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A Digest of Current Social Information

News Briefing No. 73. August 2014

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THOMAS PAINE

I was much taken by, and give first place to Melvyn Bragg's *Radical Lives* on BBC2 (9 August). I identify with Paine, having been an excise officer and having my own radical tendencies. I have read most of his mainstream books and indeed have contributed my own thoughts to *The Journal of Radical History*. But Bragg's inspirational analysis came over fresh as the dawn. Paine's admirable prose and purpose, particularly his advocacy of the rights of mankind, are much-needed today. My only obvious reservation is that he overreached himself: In his assault upon unearned privilege and unelected power he failed to recognise that the forces of revolution can themselves embody evil characteristics.

ISIS

I recently came across the following comment by the Rt Hon Lord Hurd of Westwell in Hugh Leach's *Strolling About on the Roof of the World* (2003):

"Professor Yapp told the Society [the Royal Society for Asian Affairs] nearly ten years ago 'the delusion that one can bring about a just order through international intervention in the internal affairs of states is one of the most dangerous follies of our times'. Our present Prime Minister proclaims and acts on the opposite view, both in the Balkans and Afghanistan'."

ROTHERHAM

The shocking accounts of the scale of extreme child sexual abuse, apparently largely tolerated by the local authority and the police, are a wake-up call. It is said that one factor in the lamentable inaction was a fear of being accused of racism. But how is it that in its dealings with black Africans and Caribbeans the police do not appear to have any such apprehension?

From Chris Bazeley

An elderly farmer was in the emergency ward, having stitches put in his hand, due to an accident with a piece of machinery. The doctor carrying out the procedure struck up a conversation with the old man. Eventually the topic got around to politicians and their role as our leaders. The old farmer said, "Well, you know, most politicians are 'post tortoises'." Not being familiar with the term, the doctor asked him what a 'post tortoise' was. The old farmer said, "When you're driving down a country road and you come across a fence post with a tortoise balanced on top, that's a post



tortoise.

The old farmer, seeing the puzzled look on the doctor's face, continued to explain. "You know he didn't get up there by himself, he doesn't belong up there, he doesn't know what to do while he's up there, he's elevated beyond his ability to function, and you just wonder what kind of idiot put him up there to begin with."

Followed up by some cynical quotes notices by Chris:

In my many years I have come to a conclusion that one useless man is a shame, two is a law firm and three or more is a government.

John Adams

If you don't read the newspaper you are uninformed, if you do read the newspaper you are misinformed.

Mark Twain

Suppose you were an idiot. And suppose you were a member of government. But then I repeat myself.

Mark Twain

I contend that for a nation to try to tax itself into prosperity is like a man standing in a bucket and trying to lift himself up by the handle.

Winston Churchill

A government which robs Peter to pay Paul can always depend on the support of Paul.

George Bernard Shaw

Foreign aid might be defined as a transfer of money from poor people in rich countries to rich people in poor countries.

Douglas Casey, classmate of Bill Clinton at Georgetown University

Giving money and power to government is like giving whiskey and car keys to teenage boys.

P.J. O'Rourke, civil libertarian

Government is the great fiction, through which everybody endeavors to live at the expense of everybody else.

Frederic Bastiat, French economist (1801-1850)

I don't make jokes. I just watch the government and report the facts.

Will Rogers

If you think health care is expensive now, wait until you see what it costs when it's free!

P.J. O'Rourke

In general, the art of government consists of taking as much money as possible from one party of the citizens to give to the other.

Voltaire (1764)

Just because you do not take an interest in politics doesn't mean politics won't take an interest in you!

Pericles (430 B.C.)

No man's life, liberty, or property is safe while the legislature is in session.

Mark Twain (1866)

Talk is cheap...except when government does it.

Anonymous

The government is like a baby's alimentary canal, with a happy appetite at one end and no responsibility at the

other.

Ronald Reagan

The only difference between a tax man and a taxidermist is that the taxidermist leaves the skin.

Mark Twain

There is no distinctly Native American criminal class...save government.

Mark Twain

What this country needs are more unemployed politicians.

Edward Langley, artist (1928-1995)

A government big enough to give you everything you want, is strong enough to take everything you have.

Thomas Jefferson

We hang the petty thieves and appoint the great ones to public office.

Aesop

Chris Bazeley,

www.chrisbazeley.com

From Liberty

Over recent years there's been much promise of reform of the UK's extradition procedures from politicians of all stripes, but in fact the few basic protections which did exist have been diluted even further under this government.

Extradition is an important part of fighting cross-border crime. But it's also a traumatic punishment in itself and effective safeguards are imperative. A fundamental overhaul is long-overdue.

Thankfully our extradition arrangements are again under review. The Lords' Extradition Law Committee is conducting an inquiry, and has called for input from organisations and members of the public.

From Civic Voice

Decline in heritage expertise continues

Historic buildings across England are at risk of ruin or damaging redevelopment because local authorities no longer have the necessary conservation expertise.

The latest annual report on local authority staff resources, carried out by the IHBC in partnership with English Heritage and the Association of Local Government Archaeological Officers (ALGAO), has found that since 2006 one in three conservation officers have lost their jobs due to budget cuts. This has resulted in a massive loss in building conservation knowledge and expertise.

One in four local authorities has no conservation officer or little more than limited, part time advice on the protection, maintenance and repair of their historically important buildings. The scale of the cutbacks identified in this research means that civic societies should really be championing the importance of the historic environment at a political level to ensure the investment required comes forward.

The next few years will be key for the civic society movement. English Heritage is being split up, conservation and planning departments will continue to be eroded and the impact of the Government's planning changes will continue to be felt in our towns and cities.

From Maggie Quintrell

Again, thanks for your Briefing, Derek. Food for thought, as ever. At present, I'm the opposite of living alone and feeling lonely! All my days are given up to going to look after grandsons...one in Teddington (Archie, aged just 2) and one in Queens Park (Teo aged 4.8). Plus visiting my 92-year-old bed-ridden neighbour, and other neighbours here popping in and out....plus the other two grandsons to visit...plus busy emailing every evening, etc., etc. You get the picture!

I had to give up my local politics class until September, when Teo starts school, but will still be going to

Archie until September 2015! Both my sons' partners are full-time career women. However, I feel that if one is fit enough to get out there are many local groups and charities needing retired people, so no reason for loneliness. Of course, emotional loneliness is MUCH more problematic...I have lost too many unique friends over the last decade, ones going back decades and impossible to replace. Especially one who was closer to me, in so many ways, than family for 48 years. I need to address that through bereavement counselling.

From Eleanor Margolis

Thank you for the newsletter. The thoughts on loneliness were particularly nicely judged. It reminded me of the time a few years ago when I broke my wrist and was off work and a bit isolated. Suddenly I was going to Peckham Hourbank weekly lunches not as a volunteer helper but as someone who was really grateful for companionship and an affordable meal cooked by someone else! It reminds me how we can change roles quite suddenly, be both independent and dependent in different ways at the same time. Thanks for your work to keep us informed and aware.

From Mark Osterloh, Department of Health

Be a voice for autism

Earlier this year, the Department of Health launched Think Autism – our cross-government update to the 2010 Adult Autism Strategy. Created with the involvement of people with autism and Asperger's syndrome, as well as their families and carers, it brings new focus and resolve to the task of building communities in which easy access to information, services and support are the norm.

At the time, Jon Rouse, our Director General for Social Care, used his blog to wholeheartedly endorse this enterprise, emphasising the need for inclusion and innovation at a local level.

As we look towards implementation, our commitment and desire to keep the voice of 'end users' at the heart of the strategy remains paramount, which is why the Department of Health is seeking to recruit four members to the National Adult Autism Cross Government Programme Board.

The vacancies offered are intended to reflect the needs and views of both those living with autism and those who live or work in a supporting role. To this end, positions are available for two people on the autistic spectrum who can self-advocate (with without support from a carer or other trusted supporter) and two who are family carers of adults with autism or children who are preparing for adulthood.

This is a fantastic opportunity to promote the principles and goals of Think Autism and to drive implementation to strengthen positive attitudes within communities.

For further information and how to apply please visit Working for DH and scroll down to find the full vacancy details. Deadline for applications is 12 noon, Friday, 5 September 2014.

In the meantime, if you would like to share your views and experiences on what works in your area, we'd love to hear from you.

Reported by CILIP UPDATE, from the Daily Telegraph, 6 August 2014

Plans to allow personal data stored on different public sector databases to be aggregated could be unveiled later this year. But even if not challenged, data inevitably 'decays'. How will it be kept up to date?

From Access by Design (Centre for Accessible Environments, summer 2014)

Vivien King explains how the new Children and Families Act 2014 gives greater protection to all vulnerable children within society, including those with special educational needs and impairments. But she also remarks "that one can be left, at times, with the feeling that the needs of disabled people have been forgotten or at least considered to be secondary to others with differing protected characteristics."

Elsewhere, however, it is reported that selected railway stations will receive a portion of £100 million to improve access for disabled passengers under a government scheme. See <http://tinyurl.com/Gov-funding-access-stations>

Much more in this brilliant specialist journal, including a review of Inclusive Urban Design: *A guide to creating accessible public spaces*, and an introduction to the principles of 'DeafSpace': creating a built environment informed by sensorial consideration and connection to place. No local government planners should be without this guidance.

Selected and summarised from *The Guardian*

1 August: Prison governors have had to contend with controlling a record population of more than 85,000 while implementing budget cuts of up to 24% over the past three years. Over the year to March 2014 serious assaults have risen by 30% and suicides by 69%. The performance of nearly a quarter of 126 prisons have been officially rated as poor, with conditions in 28 of them described as being of concern.

2 August: Lucy Mangan in *The Guardian Weekend* comments on so-called “poor doors”: separate entrances in apartment blocks to isolate poorer from richer inhabitants (26 July). She observes that the visibility of such doors provides “a brilliant, instantly comprehensible distillation of an entire complex of social, cultural and political attitudes...portals into stored centuries of privilege, prejudice and protection rackets of all kinds.” She sees them as a gift to anyone who wants “take the electorate by the hand and lead them round the shiny, fragile edifice, listing on shallow foundations and permeated by the faint but persistent stink of moral squalor that is the house that Conservatism built.”

5 August: Labour, drawing on the House of Commons library, has produced figures which show that growing housing benefit payments are attributable not only to the number of unemployed claimants, but also to rising housing costs for those in work, a reflection of the number of people in part-time or low-paid work.

The Guardian has found evidence of attempts to revive plans that could allow the sharing of confidential personal data across government departments and, under the most radical option, with all bodies providing public services.

6 August: Clare Allen contrasts the furore over revelations of sexual abuse of children by people in the public eye with the cutting back of services to survivors of such abuse.

G2 has a two-page expose of some accounts of the counter-productive effects of benefits sanctions, drawn from more than 2,000 comments from online readers following the report of the death of David Clapson (4 August).

8 August: Ian Birrell has an important article about perceptions of disability, inveighing against the rising tide of abortions on grounds of disability and a new kind of eugenics: the concept of “enhancing evolution” by the elimination of genes that cause unwanted conditions. Birrell, who writes from a perspective of bringing up a daughter with profound and complex disabilities, concludes that “it seems our technology has again exceeded our humanity”.

11 August: Labour sources say that in 2013/14, in England, almost 300,000 patients had to wait in ambulance queues outside A & Es, some for hours.

Larry Elliott, The Guardian’s economics editor, observes that “the Bank of England has been scratching its head for months about the state of the economy”. While unemployment is lower than expected, so is the rate at which earnings are increasing. And tax receipts are falling: in the first three months of 2014/15 down by 3.5% on the previous year. Elliott suggests some possible explanations, and offers a radical alternative approach.

12 August: Reinforcing my piece on loneliness, Relate has published the results of a survey into UK relationships. I’m not sure that one can trust what people say (or think) about their happiness, but an astonishing percentage of people think they have good relationships with their partner, a figure that is completely out of sync with the divorce rate. 24% say they are not satisfied with their sex lives. Put another way that means that 76% are satisfied, which is again astonishing. But the figures that are probably reliable are those concerning loneliness: 10% say they don’t have a single close friend, and 19% never or rarely felt loved in the two weeks before the survey.

According to a Guardian/ICM poll, Labour has surged into a 7-point lead over the Conservatives. (It’s

unfortunate, however, that public opinion blows in the wind of passing events rather than a reasoned overall view of the political climate, not least the perilous state of the economy.)

A survey by law firm Slater & Gordon found that more than 40% of managers are “generally wary” of hiring women of childbearing age. (I wonder what percentage of those asked are similarly disinclined to take on disabled people.)

Polly Toynbee regards Iain Duncan Smith’s view of welfare reform, and of his assessment of his own performance as divorced from reality. “Tricks abound,” she asserts, “as staff are forced to hit targets called ‘spinning plates’. With George Osborne taking another £12bn cuts after 2015, it’s possible Duncan Smith doesn’t know the abominations he oversees.”

14 August: ONS figures show that for the second quarter of 2014 wages, excluding bonuses, rose by only 0.6% - the slowest growth rate since 2001, when records began.

15 August: The Resolution Foundation has published figures showing that in 1.6 million homes more than half of disposable income is taken up by mortgage repayments or rent, typically young people living alone and renting privately. Thus their ability to meet other expenses is precarious and likely to get worse.

16 August: Polling firm ComRes has found that nearly half of people contacted would be willing to pay more tax provided the extra money went directly to the NHS, which is said to be facing a £30 billion shortfall in its finances by 2020.

Owen Jones observes that suicide is the biggest killer of men aged between 20 and 49, and that overall it is predominate among males. In 2012, 76% of people taking their own lives were men. Jones argues that male depression is not receiving the attention it deserves.

In the same issue Andrew Solomon explores his view that depression is a disease of loneliness, and identifies “depression’s tidal pull towards seclusion” so that friendship becomes “a vocabulary as obscure as Sanskrit”.

18 August: Conservative MP, former GP, now chair of the Health Select Committee, Dr Sarah Wollaston is quoted as saying that it is “wholly unacceptable” for under-18s picked up by the police because they are having a breakdown to be taken into cells rather than to a specialist medical unit. Care Quality Commission figures for England in 2012/13 show that more than a third of assessments under section 136 of the Mental Health Act involved the use of a police cell.

Tristram Hunt, shadow Education Secretary, is set to highlight figures that show a 200% increase in the number of infants with more than 30 pupils since 2010, up to 70 in some schools.

Zoe Williams deliberates on the identification of “troubled” families as those who are disruptive rather than deprived. She argues that we have to be clear about the systematic causes of poverty: low wages, insecure jobs, deliberately insecure benefits, high rents, impossible energy costs. “Everything else,” she says, “is window dressing”.

G2 notices that since the introduction of fees there has been a dramatic fall in cases being taken to industrial tribunals. Are people being priced out of justice?

19 August: In September 2013, the DWP was beset with technical problems achieving delivery of Universal Credit. Faced with criticism, a decision was taken to categorise it as “reset”. Rajeev Syal reports that the Public Accounts Committee has now expressed concern that this was “an attempt to keep information secret and prevent scrutiny”.

It is reported that the price of rail tickets is rising four times faster than wages.

Polly Toynbee reminds us that the Tories haven't won an election for 22 years.

Letters (mostly from medical professionals) focus on the need to improve mental health services.

21 August: Self-employment in the UK at its highest level – 4.6 million – since records began: some 15% of the total workforce, compared to 8.7% in 1975.

Research published in the Journal of Medical Ethics shows that the number of foreign nationals who travel to Switzerland to be helped to end their lives has doubled in four years and 20% of them are from the UK. (Sarah Wootton, CEO of Dignity in Dying, points out that these statistics reinforce the fact that there is a problem with UK law, something that the President of the Supreme Court has already indicted. Moreover, many more dying people are finding ways to end their lives at home, while others receive illegal assistance to die from their doctors, without safeguards and transparency.)

22 August: (Evidence of how dangerous it can be to communicate by Twitter): Richard Dawkins apologises if brevity gave the wrong impression in a tweet advising that it would be immoral to persist with a pregnancy if the mother knew the foetus had Down's Syndrome.

23 August: A turnout of only 10.4% in a by-election for a Police and Crime Commissioner calls into question the legitimacy of the office.

27 August: The number of incidents of self-harm in England's mental health trusts has risen by almost 56% since 1910. Labour blames this on cut backs in mental health services.

(G2): Owen Jones writes on the meaning of the 'establishment', and explains how the political, social and business elites have a stranglehold on the country.

28 August: An austerity measure which resulted in low-income households becoming liable to council tax has resulted in widespread non-payment. More than a fifth of the tax charged to working-class claimants remained unpaid at the end of 2013-14.

Shelter estimates that in the past year 880,000 working parents in England have skipped meals in order to be able to meet their housing costs.

29 August (Guardian Sport): England's football manager, Roy Hodgson, commenting on public apathy following our mediocre performance in the World Cup, is quoted as saying: "I can't expect people to suddenly shrug that off in the way that the players and coaches have to." Did he really mean that?

RACISM

Interesting to hear black footballer Cyril Regis on Radio 5Live (30 August) making a distinction between racial abuse and racial banter between friends. And commenting that black people experience a 'glass ceiling' in management – both in football and society in general – but not being able to explain it.

THE SOCIAL MODEL OF DISABILITY

Readers may be interested in the following exchange I recently had with members of the Community, Diversity and Equality Group of the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals:

15 July 2014, Derek Kinrade: I want to put on record the fact that I dissent from the view of the 'social model' of disability embodied in the paper brought by Francesca Pratt at the last meeting of the Group. These are my thoughts on models and, in particular, the social model of disability; from c.2007:

"Not, despite some reservations, the sort that parade on catwalks, but what the French call *idées fixées*. An example is the 'social model of disability' which holds (correct me if I'm wrong) that disability is attributable to the physical, attitudinal and communication barriers created by society, or perhaps more accurately which society fails to dismantle or change. Despite significant progress in addressing the needs

of disabled people, society (whatever that means) is certainly not blameless; but is not the greater truth that the shortcomings and insensitivity of non-disabled folk *compound* disability, rather than being its sole cause? And to a degree related to an almost infinitely variable level of impairment.

The 'social model', we think, emerged as a reaction to another paradigm – the 'medical model' – which was seen as identifying and relating to disabled people in terms of their impairments. My partner remembers being in hospital as a child (for years on end) when the consultant would sweep in and be told, "this is the spastic". The danger, however, in repudiating such medical insensitivity is to move on to an unbending hostility to medical interventions, even those that seek to prevent or cure impairments, on the dubious ground that such strategies present disability in an unfavourable light.

Like all models, the 'social model of disability' predicates a one-rule-fits-all fundamentalist formula, underestimating the diversity of disability and the severity of its impact. It is not, as lawyers say, 'case-sensitive', derogating from, if not entirely rejecting, the view the rest of the world has that impairments are in themselves to a greater or lesser degree disabling.

We are alas increasingly beset with models: a tendency to apply fixed rules to any given situation. I've seen it called a disorder, as for example when psychologists at the University of Maryland concluded that conservatism is a set of neuroses rooted in "fear and aggression, dogmatism and the intolerance of ambiguity". Adherents of these values, they said, had a "preference for moral certainty" and disliked nuance, an intolerance of ambiguity that could lead people "to arrive at premature conclusions, and to impose simplistic clichés and stereotypes".

In all such beliefs, facts are subordinate to concept; and imagination and exploration outside the rules rigorously outlawed."

Then on **31 July**: My remarks on the social model of disability have been greeted with a deafening (and ominous) silence. Only John Vincent has responded, and even he is agnostic. I feel it important to explain my thinking. Anyone who reads my monthly briefings will know that I champion disability rights and am highly critical of present government policy towards disabled people. But I feel that the 'social model' is overstated and is, to that extent, unhelpful and divisive. There is no question that there are elements within our society, both in structures, attitudes and government policy, which make life worse for disabled people. But my objection is twofold: that this is not true of society as a whole, and that societal impediments compound disability, rather than cause it. Common sense argues that disability, in its many forms and degrees, is in itself disabling.

I charted the emergence of the social model in my biography of Alf Morris (pp 151-152). Why do I think this is important? Because there are a great many non-disabled people who are on-side with disabled people and who are not part of the problem. Surely it is beyond question that there is much to be gained from working together in common cause. The social model, I think, creates a 'them and us' way of thinking, and unfairly castigates friend and foe alike.

It is also vital that protest is well reasoned. I have no problem with the general thrust of the paper *Changing Lives, Changing Times*, but there are two assertions that, I feel, do not stand up to scrutiny. It begins with a remarkable statistic: that there are 12 million disabled people in the UK, and goes on to point out that disabled people "have been continually targeted with 69 murders in the UK between August 2007 and July 2010". Well, according to www.citizensreportuk.org, there were 2,066 murders in England and Wales in that period. So that 69 murders represents 3.4% of the total, whereas 20% of the population is said to be disabled. This evidence tends to suggest that disabled people are far less likely to be targeted than others.

Then, on the same page, it is said that: "Discrimination by employers is one of the main factors behind the high rates of unemployment." Well of course it is. Employers are bound to be discriminating in taking on employees. They need to be encouraged not to automatically rule out disabled people, not criticised.

So there is in the approach of *Changing Lives, Changing Times* a backdrop of having been conceived from an acute sense of victimization. It does refer to "disabled people and their allies", but to my mind social model thinking is counter-productive.

20 August, from John Vincent:

Dear Derek (and all)

I've been very quiet – and not because Derek suggested that I'm agnostic (that's often a position I'm proud of!), but because I've been thinking (no jokes about hearing the cogs grind!!).

What I replied to Derek's original email was:

"... am I right in understanding this as 'no' to setting things as "models" (I agree that they do become one-size-fits-all), so you have to look at the individual's circumstances – which might require medical support as well as greater understanding by society? I don't agree or disagree yet, I'm just thinking it through!"

I've also been talking to some friends who are involved with disability organisations, and am working towards a thought-through position (which, unlike some 'models', doesn't mean it's stuck to rigidly!)

The reason that I've hesitated is that I really don't like the medical model (where a person's life is assessed only via medical procedures and interventions – I had, for a while, a tiny example of that with my sideroblastic anaemia, where some of the medical profession saw me only as "an interesting case" and wondered about my future life expectancy). Therefore, I was delighted to see anything that re-looked at disability and considered it from a different perspective, and I welcomed the social model as a way of understanding both some disabled people's attitudes to society and also some people's attitudes towards disability. (This 'awakening' happened to occur at the same time as I was really finding my role in the world as a gay man, and I could see some strong parallels – after all, it's other people's barriers & prejudices that, in the past at least, tried to stop me being who I wanted to be.)

However, as time has gone on, I've re-evaluated my "world-view" as a gay man, and therefore should also re-think disability issues – and Derek's email has prompted me to think about this. I'm not very happy with living life via models, but they can, at the same time, shorthand more complex ideas and make living easier. I do think they need to be challenged, though ...

One of the issues that we need to consider is that most of the discussion about disability (from the UN down, if I can put it like that) uses the social model. There are regular challenges to it, but, nevertheless, as I understand it, it still holds sway. Therefore, and this is where I differ from Derek, I think, whilst we may not like it as a way of describing disability issues, I believe it's important that we understand and work with it as a model or we may end up without a shared language to discuss disability with other organisations with.

I do understand Derek's point about the dangers of 'them & us', but also think that there is a lot of work going on to build bridges with what some organisations call "allies" (non-disabled people who recognise how society's assumptions need to be challenged; parents of disabled children who need to see how their role is to support that child towards the maximum independence s/he can achieve, etc).

Earlier this year, I was privileged to be given a ticket to see Mat Fraser perform his amazing "Cabinet of Curiosities" (see: <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2014/jan/22/disability-mat-fraser-museum-cabinet-curiosities-theatre>); in that, Mat is (rightly, given his own experience) vicious about the medical model, but also very positive about the importance of the social model, and, for me at least, this made sense.

Does this all make sense though?! Thanks, Derek, for starting off this important discussion.

WE HATE NO.78: AUSTERITY

Ce dont nous instruit l'économie actuelle, c'est qu'il est impossible de réduire les déficits avec des mesures d'austérité sans croissance.

Arnaud Montebourg, French Economy Minister, Twitter 24 August 2014.

The world has conducted a massive macro-economic experiment since the cataclysm of 2008. In Europe, the fans of austerity have had their chance, and the results have been a disaster.

Eliot Spitzer, former US attorney general.

I approach this subject not as an economist, but as a consumer. The idea of austerity as an economic policy is simple enough. If, as a family, you are failing to make ends meet and have run up large debts, then the most obvious redress is to cut back on what you are spending. But this is only the first remedy. No less important is somehow to increase your income. For pruning without enhancement can lead only to personal stagnation and impotence. I well remember a case in a magistrates' court where a home owner who had progressively been unable to pay the rates on his property was asked what he intended to do about it. "I have cut back all I can," he replied, "the only thing I can do now is to live in my garden shed." Apply austerity nationally and, in particular, curtail spending on wages, increase the cost of travelling to work, and you will inevitably reduce consumer spending and dampen down the flow of goods and services. A VAT rate as high as 20%, applicable to rich and poor alike must similarly inhibit economic activity. Producers, as

well as curbing pay increases, will also shrink their work forces. Before our eyes, employees are being made redundant and replaced by technology in supermarkets, booking halls, libraries, banks etc. Thus the tax yield declines as people in work spend less, while those made unemployed, instead of contributing to government revenues, draw down state benefits.

Don't take my word for this. In 2013 the IMF said "if financial markets focus on the short-term behaviour of the debt ratio, or if country authorities engage in repeated rounds of tightening in an effort to get the debt ratio to converge to the official target," austerity policies could slow or reverse economic growth and inhibit full employment (Working paper WP/13/67). But, you will say, that has not been the case in Britain. Surely we are emerging from recession, growth has improved, if only marginally, and unemployment is falling. My response is to ask whether the improvement data should be taken at face value. The latest quarterly figures from the Office for National Statistics (April/June 2014) show that there were 30.6 million people in work, 820,000 more than a year earlier. But accompanying guidance explains that anyone doing one hour or more of paid work is counted as employed. This includes people on government supported training programmes if they are engaged in any form of work, work experience or work-related training. Also included are unpaid family workers, and people, such as charity volunteers, working without pay. The total also includes 622,000 people on zero-hours contracts and an unspecified number on low pay or working part time. Added to this is an unprecedented growth in self-employment, of which a significant proportion is likely to be speculative; probably due in part, it is said, to fewer people being able to find other jobs during the recession. The impact of all this is significantly to contract the real number of people in full, decently-paid employment, and thus to distort the adverse impact of austerity. Perhaps a clearer indication is the fact that (as reported by Larry Elliott on 11 August) tax revenues in the first three months of the financial year 2014/15 were down by 3.5% on the same period in the previous year.

The acid test of austerity is whether it is working, whether the impoverishment of public services and well-being is yielding the desired reduction in the nation's borrowing requirement. Well, the fact is that in the March 2014 budget borrowing was forecast as a hefty £96 billion; this against a prediction of £37 billion in the first coalition budget of June 2010. Even the more recent figure already seems optimistic. Borrowing in June 2014 was £11.4 billion, some £3.8 billion more than in June 2013. Moreover, it doesn't *feel* as though we are emerging from recession. For those on lower and middle incomes living standards are under pressure, and in poor districts well-known retailers and service providers have already shut up shop. We can't go one blaming this on the oft repeated mantra of the mess that Labour is said to have left behind. The fact is that the troubles were not only political, but also and more a matter of banks over-lending and consumers over-borrowing. Four years have elapsed since the election of 2010: long enough, one would have thought, to repair any damage. And if we go back to first principles, this has as much to do with an insufficiency of income as an excess of expenditure. Staffing levels in HMRC have been cut back, encouraging evasion and the growth of the 'black economy'. There have been welcome moves, prompted by the Liberal Democrats, to take lower-paid people out of income tax, but this has not been matched by a sensible increase in the rates for those better able to contribute more. And although there has been talk of reining in tax avoidance schemes, they seem to be largely alive and well.

Needless to say (for I have said it before), my main objection to the dogma of austerity is its uneven application. Well-off people have not escaped entirely, but the principal target for draconian cuts has been those already poor. Polly Toynbee's remarks on 12 August are timely and apposite. It is also remarkable that alongside cut backs in vital public services, huge sums have been squandered on failed or failing IT projects. The road ahead may not be easy, but we need a change of direction, whether from a new administration or a change of heart in Conservative ranks.

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