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A Digest of Current Social Information

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THE AUTUMN STATEMENT

So, if the Conservatives succeed next year, we can expect yet more stringent spending cuts, with the obvious corollary of diminished public services. No mention of higher taxation: that will surely *follow* the election. George Osborne spoke of being “on-course”: more promises of balancing the books in the years ahead. But what credence can be given to such forecasts, when the Chancellor has already strayed well off-course?

There was a surprise increase in the personal allowance to £10,600 (from 6 April 2015), but it seems to escape notice that this adjustment benefits not only the very low paid, but also those earning up to £100,000: a perverse hand-out when there is a shortfall in tax receipts.

FROM PETER SALTER

A male caller to LBC yesterday, 8 December and again today 9 December (called by the station), is unemployed having been made redundant by a broadcasting company. Marriage has broken down because of poverty; house lost (don't know if rented or mortgage). Has slept rough for a while and now has a flat.

Talking about food banks, in the light of the Tory MPs this week saying people do not know how to cook and other media criticism about people going to food banks (to which I understand you have to be assessed and referred - it's not a turn up and take system), it seems they all have smart phones, flat screen TVs and Sky subscriptions. I do not believe it; anyway the TV might have been bought when times were better.

This caller has a radio, no TV. But he said bailiffs came to his door and took his pots and pans. If true, is that legal?

LBC said they had calls from people saying “I have a few hours work needing doing”. That wouldn't help this man, since it could disturb his benefit payments, and DWP isn't known for its ability to process changes promptly. It would also prevent him from looking for other work when he is engaged in this work.

SOCIAL CARE

The Care Act 2014 talks about how assessment must be driven by an asset-based or strength-based approach. It argues that in understanding needs, social care professionals should consider the wider relationships, networks and resources people have, as well as their own strengths and resources. The Social Care Institute for Excellence is producing guidance on assessment and eligibility on behalf of the Department of Health.

On 29 December, BBC radio 5Live interviewed one former and one



serving social worker. They referred to the long-standing underfunding of social work and the present shortfall in front-line social workers, necessitating an expensive reliance on agency staff. Both spoke of the instability of the profession: increasing demand with diminishing resources. Thus the pressure on social workers is intense, with a concomitant risk of dreadful mistakes.

FROM THE DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

Detaining someone in a police cell while they are experiencing a mental health crisis 'simply cannot be justified in a civilised society', especially if that someone is a child or young person under 18.

So said Care and Support Minister Norman Lamb in his recent GOV.UK article, a reiteration of his views expressed at the recent Mental Health Crisis Care Concordat summit.

Today, those views become part of a published government commitment. Following the joint Department of Health and Home Office review, ministers will now take action to ensure children and young people under the age of 18 are never held in police cells as places of safety if detained under Section 135 or Section 136 of the Mental Health Act.

After seven years of passionate and committed service, Dame Philippa Russell OBE is to stand down as chair of the Standing Commission on Carers (SCOC). She relinquishes the post on 31 December.

She worked for the Council for Children's Welfare 1968–76 before becoming director of the Council for Disabled Children 1976–2003. She was disability adviser to the National Children's Bureau 2003–07 and the Department for Education and Skills 2003–05. Prior to chairing the Standing Commission, she was also a commissioner of the Disability Rights Commission from 2002 until its abolition in 2007.

[Some readers may have been involved with Philippa's work. More at <https://socialcare.blog.gov.uk>]

FOOTBALL

All manner of pushing and pulling goes on when corners are taken. Would reducing the number of players allowed in the penalty area improve the chances of referees spotting offences?

FROM JOHN VINCENT

A new report from Barnardo's shows that:

"... young people leaving the care system are effectively set up to fail when living independently in local authority accommodation and this could ultimately end up costing the taxpayer more. Based on in-depth qualitative research with twenty care leavers, the research finds that some local children's services are placing care leavers in unsuitable housing with unrealistic expectations as to how well they can cope with living alone. Some young care leavers are provided with good quality accommodation and emotional support, but this stops abruptly when they turn 18. Often poorly prepared for how to run a home on their own, care leavers can find themselves unable to pay the rent and getting into arrears. Some care leavers end up in huge debt and experience serious mental health issues due to isolation and loneliness. Barnardo's is calling on local authorities to ensure that they adhere to DfE guidance for housing care leavers, which states that affordability for these young people must be a priority. It is urging Children's and Housing services departments in local authorities to share their budgets and work in tandem, for example, by jointly commissioning services that would help smooth the transition to independence for care leavers."

http://www.barnardos.org.uk/costs_of_care_leavers.pdf

DEATH AND SURVIVAL

My good friend John Beasley has sent me an extract from Dr Leslie Weatherhead's *The Christian Agnostic* (1965). It came as a surprise. The great Methodist preacher writes of "the relative unimportance of death in God's plan for us", believing that we merely pass to another phase of being. Holding this view, he was "a convinced member of the Voluntary Euthanasia Legislation Society", a position for which he had argued in a lengthy debate at the Oxford University Union. He sincerely believed "that those who come after us will wonder why on earth we kept a human being alive against his own will, when all dignity, beauty and meaning of life had vanished; when any gain to anyone was clearly impossible, and when we should have been punished by the State if we kept an animal alive in similar physical conditions". Subject to proper safeguards, Weatherhead declares his willingness to give a patient communion, sharing responsibility while a doctor "allowed a patient to lay down his useless body and pass in dignity and peace into the next phase of being".

He goes on to cite the case of a young wife who watched her husband die of cancer of the brain. In a letter to the Dean of St. Paul's (also a member of the society), she wrote: "To stand helplessly by and see the one we love best in all the world suffer terribly with no chance of recovery is sheer hell."

There is much more. If I cannot accept Weatherhead's precept that death is merely the gateway to a different kind of existence, I find his principal argument compelling.

FROM THE OFFICE OF JEAN LAMBERT MEP

Green MEPs have called for talks over a proposed trade deal between the EU and US – the so-called TTIP – to be suspended, over revelations that US spies are routinely monitoring EU citizens' emails and phone calls.

Jean said that the TTIP could also pave the way for NHS privatisation: "There are good reasons to oppose TTIP – the threat to public services is one of them – but even its supporters cannot continue with 'business-as-usual' in the face of the shocking revelations about US spying."

Jean has also worked to secure MEPs' agreement to tough new rules protecting personal data in the EU – particularly that personal data can only be collected with the consent of the individual concerned and that all EU citizens should have a 'right to erase' data about them – to really give back control of privacy to millions of computer users.

LIBERTY80 is critical of current Coalition policy. Shami Chakrabarti describes the plan to repeal the Human Rights Act and replace it with a British Bill of Rights as "legally illiterate and politically provocative." The proposals, say Liberty, "put us on a collision course with the Court of Human Rights and likely lead to the UK's ultimate departure from the Convention on Human Rights and the Council of Europe." And "the plans are clearly intended to diminish the rights of everyone in Britain – in particular vulnerable minority groups and children with parents facing removal or deportation." [Did the LibDems intend to sign up to the castration of human rights?]

The new Counter-Terrorism Bill is said to include "a raft of measures shrouded in misleading rhetoric", while the Winter 2014 goes on to reveal that Britain's intelligence services don't need a warrant to receive unlimited bulk data from the National Security Agency and other foreign agencies – and can keep this information on a massive database for up to two years.

CILIP UPDATE, meanwhile, reports expertly on a new collection of primary source material that reveals how electronic surveillance has developed in the United States. The Digital National Security Archive has released *Electronic Surveillance and the National Security Agency: from Shamrock to Snowden*, claimed to be the most comprehensive resource available on the subject of electronic surveillance.

The same issue also reports on a reversal of Liverpool Council's plans to close 11 of its 19 libraries, faced as it is with cuts equivalent to 58% of its spend in 2010/11. But the rescue will depend on an enhancement of core statutory library services with alternative provision delivered by community groups and local organisations.

THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF EQUIPMENT PROVIDERS' JOURNAL, EQUIPMENT SERVICES, JANUARY 2015 carries my opinion piece *The social model of disability; as divisive as the medical model*. I expand the same case in this month's 'We Hate'.

ABLE MAGAZINE, NOV/DEC 2014, which is extended by a guide to accessible sport, and even offers a religious perspective, begins with an editorial in praise of independent living, albeit admitting that this means different things to different people. At its heart, perhaps, is the freedom to make one's own decisions, so helping to "bring colour and volume to people's lives where there might only have been a drab routine had they been overly supervised." Tom Jamison doesn't mention it – perhaps doesn't yet know about it – but the DLF has recently established an independent living fund in the name of Alf Morris, the first Minister for Disabled People.

In an issue that takes independence as its theme, it was interesting to read the views of Mark Harper, the current Minister for Disabled People in a government which many of us regard as set on cutting back on disability benefits. He is pleased to say that only a year after the launch of Disability Confident, more than 1,100 employers in Britain have become more disability confident, and that disabled people are now moving

into jobs or training opportunities at a rate of 150 a day! This summer he launched the Accessible Britain Challenge, aimed at encouraging businesses and local authorities to do more to cater for disabled customers, a programme that is already “making waves”. He wants readers to highlight good practice.

A small article highlights a big problem. A report by the Ready for Ageing Alliance foresees a huge gap in care for the elderly over the next 20 years. It says that by 2030 there will be 100% more people aged over 85 in the UK, and 51% more aged 65 and over. It warns that this dramatic demographic change is not being catered for.

The charity United Response has drawn attention to the fact that none of our mainstream newspapers make news available in ways that people with learning disabilities can understand. To address this deficiency it has produced an accessible news service, Easy News. To check this out and sign up for free future editions go to: www.unitedresponse.org.uk/easy-news.

ALL TOGETHER NOW! (OCTOBER/NOVEMBER 2014) is critical of government policy towards disabled people. While acknowledging Disability Minister Mike Harper’s challenge that businesses should ensure they cater for disabled customers, it quotes Dave Webber, CEO of Livability, who argued that government needs to lead by example and look again at its own policies. “Recent Government policies,” he said, “especially reforms to disability benefits, have made it more difficult for disabled people and have had a negative effect on their independence.” The editor’s banner headline is “Hypocrites!”

Continuing the theme, the much vaunted education reforms for children and young people are said to be inadequate. Simon Shaw, from the National Autistic Society, refers to research which shows that nearly 50% of parents have waited over a year to get the right support for their child. He wants a joined up system of redress, with education, health and care plans underpinned by a single point of appeal. Otherwise, “too many families will continue to face an exhausting process of being passed from pillar-to-post while they fight for the right support.”

Sir Bert Massie reminds us that about half of our disabled people of working age are unemployed, a figure that has been constant despite numerous initiatives to get disabled people into work. One company – the pharmaceutical giant Walgreens has bucked the trend in the USA. Having bought Alliance Boots, Bert hopes that they will introduce the same policies in the UK.

The December/January issue is more positive:

- Iain Fryatt has reached the top of Kilimanjaro using an all-terrain wheelchair created by the Mountain Trike Company of Nantwich;
- Sue Austin, Artist-in-Residence at Plymouth University Marine Institute, has wowed YouTube audiences with her deep sea dance in a powered wheelchair; and
- Natasha Lambert, in spite of cerebral palsy, has completed a Sea and Summit Challenge, sailing a boat 440 miles by blowing through a straw, and then scaling the highest peak in South Wales using a walking frame.

SELECTIONS FROM THE GUARDIAN

1 December:

Larry Elliott, in advance of the autumn statement, takes stock of an economy that has not lived up to political promises. The budget deficit, planned to fall below £40bn is almost £100bn and rising. Despite expanding growth and improved employment statistics, the Chancellor’s deficit-reduction plan hasn’t worked. Poor tax revenues have led to higher borrowing than was expected. [And continuing deficits add to a staggering national debt. How can we afford massive infrastructure projects, when people are going hungry and losing their homes? Do we really need to tunnel under Stonehenge? The government claims economic competence, but is it harnessed to a worthy strategy? Are intelligent people beginning to question the wisdom of draconian public service cuts? Is George Osborne overreaching, and perhaps committing political suicide?]

Official figures reveal that more than 41% of Britain’s apprentices are over 25, with around 6% over 50, raising concerns that part of the big increase in apprenticeships over the last five years is down to a “numbers game”.

Proposals to downsize A&E units and concentrate specialist services have been abandoned, perhaps because of a fear of political damage.

A report from the charities Marie Curie and the Alzheimer’s Society suggests that because dementia is

rarely seen as a terminal illness it can lead to poor access to care. The ONS, however, has said that the illness is the leading cause of death in women and the third leading cause of death in men. It is estimated that around 225,000 people will develop dementia this year.

The charity Leonard Cheshire Disability reports that around 300,000 disabled people are stuck on housing waiting lists, and that housing development for them is inadequate. It argues that all new homes should be designed so as to be easy to adapt, and some should be wheelchair accessible.

Prosecutions under the Vagrancy Act 1824 have increased by 70%, prompting concerns that benefit cuts and reduced social support may have driven more people into begging. One homeless charity urges people not to give money to people who beg, but rather to support homeless charities. It is also argued that “easy money” traps people into a life of begging and may be spent on drugs and alcohol. [Familiar objections.]

Statistics, illustrated with colour coding, show the incidence and impact of HIV across the world. About 35 million people are living with HIV, and an estimated 39 million have died from AIDS-related illnesses. Africa generally tops the charts, and the country with the highest HIV toll is South Africa (6.27million). Swaziland, with 0.2 million, is a minor contributor, but is shocking in having no health facilities for anti retroviral and general HIV outpatient care. It also has the highest HIV rate among young men globally at 71%. [While this makes dismal reading, the numbers of victims of HIV and AIDS has fallen from a peak in the late 90s. In 2013, there were 2.1 million new HIV infections, and 1.5 million AIDS-related deaths.]

Dr. David Owen reckons that it is now accepted, even by senior Conservative ministers, that Andrew Lansley’s Health and Social Care Act 2012 was a massive blunder. In a formidable article he asserts that the main thrust of Lansley’s project [not announced in the pre-election 2010 manifesto] was “to take the NHS down the American healthcare route”, that privatisation has already begun, and that the end of the NHS as we have known and understood it in England will take place before 2020 if the legislation is not changed. Repealing the act, he feels, is not a realistic political option, but its worst aspects can and must be excised.

2 December:

Polly Toynbee addresses the prospect of both the main parties lying about the economy, though for different reasons: the Conservatives to downplay the impact of swinging cuts to come; Labour to avoid being seen as soft on the need to reduce the deficit.

In 2012/13 there were 3,692 prosecutions for rape in England and Wales, resulting in 2,333 convictions [63%]. In the last five years 109 women have been convicted for making false allegations, mostly for perverting the course of justice. The charity Women Against Rape thinks this is heavy handed.

Phillip Inman explains George Osborne’s failure to achieve the planned deficit reduction, as largely attributable to a shortfall in tax receipts: a consequence of a surge in low-paid work and self-employment yielding net taxable income below the personal allowance.

An inquiry into home care finds that the system is on the verge of crisis. The report, Key to Care, cites poor organisation and a chronic lack of funding.

3 December:

The number of tenants evicted from their homes in England and Wales are at record levels. Shelter estimates that more than 1,300 people are at risk of eviction or repossession every day.

Bed blocking – where hospital beds remain taken up by patients medically fit for discharge because social care is not ready – has also reached record levels.

Tighter eligibility rules for legal aid are said to be making it difficult for victims of domestic violence to get protection. 60% of women decide to take no further action if they find they do not qualify, leaving increasing numbers vulnerable to physical or emotional harm .

4 December:

Statistics clearly show that childhood obesity is now commonplace, particularly in deprived areas. The cheaper the food children consume the more likely that it is unhealthy.

Former Tory attorney general, Dominic Grieve QC, warns that leaving the European Court of Human Rights would have “devastating consequences” for the UK, undermining respect for international law. [But in the same issue Professor Eric Posner argues that in truly international human rights institutions there is a lack of consensus between nations. To avoid being compelled to recognise rights that they reject, countries give them little power.]

Simon Jenkins contrasts the cliché of austerity with the promise of tax cuts and plans for huge spending on mega projects.

Dr. Michael Dixon, on the letters page, observes that “GPs are on their knees, new GPs are scarce, there is a developing fracture between patient and doctor due to a mismatch in expectation and reality.”

5 December:

Financial analysts argue that the Chancellor’s projected public spending cuts would result in the role of the state being changed beyond recognition.

The police are said to have a database of 50,000 people who regularly view indecent images of children, but not all of them are regarded as posing a threat of molesting children.

A new, controversial, strategy envisages that “non-contact abusers” don’t need to come into the criminal justice system, but might be more effectively ‘helped’ by mental health and health services.

6 December:

Sir Peter Fahy, Chief Constable of Greater Manchester, sees a need to divest police of the responsibility of deciding the boundaries of acceptable free speech, lest we drift towards a police state. [Admittedly, extremism is difficult to define, but jihadist ravings no more have a place in a free society than did the outpourings of Nazi anti-semitism. And I believe that the right to say so is sacrosanct.]

Another sexual predator, Ray Teret, friend of Jimmy Savile, has been brought to book.

A blanket ban on sending books to prisoners in England and Wales has been ruled unlawful by a judge in the High Court. [But what has become of the blanket ban on the right to vote?]

8 December:

An all-party report on food banks receives major coverage. It draws attention to the worsening financial plight of large numbers of our people, and consequent hunger. The DWP, in particular, and welfare policy in general are heavily criticised. [Because the report is “church-funded”, it is seen by The Guardian as strengthening a rift between the Church of England and the government; a view endorsed by the Archbishop of Canterbury, who is quoted as saying: “a stark picture: hunger stalks large parts of our country”. But this verdict extends well beyond the church, and increasingly calls into question the severity of the Chancellor’s austerity drive.]

[I have noticed on several occasions that raising the income tax personal allowance benefits not only the low-paid but also those with an income up to £100,000.] Now a leading article makes the same point, arguing that such untimely generosity not only goes predominantly to higher-rate taxpayers, but since 2010 has cost the exchequer £11bn and counting, while doing “next to nothing for the pretended aim of easing the poverty trap”. It concludes: “The obsession with income tax cuts is cynical, costly and stupid”.

9 December:

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development has proposed higher taxes of the rich, and policies designed to improve the lot of people at the bottom of society. It repudiates the ‘trickle-down’ theory and concludes that “income inequality has a sizeable and statistically negative impact on growth”.

Nils Muiznieks, Commissioner for Human Rights at the Council of Europe, has called for greater transparency and stronger democratic oversight of the way security services monitor the internet. He argues that suspicionless mass retention of communications data is fundamentally contrary to the rule of law, and ineffective.

Owen Bowcott reports that the Court of Appeal has ruled that, as the law stands, bus companies are not obliged to force passengers with buggies or other passengers to give way to wheelchair users in the disability bays of their vehicles.

A leading article considers yesterday’s assertion that “hunger stalks this country”. Notwithstanding some other plausible reasons for the soaring number of people seeking help, problems with benefits emerge as “the last explanation standing”, the single most important cause. Much of the new hunger “is the responsibility of Messrs Cameron and Osborne. And there is no apolitical way to say that”.

Polly Toynbee puts our electoral choice starkly: “A Conservative win would bring the brutish future laid out in George Osborne’s bone-chilling autumn statement”. [Ms Toynbee might be interested in what Eliza Cook had to say in her Journal back in 1849: “Socialism, as popularly expounded, may not, and we

believe will not become the possible life of any community; but we do believe in the possibility, and have no doubt as to the ultimate realisation, of a state of society in which every child born into the community shall have the benefits of a complete culture; when every man and woman shall be raised above the material wretchedness which now so fearfully abounds.” She took a simplistic view of the class system : on the one hand “the toiling millions, those who pass their days in work whose remuneration barely feeds their bodies, or in begging for work and receiving instead poor house or private charity”. Contrasted were those living in luxury “ignorant of the meaning of poverty, and too often selfish and thoughtless to a demoralising degree”. But Eliza identified a third class: “the lovers of freedom and progress”, some of whom could be found in every country and in every class, who “save the whole body of the nation from corruption” (22/9/1849).

Most of today’s letters supported religious studies in schools, but Fr Alec Mitchell asked whether we could please abolish the absurd anachronism of ‘faith schools’: “Religious studies is one thing; the notion that any one religion should be solely responsible for all studies has ‘inevitable partiality’ and ‘future conflict’ embedded into its heart”. [I selected this because it chimes with my ‘We Hate no. 67: Faith Schools’.]

10 December:

The focus on hunger continues. Zoe Williams points out that more than 300,000 children are using Trussell Trust food banks. But if children have the right not to be hungry, plainly the state has a duty to make provision. Zoe says: “it is preposterous that thus should be offloaded on to makeshift networks run by charities.” Three pages on Natalie Bloomer relates that Kind, a charity in the northwest reliant on voluntary donations , is helping out increasing numbers of people in work, who are nevertheless struggling to cope. But it can help only to the extent that it is able to raise money. Charities across the country tell the same story. Kids Company, in London, has seen a 200% increase in demand since 2012. Joseph Rowntree’s researchers have found that around half of all people in poverty are now from working families. Another three pages on, Linda Tirado advocates that governments need to stop subsidising low pay.

11 December:

Alan Rusbridger is to stand down as Guardian editor next summer. His tenure has been one of outstanding achievement during which the newspaper, particularly its website, has gained unparalleled respect, at least among those of us who treasure courageous reporting.

The annual survey of the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy reveals that the number of libraries in the UK has fallen by 8% under the coalition, with a drop of over 12% in visitor numbers.

13 December:

It’s interesting to read that Jenny Agutter decided to stop believing in God at the age of 16. She now says: “I don’t understand how you’re asked to believe things that are absurd. It’s like Father Christmas. It doesn’t make sense.”

It is equally surprising to learn from Giles Fraser that Franklin Graham, son of Billy, regards Islam as “a very wicked and evil religion”; not that Islam has been taken over by dangerous radicals, but that it is itself intrinsically evil. [But then his father never did things by halves.]

15 December:

Age UK asserts that a number of key lifestyle changes can significantly lower the risk of developing dementia. It is estimated that about 850,000 people in the UK are living with the condition.

Mental health and disability charities are urging the DWP – without success – to publish its investigations into suicides with a possible link to benefit issues. The department’s latest figures indicate that sanctions against people claiming Employment Support Allowance have risen by 470% in 18 months.

16 December:

A community supermarket has opened in West Norwood selling surplus, in-date food from regular supermarkets at heavily discounted prices. The store caters for people on means-tested benefits within its catchment area. They can also attend a course offering guidance on developing their lives.

Polly Toynbee notices that the Institute for Fiscal Studies predicts that on present cuts alone a third of children will have fallen into poverty by 2020, and that last month 323,000 people were waiting for personal independence payments: on average for 60 days. She also pours scorn on Iain Duncan Smith’s wish to limit

child benefit to a family's first two children, to save money and prompt "behavioural change".

17 December:

Humanists are pressing for non-religious weddings in England and Wales to have legal status. At present, couples opting for a humanist ceremony must have a further wedding at a register office to be married in law. [Ann and I married in 1975 at the Ethical Society, Conway Hall, under the auspices of the Unitarian Church. Shortly afterwards its licence was revoked. Her funeral last year was conducted by a celebrant from the British Humanist Association. The time has come to recognise that marriage can be legally valid (and relevant) without a necessity of subscribing to superstitious beliefs.]

George Monbiot comes out against the meat industry, which conceals what is happening in factory farms and slaughterhouses, a deception in which consumers conspire, because they don't want to know. "If we cannot bear to see what we eat," he concludes, "it is not the seeing that's wrong, it's the eating."

After a radio talk by Joan Bakewell, 'Suppose I lose it?', Rebecca Ley wants us to be more aware of the scale of the problem. The number of sufferers is set to rise above a million by 2025, and already one in three people over 65 die with dementia. She wants more of this kind of broadcasting: "to shine a light into the abyss", alongside communities that are dementia-friendly.

18 December:

Rev. Libby Lane appointed as first female bishop.

A Guardian/ICM poll sees support for the Conservative Party slipping after George Osborne's autumn statement. [Hardly surprising. The public can see the increasing failures in vital public services.] Seumas Milne denounces "deficit mania and balanced budgets" as a "political fraud".

According to Alzheimer's Research UK, deaths from dementia have risen by 52% since 1990 and now represent the third most common cause of fatalities. The increase, of course, is linked to Britons living longer.

Phasing out of funding for local authorities to meet emergency needs of vulnerable people, scheduled to end in April 2015, is reported as having provoked a split in the cabinet.

J.K.Rowling writes of Lumos, the organisation she founded, seeking to bring an end to the harmful and unnecessary institutionalisation of children. Isn't it time, she asks, we left orphanages to fairy tales? During her lifetime presidency, she dreams it will come to pass that "the very concept of taking a child away from its family and locking it away will seem to belong to a cruel, fictional world."

The sisters of two vulnerable men, who died earlier this year after having their state benefits withdrawn, are campaigning against what they regard as the callousness of the present welfare system. (G2)

Sarah Champion MP speaks of disarray in governance in Rotherham following the child abuse revelations. The town is still reeling and racism is said to be rife. (G2)

19 December:

The Metropolitan Police are actively investigating allegations that over 30 years a ring of prominent politicians and members of Britain's establishment abused and terrorised children, killing three young boys. The account of one victim, said to have been abused from the ages of seven to 16, has been described as "true".

The financial settlement for councils in 2015-16 has been announced. Council leaders, represented by the Local Government Association, warn that local authorities will be pushed to breaking point.

The European Court of Justice has ruled, in a landmark case, that obesity can, in some severe instances, constitute a disability, where, under particular conditions, it hinders the full and effective participation of the person concerned in professional life on an equal basis with other workers.

Shoppers have [at last] realised they can buy very similar products at far lower prices in Lidl's discount stores. Sales in the last three months are 18% up, while other major supermarkets are suffering a downturn. [Not merely 'very similar'; a good many products are unique, with a continental flavour, with periodic dedication to produce from particular regions. My own favourite is their Italian week.]

Figures released by Ofgem show that total customer debt to energy suppliers is some £900 million. There has been a 23% increase in electricity disconnections.

20 December:

Some refreshing news today: a brilliant retrospect on Mandy Rice-Davies by Geoffrey Robertson; the joyful Christmas news that the campaign of the New Era tenants has triumphed against the forces of capitalism [surely no need to spell it out]; the prospect of Keir Starmer hopefully becoming a Labour MP; the appointment of Sharon White as the new chief of Ofcom; and the detente between Cuba and the USA. But in contrast we also have the capitulation of Sony to North Korea [does Kim Jong-un really need contrived mockery?]; the continuing financial pressure on the NHS, despite increased support; and a lot more beyond my scope.

22 December:

A study carried out by the University College London Institute of Education expresses concern that pre-school children are being prescribed medication to treat hyperactivity, rather than being offered psychological interventions.

Plans to reduce ambulance response times have been put on hold in the face of opposition.

23 December:

A Commons library assessment predicts massive cuts in police forces if planned austerity measures are introduced.

A survey of 1,183 private tenants by the National Housing Federation has found that 31% had been in difficulties, having had to cut back on food and heating to keep up with rising rents. London tenants were having to pay more than ever: on average £1,167 a month.

24 December:

The Department for Communities and Local Government statistics show that 60,940 families, including 87,420 children, will spend Christmas in emergency accommodation – an increase of 20% since 2010.

29 December:

David Laws, a former deputy to George Osborne, has called the Chancellor's public spending plans a "huge policy and strategic blunder".

30 December:

A Scottish nurse, returning from voluntary work in Sierra Leone, has been diagnosed with Ebola after clearance through Heathrow. [If the indications of this disease are initially not obvious does it not follow that routine airport screening can and will fail to detect people carrying the infection?]

Debbie Purdy died on the 23 December, having lived with multiple sclerosis for almost 20 years. In 2009 she won a landmark ruling which led to clarification of the circumstances in which those assisting death could expect prosecution. [Pressure for a more fundamental change in the law is growing.]

Prime Minister David Cameron is pictured taking part in the arduous Great Brook Run.

Speaking on BBC Radio 4, Mervyn King, former governor of the Bank of England, denied that the Labour government had been responsible for the financial crash. He argued that there had been a shared intellectual responsibility across the political parties and financial institutions.

WE HATE NO.83: DISABILITY DOGMA

I am not a disabled person – well, not so you would notice. Never have been. But I am conscious that disability can come to me, as to anyone else. If that were to happen, I would count it a misfortune. *Ipsa facto* I regard disability as a misfortune. I am convinced that the vast majority of disabled people take the same view and would be delighted if their impairment could be removed. Why? Simply because it restricts the things that people can do. And, for the avoidance of doubt, let me say at the outset that I take that view in relation to the impairment itself. Social factors – attitudes or barriers to access – may intensify or ameliorate the extent of disablement, but they do not cause it. I have said previously that fundamentalist doctrines about 'models' are, to my mind, perverse and naïve.

Having said that, I hope that if I were to become disabled I would not want to belittle myself or to whinge on about my condition. The impairment would be part of me, and I would not want to be seen as 'imperfect'. There is a parallel with older age in as much as you cannot be, nor do what you did when you

were young, nor look as good (Joan Collins said of beauty that it's like being born rich and getting poorer). You are what you are, and have to make the best of it (I nearly said 'of a bad job'). And, of course, there are compensations, because both disability and older age can bring out previously untapped qualities. Nevertheless, I think that getting older, like disability, is pretty much a misfortune.

My impairment, if it comes, may vary in kind and degree, from slight to severe. Withal I would remain a person, deserving to be respected and valued as an individual. Perhaps not the same person as I am now, because I know that disability can affect personality and disturb relationships. But I'm sure I would want to make my own decisions and to be helped to be as independent as possible (an oxymoron surely, but you will know what I mean). But full independence, or at least the level of independence enjoyed by non-disabled people, may be a bridge too far; indeed I may not want it. Some impairments inevitably bring a measure of dependency, sometimes, sadly, very large. There are no absolutes in disability, no single prescription for one's lifestyle.

Mind you, neither would I want to be seen simply as a medical 'case'. My needs would remain holistic, as they are now. But I cannot go along with the idea of demonising the medical profession. Doctors may be able to lessen the impact of my impairment, perhaps even cure it.

The same goes for 'charity'. This is surely not a dirty word, nor a concept to be regarded as rotten to the core. Is the work of charities to be devalued because they recognise a special need not met by state provision and unlikely ever to be met? Take, for example, the charity Freedom from Torture. Does anyone imagine that its support for traumatised refugees would exist without the personal commitment of those whose concern has provided the impetus for its creation and continuity? Certainly I wouldn't want to be pitied or patronised, but if I should have to endure care, I would like it to be provided with concern and sensitivity.

I say again that there are no absolutes in disability. This applies no less to employment. It is simplistic to say that disabled people make good employees. Some do, but at the other end of the scale others of working age have such high levels of functional impairment or susceptibility to illness as to be effectively unemployable. I might lie somewhere between the two, with a chance of meeting the requirements of some jobs, but acutely conscious that disability will not help me in a competitive environment. Please spare me the notion that disability is a *qualification* for employment.

And because there are no absolutes in disability, much the same dichotomy applies to education. Certainly, an honourable goal is to try to bring disabled children into mainstream education as far as this is reasonable. But it cannot include all disabled children. Some have disabilities so profound or are so disruptive as to need special educational provision for their own sake and that of their peers. Dogma which argues for inclusion in all circumstances is surely misconceived. The battle, rather, is to prevent the boundary being drawn too much in favour of exclusion.

I accept that I have taken a broad approach. There are some areas of heated dispute into which I have not ventured. I realise that many questions are susceptible to all the individual surrounding circumstances. This is the whole point really. Disability issues cannot be defined – or made the subject of legislation - by a rigid adherence to a particular and narrow ideology.

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