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A Digest of Current Social Information

News Briefing No. 74. September 2014

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THE SCOTTISH REFERENDUM

I am writing this on the eve of the poll. Listening to the advocates of a 'No' vote, I am persuaded that there is scope for a new song, 'Scotland the Timorous'.

And now (19 September) the chatter has turned to whether, given greater devolved powers for Scotland, federalism should be extended. It is suggested that, even if an English Parliament would be a step too far, there is a case for debarring Scottish MPs from voting on English issues. Thus one might have a Labour government without a majority when putting forward legislation relating only to England. The effect, surely, would be to accelerate the social and political divisions between Scotland and England. How in the light of such a contrast could the Kingdom be said to be united?

From Frank Adams

Selection of candidates

I have thought for a number of years, since the vicious cuts started in fact. Is it not time to reduce the number of council members from three to two per ward? After all, with the drastic cuts in services and the farming out of a number of other services to the voluntary sector, do we need so many? The last time the subject was raised, it was said that the public did not realise how much work councillors did and the number of committee meetings they were obliged to attend.

Surely the same message should apply to them that has been forced on the rest of us, that is to do it in a voluntary capacity.

In fact, the same could apply to national government, they should all be volunteers, like

thousands of ordinary people supporting other organizations throughout the nation.

Then they would get committed people and not those doing it for the money. Still there is no mention of disabled people even listed let alone shortlisted. Then the issue of gay, lesbian, and transgender candidates either.

This is called democracy of course.

A WARNING THAT SMOKING CAN CAUSE BLINDNESS

The RNIB's magazine *NB* (Sept/Oct 2014) reports that The Macular Society has said that children should be given clearer warnings that "smoking dramatically increases the risk of blindness. Research suggests that smokers are up to four times more likely to get macular degeneration



than non-smokers. But a survey of 10-year-old children found that 98% didn't know that smoking increases the risk of blindness.

CRASH VICTIMS EXCLUDED FROM NEW VICTIMS' LAW

Victims' rights are to be enshrined in law. But the Ministry of Justice has clarified to RoadPeace that these rights will not apply to victims of summary motoring offences (drink/drug driving, speeding, careless driving, hit and run). They are not planning on changing their definition of victims of crime. For RoadPeace this represents yet another missed opportunity to end discrimination against road crash victims.

A DIGEST OF NEWS FROM 'ALL TOGETHER NOW!' (ATN)

A report from Leonard Cheshire Disability, *Hidden Housing Crisis*, focuses on the failure to build more accessible homes. Many disabled people are said to be living in conditions reminiscent of the Victorian era.

A bronze bust of Jack Ashley has been unveiled in Widnes Library.

Dr Ros Altmann, formerly head of Saga, has been appointed the Government's 'Business Champion for Older Workers'. She says that a big part of that role is to persuade employers of the significant benefits of retaining and recruiting older workers.

A study led by Professor Kim Hoque of Warwick Business School has found that only 15% of businesses awarded the government's 'two ticks' equality symbol were adhering to all five of the qualifying commitments. Thousands of firms boasting the symbol were found no better than companies without it.

The charity Vitalise has found that many of our leading tourist venues are paying only lip service to accessibility. Its survey revealed that of 100 top attractions over half did not have full wheelchair access, and almost half had fewer than two disabled toilets per 100 visitors. Many disabled people have lost confidence in accessibility claims.

Authors of a report by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation have told the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Disability that the true number of people in poverty living in households with a disabled member is at least four million, rather than the official figure of three million.

A new Australian treatment with a drug called furosemide, tried out on guinea pigs, suggests that it may be possible to eliminate the noise of tinnitus in humans by blocking signals between ear and brain.

A cross-party parliamentary inquiry into childcare for disabled children has found serious inadequacies that should be urgently addressed.

The Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities has completed a three-year project, *An Ordinary Life*, looking at the obstacles hindering the quality of life of children with complex health needs and identifying support materials to meet their needs.

The British Polio Fellowship, currently celebrating its 75th anniversary, offers support to those suffering from the late effects of polio and post polio syndrome (0800 018 0586).

Four years into the life of the Coalition and the fourth Minister for Disabled People, Mark Harper, has been appointed. (More changes than the managers of a failing football team). "Let's hope," says ATN, "he proves to be a minister for disabled people and not against us".

On a positive note Sir Bert Massie rejoices in the progress made over the last thirty years in improving disabled people's access to artistic and entertainment venues, along with increasing opportunities for disabled artists and actors. Not perfect, but a whole lot better.

SELECTIONS FROM THE GUARDIAN

1 September: Owen Jones has a fine article drawing our attention to the pernicious effects of Britain's cosyng-up to fundamentalist dictatorships.

3 September: George Monbiot comments: "England is dysfunctional, corrupt and vastly unequal. Who on earth would want to be tied to such a country?"

4 September: An H.M. Inspectorate of Constabulary report says that victims of relatively low-level crimes are being advised by some police forces to undertake their own investigations. It finds that the policy of an officer attending all reports of crimes is being maintained in only six of the 43 forces in England and Wales.

Brooks Newmark, recently appointed as Minister for Civil Society, is quoted as telling charities to "stick to their knitting" and to keep out of politics. (The response has been both predictable and appropriate.)

6 September: You will not have missed this. A Private Member's Bill, sponsored by Andrew George, substantially to modify the 'bedroom tax' passed its second reading with a majority of 75. Significantly 70 Conservative MPs were absent, despite a three-line whip. A leader called it a "humbling defeat".

9 September: Frances O'Grady, TUC Secretary General, warns that Britain is at risk of creating a "Downton Abbey style" society where social mobility has gone into reverse. And that under the coalition, blame for the country's ills had been heaped on the vulnerable while "the powerful and privileged sit pretty". (Now where have I read that before?)

10 September: Simon Danczuc wonders whether Home Secretary Theresa May really wants the inquiry into the sexual abuse of children "to ever really see the light of day", and questions the successive appointments of establishment figures to chair it. He argues that the events of the past few weeks suggest that, where tackling sex abuse is concerned, victims remain an afterthought for the government.

Mary O'Hara reports that campaigners are contending that legal aid restrictions and swingeing budget cuts are putting victims of domestic violence at greater risk. The director of the campaign group, Rights for Women, is quoted that there are women saying that without legal aid they are staying in abusive relationships: "It is not over-dramatic to say that women will die". Emma Howard adds a summary of those who no longer qualify for legal aid.

Zara Aziz, a GP in North-East Bristol, argues that patient-led consultations, in which the doctor willingly gives up a paternalistic 'doctor knows best' attitude, seem "not such a bad model of care".

A study led by Anna Phillips, reader in behavioural medicine at Birmingham University, has found that bereavement can damage the immune system in older people, making them more prone to infections. (Amen).

11 September: Officers of the UK Border Force are said to have warned that there is an emerging trend of 'cutters' flying into Britain to carry out female genital mutilations. The senior Border Force Officer at Gatwick is quoted as saying: "Instead of girls being removed from the UK to go back to the country of origin to have this procedure carried out, now there are cutters travelling from the country of origin to the UK".

12 September: A study led by Robert MacDonald, Professor of Sociology at Teeside University, has concluded that the popular narrative portrayed by the Channel 4 documentary, 'Benefits Street', appears not to be backed by any evidence.

A bill to give voters the right to recall MPs was published yesterday, but is already criticised as making the process too difficult.

15 September: A Commission set up by the Howard League for Penal Reform reports that prison inspectors estimate that 1% of prisoners are sexually abused by other inmates or staff. Official records show that sexual assaults in prison are at their highest level since at least 2005, but it is believed that the real figure is much higher, a problem described as “a hidden issue in a hidden world”.

Justice Secretary, Chris Grayling, has announced that victims of crime will be given a legal right to confront offenders in court, but there is concern that court appearances can be traumatic for vulnerable victims and witnesses.

16 September: Denis Campbell reports on official figures showing that in the second quarter of 2014 there has been “a sudden, sharp and dramatic deterioration” in the financial health of the NHS in relation to the previous quarter. He points out that the NHS is facing a mounting financial crisis, with more than half of all hospitals in deficit, and the service set to end the year almost £1 billion in the red.

17 September: Oxford University researchers have found that women with low incomes get substantially poorer maternity health care delivery and outcomes

18 September: Solveiga Pakstaite, a design and technology graduate of Brunel University, has come up with a new method of labelling perishable food which produces a tactile bump if the contents are no longer fresh. Her invention has won the prestigious James Dyson award.

19 September: NHS workers represented by Unison have voted 68% to 32% in favour of strike action against the government’s restraints on pay, if a negotiated settlement cannot be achieved.

Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury, has admitted to moments of doubt as to the existence of God.

It was reported on 11 August that in 2013/14, in England, almost 300,000 patients had to wait in ambulance queues outside A & Es, some for hours. Now comes news that an elderly patient in Wales has died in an ambulance while waiting for more than half an hour in a queue outside Morrision Hospital, near Swansea.

20 September: There are concerns about unwanted sexual harassment in our colleges. As part of their welcome, students arriving at Cambridge University will be expected to attend ‘sexual consent’ workshops. The message is that consent “is active and willing participation in sexual activity”. This means that “both parties had the freedom and capacity to make choice”. Oxford too is introducing sexual consent sessions in 20 of its colleges, and the National Union of Students is launching a similar scheme for 20 further and higher educational institutions.

24 September: A report by Maggie Atkinson, the Children’s Commissioner for England, says that rights under United Nations conventions are being breached because children cannot navigate complex legal procedures unaided.

Frances Ryan argues that disabled people “have been thrown to the wolves by this government”. She hopes that a new ‘Disability Labour’ initiative will both make the party more confident in supporting a financial ‘safety-net’ and help to boost the number of disabled politicians across the UK. (I was disappointed to read that all its executive committee will be disabled; can’t we work together on the basis of commitment and talent?)

25 September: Seumas Milne argues the case for radical economic reform. Without it, he says, “austerity can only pave the way to political failure”. Instead of five more years of austerity, promised by the shadow chancellor, Labour could still be propelled into government next year if the Labour leader offers his party’s lost supporters “change on the scale they desperately need”. (As I tried to say in last month’s Briefing).

26 September: An analysis of NHS England data by the Royal College of GPs shows that the number of patients expected by the end of 2014 to have waited for a consultation for a week or more will have risen by 50% since 2012. Dr Maureen Baker, Chair of the College, describes these statistics as “a national disgrace...set to get worse over the year ahead”.

29 September: Larry Elliott reflects upon the anomaly that, despite economic failure, George Osborne has contrived to present a convincing political narrative of how Conservative competence that has rescued Britain from the slough of Labour’s folly.

30 September: Whence the Chancellor, in his speech at the party conference, can advocate not only “another dose” of austerity, but that it should be imposed on the welfare budget and public services. “He might”, commented Elliott, “just as well have said vote Conservative for the future no different from the past”.

For the first time in its 133 year history, The Royal College of Midwives has voted more than four to one in favour of a four-hour walkout on 13 October, as part of industrial action by NHS staff.

Research by the World Wildlife Fund and the Zoological Society of London has revealed a huge decline in the number of wild animals across the world over the last four decades.

The International Organisation for Migration estimates that over the past 14 years some 40,000 migrants have died while attempting to reach more prosperous countries, 55 per cent of them trying to get to Europe.

WE HATE NO.80: HOMOPHOBIA

Warning: sexually explicit from the start and not suitable for anyone of a reserved disposition

“An estimated one person in 20 is exclusively or predominantly homosexual. That is to say they are erotically and emotionally attracted to others of their own sex. What causes this sexual orientation is not entirely clear, but it is none the less real and for the individuals concerned, natural. Society at large commonly takes a different view. Given that the majority of people are attracted to the opposite sex and that the ‘hetero’ sex act is closely identified with procreation and this in turn with the natural order, homosexuality is widely regarded as aberrant, a perversion and immoral. This view is reinforced by society’s conventional image of male and female gender roles. To be gay is seen as a betrayal of the sexual stereotypes, whether male or female.

It is a well-known, if primitive, characteristic of group behaviour to disparage and ostracise those who differ significantly from orthodox models or who fail to conform to accepted norms. So it is that homosexual people commonly find themselves isolated, ridiculed and the victims of discrimination in areas such as employment, housing, and even, alas, the law. It is not surprising that the reprovng attitudes of society tend to rub off onto many homosexuals, inducing feelings of shame and guilt which fortify loneliness and rejection from within.

The danger which arises in this situation is that it is all too easy for the individual to see homosexuality itself as a problem; if she or he is then perceived as needing counselling and support and so on, her or his fears and introspection can be aggravated. Simply being gay is not in itself a medical or psychological problem, any more than being heterosexual is. Difficulties can arise, certainly, particularly when people realise they are gay only after marrying, but it is important to recognise the essentially external nature of such relationship conflicts and indeed of the distress which arise from social disapproval.

Many homosexuals have found that the best approach to their particular situation is to ‘come out’ – to stop hiding the fact that they are gay and instead to be glad of it. By doing so, not only do they throw off the tensions of keeping their sexual identity a guarded secret, but they present a positively asserted challenge to the myths and prejudices by which they are circumscribed. Not everyone, by any means, will wish to be part of the ‘swinging’ gay scene, but there are by now a wide variety of self-help organisations and groups which act out of a personal understanding, do not perceive homosexuality as something to be ‘cured’ and which can offer help at every level and in total confidence.”

Ann Darnbrough: *‘The Sex Directory’*(Woodhead-Faulkner Ltd, 1988)

When I reread this extract from chapter 18 my first reaction was to marvel at the ease and clarity

of Ann's prose; she was able to say a lot in a few paragraphs, whereas I tend to the long-winded. More importantly, now as then, I agreed with her analysis.

But not everyone is persuaded. This, I think, is particularly true of those who believe in divine creation, particularly among the more extreme religions, which tend to deplore unorthodox sexual practices. This view can still be found in Christian congregations. Yet there is no record of Jesus saying anything about homosexuality. There are references in Matthew 15:19 and Mark 7:21 to evil thoughts, adulteries and fornication as things which defile a man, but outright condemnation of homosexuality is confined to the Old Testament (Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13), and the letters of Paul the Apostle, who in Romans 1:26/27 wrote of "vile affectations" and referred to women who changed "the natural use unto that which is against nature" and to men "leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust one toward another; men with men working that which is unseemly."

Though I approach it as a novice, and with respect, the Koran is even less censorious. There are strictures against lewdness and adultery, but I have found no admonition of same-gender unions, save by implication. Various revelations see Allah as the creator, who made male and female pairs whereby mankind would be multiplied.

I think that Ann got the basics right. I recall a moment when she whispered in my ear that the sex act, however pleasant, was grotesque. Anyone who has an acquaintance with contemporary pornography - looking at other people doing it - may agree. And at the core of homophobia, I think, is not only that same-sex love is seen as abnormal but that the abnormality involves, at least between men, the carnality of anal penetration (notwithstanding that it is not confined to men-on-men and again is one of the mainstays of heterosexual hardcore pornography). This basic reaction explains why female partnerships attract far less prejudice. As Harriet Walker wrote in *The Independent*: "...male impulses must be thought of as dangerous, where female ones are just a bit of a game, comical even".

Nevertheless, it is surely clear by now that the orientation driving the primal urge for same-sex intimacy, even though not the norm, is essentially natural; as the Wolfenden Report of 1957 effectively concluded when it found that "homosexuality cannot legitimately be regarded as a disease", and recommended (with one dissenting) that "homosexual behaviour between consenting adults in private should no longer be a criminal offence". Historically, as the Wikipedia *History of Homosexuality* asserts, this was already the effective view taken in many societies, in which same-sex acts "were expected or completely ignored".

At least in this country things have moved on in recent years— and I feel somewhat for the better. For an overview of homophobia in the UK since 1950 I have turned to John Vincent's *LGBT People and the UK Cultural Sector* (2014). John draws on his own experience of bullying at school, medical stigmatizing, and the difficulties of making one's way 'outside of the gender binary', now recognising as a respected professional, somewhat protected from overt homophobia, that nevertheless "many people still struggle and still have to face hostility, threats, even violence". He adopts the stance that a phobia is an irrational fear of the unknown, and that homophobia is fed by keeping it secret, finally accepting the definition that "homophobia is the hatred or fear of people who are gay or lesbian".

Chronologically, John sets out the recent chequered history of homophobia, bringing the story up-to-date in two chapters questioning whether we are making progress. He accepts that much has been achieved in recent years, driven by a rights-based perspective, and sets out an overview of legislative achievements since 2004 which have given homosexual people greater equality before the law. In addition, the Equalities Office has been prominent in supporting LGBT rights and enforcing the anti-discrimination provisions of the Equality Act 2010. John goes on to notice that some schools "have made strides in tackling homophobia and bullying in general", while from 2005 the LGBT History Month has celebrated the huge contribution to the UK made by the LGBT community. The media has given greater visibility to the diversity of society, for example by featuring gay men and lesbian women in television programmes. Recent research shows that there has been a distinct, though incomplete, improvement in attitudes towards LGBT people.

But yet, writes John, "there is still some considerable way to go to see full LGBT equality – and to end discrimination against anyone who is identified as 'different'." This is particularly so in Northern Ireland. There are also problems of 'visibility', because LGBT people are often isolated. Lacking a community of queer people (the use of the word 'queer' has now been legitimised), they may not wish to reveal their sexuality. They may have good reason; researchers have identified five different kinds of prejudice, and these persist. Some of them may be criminal. John refers to "an increasing focus on justice and the equalities aspects of

hate crimes". Though he does not say so, these crimes have much in common with prejudice towards and offences against disabled people. They have close similarities both in the hostility towards anyone perceived as abnormal and the lamentable character of those who express that perception in name-calling or violence.

As I have already suggested, those steeped in prejudice unfortunately include fundamentalist members of faith communities. John is generous in including "faith and religion" in his analysis of achievements: on the grounds that there has been some progress among believers towards accepting that objections to lesbian and gay sexuality have been "over-emphasised". But more pervasively and sometimes extreme, I suggest, is the deep rooted hostility of faith communities to sexuality deemed at once unnatural and unrighteous.

Intolerance and homophobia have also been identified in UK business and, of course, in media coverage. Likewise in sport, despite progress, John notices that there are still "intimidating barriers to LGBT people's participation" [this despite a few outstanding role models]. Crucially, statistics are revealing. Referring to a recent survey, John observes that large proportions of LGBT people feel that in many situations they cannot be open about their sexual orientation without fear of prejudice or discrimination. A majority of gay men and lesbians had experienced verbal abuse, and many had suffered stress, been bullied, felt frightened and been troubled by low self-esteem. Around 20% of gay men had reported being physically assaulted and 6 % of lesbians that they had been sexually assaulted. Three times the number of gay men and twice the number of lesbians reported a current mental health condition compared with such problems among their heterosexual counterparts.

Thus the reality is that, despite enlightened legislation and official intent, homophobia remains alive and pernicious, especially in education, not least in faith schools. Many LGBT people, some famous, are or have been reluctant to 'come out', living lives of pretence and concealing their orientation for fear of adverse consequences; thus enduring debilitating pain and identity dilemmas. Since John's book was published, the star rugby player Gareth Thomas has written an autobiography and bared his soul on the airwaves in a way which is hugely instructive and inspirational. Like many others, he had spent much of his very public life in denial, before recognising that his life is defined by his personality rather than his sexuality.

Black LGBT people face a dual challenge from racism and homophobia, but are particularly averse to 'coming out' knowing what the impact would be in their families and tight-knit communities. Immigrants fleeing homophobia and persecution in their own countries often find our own bureaucracies unsympathetic to their plight. And older and disabled LGBT people generally are more likely to find themselves without personal support and understanding access to care services.

John concludes that while the position for some LGBT people in the UK has improved, "there is still a long way to go before everyone achieves social justice and is treated fairly and equally". This, I suggest, is reflected in the impact of the government's austerity programme. For alongside welcome policy changes it is clear that funding cuts are bearing down disproportionately on the LGBT community. As *The Guardian* reports, a new study, 'Staying Alive', conducted by the London Metropolitan University, reveals "the devastating impact of austerity drives on LGBT voluntary and community organisations in England and Wales". Some organisations in London have experienced a fall of as much as 50%, and outside the capital have seen statutory funding remain stagnant or drop. Already precarious, their services have been diminished, and with further cuts expected the continuity of their work is in danger. There is a widening gap between theory and practice.

But perhaps I should let Atillah Ahmed, a former associate of Abu Hamza, have the last word. In *The Guardian* of 9 September he is quoted as referring to homosexuals as "the greatest threat to our existence". Sorry, I thought that was ISIS.

Derek Kinrade