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A Digest of Current Social Information

News Briefing No. 72. July 2014

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From the Guardian

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A busy month on the news front, and for me continuing commitments following Ann's death. I've compromised with a simplified summary from a single source. You may prefer it. Please let me know. My main objective, frankly, is to point up that there is nothing about which to be politically smug on the social scene. We may have returned to our pre-recession economic level, but many people are counting the cost, and will continue to do so.

Selected highlights from the Guardian, July

2nd: Professor John Ashton, President of the Faculty of Public Health, calls for a change in the law to allow doctors caring for dying people to end their suffering by administering a lethal dose of drugs to those who want it, without the risk of prosecution. In a separate article Ashton identifies poverty and the plight of young people as major concerns.

- The European Court of Human Rights has ruled that France has the right to ban women from wearing the full-face veil in public.
- Convictions for domestic violence have reached their highest-ever level, with cases now accounting for 10.7% of the Crown Prosecution Service's workload.
- The Association of Directors of Adult Care Services warns that the social care system is on the brink of becoming unsustainable. The Local Government Association estimates that the funding gap will be £1.9bn by March 2016.
- The Joseph Rowntree Foundation's *Minimum Income Standard* is said to tell a dismal truth: that increasing numbers of British people on low incomes will never be able to afford an acceptable standard of living.
- Sarah Boseley writes that we each have personal responsibility for our own health, but stresses that our chances of long-term success in tackling obesity are small without organised government support. "Doing nothing is not an option if obesity as a national and a global health problem is to be brought under control".
- The Guardian 'Roundtable' focuses on female genital mutilation and the need for radical change. More at plan-uk.org/because-i-am-a-girl/fgm-rose.

3rd: Denis Campbell reports early indications of the possible privatisation of cancer care, starting in Staffordshire. A new prime provider for end-of-life care is also needed in that area. New evidence from the Nuffield Trust shows that private firms are increasingly becoming providers of NHS care in England.



- The Common Home Affairs Select Committee criticises the failure of successive governments to protect vulnerable girls from female genital mutilation, calling it an “ongoing national scandal”.
- There are fresh calls for an inquiry into allegations of historic child sex abuse among politicians. Claims submitted by former MP Geoffrey Dickens in 1983 are said to have been passed to officials to investigate. They are believed to have referred to the ‘Paedophile Information Exchange’, concerning paedophiles operating a network within and around Westminster.
- Draft government guidance, out for consultation, includes a change to accepted current practice in that parents would be warned not to share a bed with their babies for the first 12 months of their lives. This to reduce the risk of sudden infant death syndrome.
- Tom Clark, author of *Hard Times: The Divisive Toll of the Economic Slump*, contributes a closely reasoned argument to argue that behind George Osborne’s claims to have cut income inequality, detailed scrutiny make it clear that the Tories have chosen to hit the poor.

4th: A Patients Association report based on official data finds that NHS patients are having to wait longer for routine operations. A DOH spokesperson points out that with an ageing population pressure on NHS services is inevitable increasing.

5th: Prime Minister, David Cameron, asks the Home Office Permanent Secretary to investigate what happened to the missing papers concerning alleged paedophile activity involving politicians in the 1980s.

- The High Court rules that retrospective legislation brought in to address flaws in the ‘back-to-work’ regulations were incompatible with European law.
- Sarah Boseley explores the production and use of ‘legal highs’.
- Amelia Gentlemen reports the experience of a group of MPs from an all-party inquiry into hunger and food poverty investigating increased reliance on foodbanks.

7th: The papers relating to organised paedophilia that might have included senior politicians may have been destroyed, creating suspicion of a cover-up, and prompting calls for an inquiry.

- The Cabinet Officer, Francis Maude, announces plans to tighten the requirements for taking strike action.

8th: The Home Secretary, Theresa May, announces a public inquiry into the historic handling of complaints of sexual abuse, including powers to examine possible suppression of allegations of child abuse by party members. Much Guardian comment.

- A study finds that a new blood test, which could be made available within two years, will be able to predict the onset of Alzheimer’s disease to an accuracy of 87%.
- The Financial Ombudsman Service warns of a rising level of complaints against payday lenders, and that even these may be “only the tip of the iceberg”.
- Comments by Sir Bob Kerslake, Head of the Civil Service, indicate that the Universal Credit project continues to draw money down from the Treasury and has still not been ‘signed-off’.
- Polly Toynbee inveighs against the treatment of people with mental illness. She finishes: “There has been much outrage about lack of kindness and care in hospitals. Neglect of mental patients is every bit as bad, but deliberate cruelty by the DWP defies any concern for the wellbeing for the most vulnerable, let alone ‘parity of esteem’.”

9th: NHS England’s CEO, Simon Stevens, will today announce a bold new scheme to fund care for frail elderly people, disabled children and those with serious mental illness or learning disabilities.

- Tristan Wilkinson provides encouragement to share the benefits of digital inclusion.
- The Guardian Roundtable considers how the new Care Act will work in practice and what public bodies can do to help.

10th: A survey of 78 senior NHS leaders by the Nuffield Trust found that 14% said it was very likely and 33% quite likely that comprehensive healthcare would still be provided free at the point of use in England in ten years time.

12th: Former Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr George Carey, has changed his mind and now backs proposals to legalise assisted dying for terminally ill people who request it. He is quoted as saying: “In strictly observing accepting teaching about the sanctity of life, the church could actually be sanctioning anguish and pain - the very opposite of the Christian message”.

- Sandra Laville reports that police officers investigating hundreds of child sex abuse cases are at a psychological breaking point.

15th: Record numbers of school pupils and staff are being identified as at risk of radicalisation.

- Research suggests that playing games or doing puzzles may help to keep Alzheimer’s disease at bay.
- The General Synod of the Church of England has approved the appointment of female bishops.
- Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt is planning to extend the power to put hospital trusts into “special measures” to GP practices and providers of adult social care.

- The government plans to charge visitors and migrants from outside the European Union 150% of the cost of NHS treatment to deter so-called health tourism.

- The Public Accounts Committee has criticised the government for failing to collect £60bn in unpaid debts of various kinds. Committee Chair, Margaret Hodge, said that “its treatment of debt has been characterised by neglect and periodic large write-offs”.

- Polly Toynbee contributes an article on the opportunity to wrest our final right to die as we please from the old moral and religious orthodoxy”.

- A leader criticises government haste in demanding so-called ‘emergency’ data laws under the heading “Headlong rush, waning trust”

16th: 27 senior figures, including 11 present or former presidents of royal medical colleges and a former NHS medical director have urged peers to back Lord Falconer’s bill on the option of assisted dying for terminally ill patients. Desmond Tutu and Lord Carey have also declared their support for the bill, but the Church of England remains officially opposed.

- A deal between the three major Westminster parties has secured the urgent passage of the Data Retention and Investigatory Powers Bill, but with the Home Secretary accepting Labour amendments to strengthen safeguards.

- A DWP report finds that 60% of tenants affected by the ‘bedroom tax’ have been unable to afford shortfalls in housing benefit and that only four and a half per cent have been able to move to a smaller house.

- 3.2 million people have been diagnosed with type 2 diabetes, but many more are regarded as “pre-diabetic”. An article in the British Medical Journal argues that the latter diagnosis is of little benefit and carries huge medical and social costs.

17th: There has been an unprecedented increase in the number of reports of historic and current child abuse. 660 suspected paedophiles (people who used the internet to look up pictures of children being sexually abused) have been arrested of whom only 39 were already on the Sex Offenders Register.

- The government’s emergency surveillance bill has been widely criticised in the House of Lords.

- A Guardian/ICM poll shows continuing majority public support for the taxpayer-funded model of health care, although NHS leaders are questioning its sustainability.

- Lord Avebury, himself suffering from an incurable disease, comes out in favour of Lord Falconer’s bill on the option of assisted dying for terminally ill patients.

- Liberal Democrats no longer support the ‘bedroom tax’ and call for an overhaul of the policy. But, says Owen Jones, nothing seems to touch Iain Duncan Smith, whom he sees as “champion of policies that have driven some of the poorest people in society into despair.”

18th: Draft report by Peter Clarke, ordered by Michael Gove, finds a co-ordinated agenda to impose segregationist attitudes and practices of a hardline, politicised strain of Sunni Islam in a number of Birmingham schools.

- John Inge, Bishop of Worcester, argues against assisted dying, and a controversial leader defends the “absolute” law against killing. Letters for and against.

- Another leader comments on an official report heavily critical of the ‘bedroom tax’. Two of the three Westminster parties now openly describe it as a failure, bringing the possibility of a reversal closer.

19th: Report on House of Lords debate on Assisted Dying Bill.

- Emerging scandal of fundamentalist Muslim ‘activists’ who are being allowed to infiltrate the management of at least ten Birmingham schools.
- Leader on Edward Snowden’s revelations.

22nd: Victims of female genital mutilation to get lifelong anonymity, but parents who fail to prevent their daughters from the abuse will be open to prosecution.

- Student loan system in crisis.

23rd: Nicky Morgan, the new Secretary of State for Education, unveils reforms following Peter Clarke’s damning report on extremist infiltration of some Birmingham schools.

- A DWP report finds systematic failings in the treatment of benefit recipients threatened by sanctions, particularly those most vulnerable. (But we have known this for some time).
- Prime Minister announces that doctors, social workers and teachers will be legally obliged to report cases of female genital mutilation.

26th: In a “risky” speech, Ed Miliband admitted to not looking good in photographs, but said that the political focus needed to be about the big ideas needed to change society. (Couldn’t agree more. One, presumably Tory, commentator has quoted Ronald Reagan as an authority and suggested that image is a guide to calibre. I prefer to argue that you can’t - or shouldn’t - judge a book by its cover, and to recall that the Prime Minister of one of our most effective administrations, Clement Attlee, was hardly good-looking. Conversely, isn’t it apparent that charisma and charm are the stock-in-trade of successful charlatans? Again one needs to judge the merit of what handsome people say.)

- A full-page article (well nearly) focuses on Fahma Mohamed and Jaha Dukureh, who have led the global campaigns against female genital mutilation.
- Prime Minister, David Cameron, has announced that the government will look into creating a separate offence of domestic violence.

28th: More from Tom Clark, who observes that the welfare system has become incoherent, and suggests that we need to start again, “resetting the whole discussion from first principles”. (A voice crying in the wilderness?)

29th: Jo Edwards, chair of Resolution, the body that represents lawyers and professionals in divorce hearings, warns that because of cuts in legal aid a two-tier structure of justice is emerging.

- A study has found that drinking to excess can lead to memory loss in later life.
- Insolvency Service figures show a big increase in personal insolvencies, prompting warnings of the fate of households already financially stretched when interest rates rise.
- Guardian ‘Interview’ focuses on Beth Britton, who has moved from campaigning on care issues to advising the Care Quality Commission.

WE HATE NO.78: LONELINESS

*“Lonely I wander through scenes of my childhood,
They call back to mem’ry the happy days of yore,
Gone are the old folk, the house stands deserted,
No light in the windows, no welcome at the door...
Why stand I here like a ghost and a shadow?
‘Tis time I was moving, ‘tis time I passed on.
Sir Frederick O’Connor: ‘The Old House’*

This is only partly written from a personal perspective. I have gained more new friends and have become more involved in diverse (and diverting) activities than ever I did when Ann was my constant and

beloved companion. But for many people, especially those unable to get out and about, loneliness can be torture. Indeed is not solitary confinement a dreadful punishment inflicted on prisoners, which at the extreme can lead to madness? Among synonyms of loneliness are 'forlorn' and 'desolate', while contrasted words are 'social', 'gregarious' and 'convivial'. I know on which side of that chasm I prefer to be.

I was prompted to add loneliness to my list of 'hates' when I learnt of The National Visitors Network, an initiative begun by the Civil Service Retirement Fellowship, which links trained visitors with former public servants who feel isolated and would welcome a visit, with the probability of a bond of friendship. Alongside is a popular Phone Buddy Scheme, providing regular friendship calls with carefully matched buddies. This is in keeping with the Fellowship's founding principles. The book charting its history has the title *A Pension is not Enough*, and in a foreword to the second edition, Lord Morris of Manchester observed that the Fellowship's role is to bring people together to combat the loneliness and social deprivation that the ageing process can inflict. Interestingly, the history records that "the welfare authorities", then centred in the Treasury, agreed to an exploration of the possibility of creating a suitable organisation "to undertake informal visiting and promote social contacts among pensioners"; and the idea of fighting loneliness and keeping pensioners in touch with each other through universal visiting was written into the Fellowship's constitution. This, I'm sorry to say, is in stark contrast to the present government's withdrawal of grant aid.

Yet living alone is not necessarily all doom and gloom. Writers, over the years, have tended to extol solitude, perhaps by way of encouragement. Robert Lindler pointed out that: "It is in solitude that the works of hand, heart and mind are always conceived, and in solitude that individuality must be affirmed". James Russell Lowell argued that solitude is the "nurse of full-grown souls". And Wordsworth wrote of "the bliss of solitude". But closer to reality are the thoughts of Collette: "There are days when solitude is a heady wine that intoxicates you with freedom, others when it is a bitter tonic, and still others when it is a poison that makes you beat your head against the wall". Sir Richard Steele, who can be claimed to have been the inventor of modern journalism, died in rural Wales in voluntary obscurity retreating from his creditors, and presumably lonely. In an early edition of *The Spectator* he had written: "To be exempt from the passions with which others are tormented, is the only pleasing solitude. I can very justly say with the ancient sage, "I am never less alone than when alone" (Cicero, *De officiis* 3.1). He went on, however, in no.264, to dissent from the common "affectation" of loving the pleasure of solitude, a view propounded "among those who cannot possibly be supposed qualified for passing life in that manner".

My own view is that loneliness can be closely linked to ill-health and poverty. But that except where isolation is unavoidable, one can do much for oneself to combat loneliness. Simply by being more outgoing and getting involved in activities. Dare I say, by joining the 'big society'. There are hundreds of organisations needing help which also offer interest and, if not love, at least companionship. And even if you are confined to 'four walls', and can afford it, life can also be hugely enhanced by joining the online community. Be not afraid of the computer. Although I have criticised some aspects of social media, used responsibly it can lift the spirits and take one into a new world. Many lonely people regard television as a friend, but it can also compound loneliness, making you a mere spectator and keeping you away from social contacts in the real world.

Jean Shapiro, in her guide *On Your Own* (1985), brings out the fact that living alone can have some advantages: freedom to do what you want, when you want, and not having to compromise to accommodate the wishes of someone else. But for many there remains a yearning for a 'special person' with whom to share experiences. And in the absence of that special relationship no one calls; no one phones. Bereavement, obviously, presents particular problems. I see no reason to resile from what Ann and I wrote in *Directory for Older People* (1989): "When bereavement comes late in life, particularly if we lose a life-long partner, the pain and distress are likely to be compounded by loneliness. People who enjoyed our company as a couple may not relate to us as individuals [sic], and some of our old and best friends may also have died. There are fewer opportunities to strike out in a new direction, and it can be more difficult to rebuild our lives."

Age, in that regard, can be crucial, inasmuch as at a certain age the likelihood of physical, sexual attraction, if not wholly spent, is greatly diminished. Thus there are thousands of people wanting a partner, but unable to find or attract one, who will be especially fortunate to meet someone with whom they are compatible. Loneliness, in this context, touches on the most sensitive part of the human psyche: the sense of being unloved and not needed.

Groups most vulnerable to loneliness have been identified as single parents (though they are not quite alone), widows and widowers, single older people and those who have gone through the anguish of

divorce. I would add spinsters. As Charlotte Brontë remarked: “The trouble is not that I am single and likely to stay single, but I am lonely and likely to stay lonely”.

It can be a mistake to think that loneliness can be alleviated by company: everything depends of the company you keep. As Haruki Murakami observed, “I don’t go out of my way to make friends...It just leads to disappointment.” That, I think, is unduly pessimistic. There are good friends; you just have to be careful. It is commonly said that one can be lonely in a crowd, but conversely loneliness bites precisely from a surfeit on one’s own company.

There is, on the web, a Campaign to End Loneliness (www.campaigntoendloneliness.com). It recognises two types of loneliness: *emotional* – felt at the loss of a special companion, and *social* – the lack of involvement in a social network or group of friends. It can be intermittent or chronic. The Campaign points to research which consistently shows that between 6% and 13% of older people feel lonely, either continually or sometimes severely. It’s a good place to go for information on available support.

I’m sorry if this has been somewhat pessimistic, but that’s why loneliness features in the ‘We Hate’ series. It may be that one has to come to terms with it, as with other of life’s misfortunes.

Derek Kinrade