disposal of our medical data.

WE HATE NO.75: MELANCHOLY

“In sooth, I know not why I am so sad. It wearies me; you say it wearies you. But how I caught it, found it, or came by it, what stuff ’tis made of, whereof it is born, I am to learn. And such a want-wit sadness makes of me, that I have much ado to know myself.”

William Shakespeare: The Merchant of Venice, Antonio’s opening speech.

I am deeply conscious that greater minds than mine have tackled this subject, and at length, not least Robert Burton (1577-1640) with his *Anatomy of Melancholy*. But I do not have 26 years for infinite research. That, I must admit, is true of everything I write nowadays. I merely hope that you may find some grains of truth among my half-baked fragments.

Clearly, there are myriad forms of melancholy, some trivial, some serious: from temporary low spirits to deep-seated clinical depression. I have been tempted to dwell upon the effects of the present ‘age of austerity’. But, instead, my thinking was started around the condition which arises from being unable to discover a sense of purpose in our lives: of not knowing from whence we came or where we finish up, or why we are here at all. What, if I remember aright, was said of the ‘Ghost Train’ in the film adaptation starring Will Hay: “Where do ‘e come from, where do ‘e go”.

I have been reading *The Rubáiyat of Omar Khayyam*, alongside Goethe’s *Faust*. Many of the quatrains of the former (in the accurate translation of Peter Avery and John Heath-Stubbs, rather than the poetic version of Fitzgerald) are heavily predicated on the ‘mysteries of eternity’. A recurring theme is that we leave this life not having known the purpose of birth, existence or departure. It finds this enigma depressing, seeing this place of ‘two doors’ as yielding only ‘a heart of sorrow’. Happiness and peace, according to ruba’i 23, is for those who were never born. Now there is real melancholy. And the best response, the poets propose, is to drink and be merry, for assuredly there is no coming back and bliss may or may not follow in the hereafter. Pleasures on earth are preferable to promises of heaven, which nobody can know except as a name.

Goethe’s *Faust*, of course, is more complex. Yet it has a similar underlying thought: the search for the meaning of life and personal fulfilment. I have relied on the simpler libretto of Gounod’s opera (an adaptation of an adaptation) to make my case. The first scene has Faust, an elderly scholar, alone at a table strewn with papers and an open book. “Nothing!” he exclaims. A life of zealous study has been unavailing. Now, sad and lonely, he longs to be free of this world, and prepares to drink a fatal potion. But, outside, the sound of young girls, joyously singing as they make their way to their harvest work, moves him to hesitate. “Blessed be God!” they sing, a last conundrum for the old man to ponder. “But what can their God do for me,” he asks himself, “will he give me back love, youth and faith?” He gives way to cursing his lot, finally calling on Satan to come to him: “A moi, Satan! A moi!”

In this operatic hocus-pocus, Satan (Mephistopheles) duly obliges. “Here I am,” he says. After a brief

discussion, Faust asks what this prince of darkness can do for him. And thus we come to the essence of the plot: "I want youth," says Faust, "then I will have pleasure and young mistresses; enjoy their caresses and desires, partake of the energy of surging instincts and the delirious orgy."

I will not persist with the rest of this Victorian plot, in which lust turns to love, for my point is made: that one of principal strands of melancholy is a fundamental tension in life, something that is built in to the human condition, a turmoil which has been said to have afflicted Goethe himself. We speak of it as the 'Faust Syndrome'. This is commonly identified as the melancholia that follows executive success, the sense that when career goals have been attained, one can be left asking 'is this all there is?'. I prefer to see the Faust story literally, as the regret that surfaces when sexual and emotional fulfilment is lost, the sadness occasioned when relationships are torn apart, break down, or don't work. *The Spectator* of 21 August 1711 postulates three possibilities: "The marriage life is always an insipid, a vexatious, or a happy condition". Over the years I have found that out for myself, but have gone on to notice that after temporary joy, much human unhappiness can stem from unmet desire and unrequited love. Thus men find other consolations, and women, of a certain age, languish from the lack of a suitable partner. If you weren't feeling miserable before reading this, perhaps you are now?

WE HATE REACHES NO.75

It occurred to me that avid readers might welcome a subject index of the series so far, available on the website (www.nif.org.uk):

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Derek Kinrade