

# national information forum

Working for the inclusion of disabled and other disadvantaged people  
by encouraging better information provision

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*A Digest of Current Social Information  
For members of the National Information Forum*

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## **GULF WAR ILLNESSES**

When I was considering a sub-title for my biography of Alf Morris I was persuaded to describe him as 'People's Parliamentarian'. That was a mistake. Most parliamentarians would think themselves similarly qualified. 'The Quiet Revolutionary' would have been better, but even more appropriate, I now think, would have been 'The parliamentarian who never gives up'. There are some obvious examples: his long and ultimately successful campaign for legislation to combat discrimination against disabled people (or, as he would put it, *for* their civil rights); and his even longer struggle to seek justice for people with haemophilia poisoned by the NHS in the 1980s with infected blood products, and to uncover the full facts of its worst ever medical disaster. But even more persistent and arduous has been his dogged pursuit of the cause of armed forces personnel – both British and American – who served in the first Gulf War and subsequently developed a range of serious illnesses apparently connected to that service.

In my biography I tried with Alf's help to relate something of cause and effect in this unhappy history, and to summarise the details of his jousting with successive governments over so many years, culminating in 2007 with a grudging acceptance by the Ministry of Defence of the term 'Gulf War Syndrome' as an umbrella term to describe the various illnesses by which veterans were afflicted in consequence of their service. A continuing difficulty has been the sheer complexity of the medical evidence. That complexity has been such that some can't see the wood for the trees, and others do not want to do so. This particular wood has many kinds of ailments; some trees have withered as though from disease, others have declined in what might be thought a natural and commonplace way. In the context of the first Gulf War, the confused circumstances have been such as to offer an excuse for prevarication, allowing an argument, consistently advanced by the MoD, that compensation, indeed ordinary pension provision and recognition, could only follow proven causation. Given the circumstances this was and remains a stern – perhaps impossible - test and one that can always be used as a justification for endless research / peer review. But in the big picture, even in 2007, it appeared to many observers that the official attitude represented what has been called "the uncaring face of bureaucracy", and that the MoD's claim that "Gulf War veterans' illnesses remain a priority for the Government" was looking distinctly threadbare.

Yet since my biographical assessment, things have moved on. The United States Research Advisory Committee (USRAC), mandated by Congress,

has now produced a definitive report on Gulf War illnesses, published on 17 November 2008, based on 1,840 scientific communications. Alf, as Lord Morris of Manchester, spoke at its launch in Washington, and on 5 February 2009 he rose in our House of Lords to ask what assessment the government had made of the report.

*The Lancet*, he pointed out, had been one of the first voices to be heard on the report in this country. In an editorial, this respected journal had called for “expanded programmes of care, support and compensation”, which it described as “the least that is now owed to those whose tenure of service to their country turned into lifelong disability”. It pointed to the USRAC’s repudiation of claims that Gulf War illness is a psychiatric or stress-related disorder. In fact, it said, veterans of this conflict “actually have lower rates of post-traumatic stress disorder than veterans of other wars”. What they do exhibit, however, are cognitive problems, as well as “fatigue, chronic pain and digestive, respiratory and skin disorders”. Successive scientific studies, *The Lancet* continued, had also found them to have “significantly higher rates than other veterans of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis and brain cancer”. Moreover, the USRAC report had found that Gulf War illnesses could now be attributed to two neurotoxic exposures (to which virtually all British veterans were subjected); namely, organophosphates and pyridostigmine bromide, a drug never tested on human beings and designed to protect against nerve agents. What has emerged, said Alf, is a clear consensus of informed opinion that Gulf War illness is real, serious and potentially deadly, and that any delay now in addressing the implications of the USRAC’s findings would be inexcusable.

In the debate, Alf was supported by some of the most prestigious members of the House, including Lord Lloyd, a former senior High Court Judge and Lord of Appeal in Ordinary, who headed the inquiry into Gulf War illnesses in 2004; Lord Craig, Chief of the Defence Staff throughout the first Gulf War; and, remarkably, Lord Gilbert, who back in 1997 had fielded questions on Gulf War illness on behalf of the MoD, but whose sympathies appear to have lain elsewhere. I cannot include their contributions here, nor indeed the largely unhelpful response of Baroness Taylor on behalf of the government. But I do urge members to read the full debate at [www.parliament.uk](http://www.parliament.uk). You may think that the response of the MoD and of successive governments repudiates the concept of a duty of care and gives the announcement of national armed forces day - to give our armed forces the respect and acknowledgement they deserve - the appearance of a cosmetic show.

#### **KEN DAVIS**

It is with deep sadness that we have learned of the death of Ken Davis, a longstanding friend of the Forum and one of those who, from less enlightened times, championed the right of disabled people to independence and respect. As a member of the union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation he emphasised the need to move away from a purely medical model – regarding disabled people only as patients – and to deconstruct social barriers that were in themselves disabling. In the 80s he founded the first Coalition of Disabled People in his home county of Derbyshire and persuaded his local authority to support Britain’s first Centre for Integrated Living. He was well aware of the importance of the Forum’s work and supported our director, Ann Darnbrough, in her efforts to raise the profile of information, fronting our video *The Need to Know* and contributing the foreword to the fifth edition of *Directory for Disabled People* in 1988. It is instructive to read that foreword now. He saw the Directory not only as a source book, but as a record of change. Successive volumes had revealed increases in the range of information of value to disabled people. In turn, he wrote, this growth reflected significant changes in the aspirations and expectations of disabled people themselves. It was helpful, he suggested, to see the Directory in the context of these changes to fully appreciate its role. Yet much more remained to be done to achieve the aim of full participation and equality for all disabled people. The liberating potential of open and accessible information would only be fully realised when it led to practical action in the real world. Amen to that.

Despite being a strenuous advocate for change, Ken had a gentle, kind, one might say avuncular manner. It is a privilege to have shared time and thoughts with him.

### **NOBODY'S LISTENING**

We have heard from (and brought into membership) The Sheltered Housing UK Association (SHUK), calling attention to a huge problem faced by residents of sheltered housing. There are around 400,000 such people in approximately 25,000 schemes. Only about half of them have access to the internet. They now have an Association to represent them but, being fragmented and vulnerable - not given to causing a fuss – are some way from being able to share and express a collective voice. Their problem is that whereas they came into sheltered housing with the expectation that there would remain a permanent resident warden on site, such wardens are apparently fast becoming an endangered species.

SHUK tells us that there are no regulations for sheltered housing, so that landlords can do just about what they wish. Residents, who are reluctant to upset their housing provider and may be fearful of losing their tenancy, are a soft target. Increasingly, on-site wardens are being replaced by peripatetic cover, often under a scheme known as 'Supporting People'. This was set up in April 2003 under the auspices of the then Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. The result, according to SHUK, is that sheltered housing has been relegated to the same level as any pensioner dwelling fitted with an alarm system. And the service provided is very patchy and unreliable. When the schedule of visits is unpicked, it usually works out as a visit once or twice a week, sometimes even less. One resident has said that the operatives are so busy that they come to the end of his mother's pathway once a month, shout "are you OK?" and are gone. SHUK has found from many other reports that floating support staff enter the building and spend most of their time on a computer, keeping up with paper work.

Unsurprisingly, residents, who commonly are not adequately consulted, are disillusioned and feel powerless. "I would not have moved in if I had known that they were going to take the warden away," and "communal activities and trips out have ceased" are typical complaints. More serious is sole reliance on electronic alert systems to services that may take some time in responding to an emergency. People feel "less secure" and it is obvious that their lives are indeed endangered by the loss of a warden, close at hand and familiar with their circumstances, illnesses and habits.

This critical situation is the subject of a recent report, *Nobody's Listening: the impact of floating support on older people living in sheltered housing*, commissioned and co-ordinated by Help the Aged and published by The Housing and Support Partnership. It can be downloaded free of charge. The Sheltered Housing UK Association, Flat 2, 71 West Belvedere, Danbury, Chelmsford CM3 4RF; tel: 01245 224166; e.mail: mailbox@shelteredhousinguk.com, website: www.shelteredhousinguk.com.

The Housing and Support Partnership, Stanelaw House, Sutton Lane, Sutton, Witney, Oxford OX29 5RY; website: www.housingandsupport.co.uk.

### **CHOICES AND RIGHTS**

The 'disability movement', in my experience, has resolutely opposed the idea of legislation to permit assisted voluntary euthanasia. It is refreshing therefore to find in the February issue of *Disability Now* an article by Peter White in which he asserts the right to choice in matters of life and death.

## A CASE FOR A LIVING WAGE

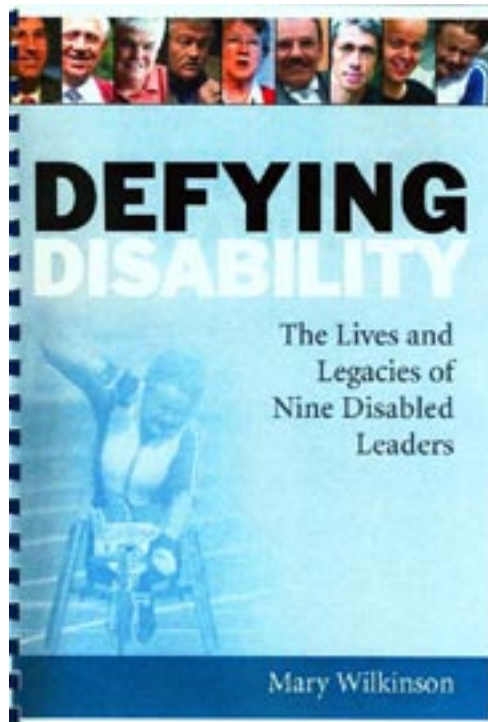
We hear that our local authority (Southwark), in response to a Green Party campaign, has given a commitment to pay all of its staff and contractors at least £7.45 an hour, described as the ‘London Living Wage’, set annually by City Hall. It will also promote the living wage to private companies operating in the borough. The living wage contrasts to the legal minimum rate of £5.73 and is surely a step in the right direction and a real incentive to attract people into work (subject, of course, to there being any work to attract them to).

## DEFYING DISABILITY: THE LIVES AND LEGACIES OF NINE DISABLED LEADERS

In the first act of *Tosca*, Cavaradossi stands before a portrait he is painting and sings ‘Recondita armonia’. This is usually translated as ‘Strange harmony of contrasts’ and is a fitting description of a new book by Mary Wilkinson, former editor of *Disability Now*. It charts the achievements of nine disabled people who have been prominent in the author’s own time, namely Andrew Lee, Jack Ashley, Peter White, Philip Friend, Rachel Hurst, Bert Massie, Mat Fraser, Tom Shakespeare and Tanni Grey Thompson. The harmony, of course, is that all nine shared a broadly similar aim: the emancipation of disabled people. The contrasts are that these protagonists have their own personalities and have different attitudes towards impairment and disability politics, as indeed has Mary herself.

Cavaradossi’s next line is ‘So deliciously blended’, and there, I’m afraid, the analogy breaks down. For the divisions revealed by Mary’s text have more in common with Stockhausen than Puccini. They range from radical, bull-in-a-china-shop protest to cunning negotiation and the acceptance of gradual change, and from disagreement to downright hatred. I well remember, though not a subject of the book, that at a meeting of disability activists the name of Colin Low evoked a chorus of hissing. I suppose that these tensions are what Sid Baility had in mind, in a review in *Disability Now*, when he referred to Mary’s mini-biographies as “edgy”. They are certainly frank, something that I regard as a strength. No less admirable is the economy of Mary’s writing, though this may owe something to her historian husband Rupert, whom she describes in her acknowledgements as “abridger in chief”. Speaking as one with an inclination to be long-winded, I delighted in Mary’s ability to condense long, epic struggles into a few sentences. Nevertheless, within this pithiness, she manages to cover an enormous amount of detail. Much of it, even to those who find the names familiar, will come as a surprise.

The roster is necessarily incomplete. It omits, for example, Ken Davis, who has just died, Colin Low, Jane Campbell, Alice Maynard, Rosalie Wilkins, and inevitably some of the early pioneers who have passed on beyond interview. Lest we forget such as Megan Du Boisson, Duncan Guthrie, Paul Hunt and Peter Large. And, perhaps a conscious omission (though he does get a number of mentions along the way), the towering achievements of Alf Morris, who was free of disability until recent years (I do realise that to say ‘free of disability’ is itself an attitude!). But it would be a mistake to see this as a defect. This is not a comprehensive history of the struggle for change. I see it rather as a study of the lives and perspectives of a chosen (and well chosen) selection of disabled champions, which brings out the non-conformity of the ‘disability movement’. Jack Ashley once remarked that disability is not homogenous. Neither are the views of those who have fought the fight for civil rights. I see Mary’s pen portraits as a major contribution to our understanding of



disability politics.

Mary has been a member of the management committee/board of the National Information Forum since 1988, is a loyal friend and, as I well know, a free spirit. Having edited *Disability Now* for over 20 years, her understanding of the diverse forces that have shaped the modern history of disability is probably unrivalled. She brings to the table well-honed skills as a journalist, and this unique record of part of that history deserves to succeed in raising awareness of disability issues.

*Defying Disability* is published by Jessica Kingsley and is offered, without extra postage and packing charge, at the discounted price of £16.99 at [www.jkp.com](http://www.jkp.com), quoting under 'additional information' on the 'card details' page a voucher code: wilkinson 09.

### **GOVERNANCE THROUGH CO-OPERATION?**

Described as Britain's best kept secret, after five years of campaigning and with cross-party support, the Sustainable Communities Act crept on to the statute book in 2007. Its focus is on local decision making by dialogue, on local governance by co-operation rather than central, top-down dictat. Local authorities have already been invited to opt-in to the processes of the Act. So far 75 have done so and the number is steadily rising.

Participating authorities are invited to make proposals which they consider would contribute to promoting the sustainability of local communities by encouraging the improvement of the economic, social or environmental well-being of their areas. Before making any such proposals, local authorities are expected to establish or recognise and consult a panel of representatives of local persons. Potentially this offers an important opportunity for concerned individuals to have an input into forging a sustainable community strategy. The matters to which local authorities must have regard are wide ranging and are set out in a schedule to the Act. They include, for example, measures to conserve energy and to increase social inclusion, such as greater involvement in local democracy.

On 10 February, I attended a meeting organised by Local Works, a project of the campaigning group Unlock Democracy, to promote the purposes of the Act. The Grand Committee Room of the House of Commons was completely taken up, with a hundred or so people outside, unable to get in. A similar response has attended similar meetings in other parts of the country. I heard Ron Bailey, the campaign director, say that the intended process was quite different from the usual one of policy proposals coming down from 'Whitehall' and offered for consultation. Most people knew by now, he argued, that the words 'consultation' and 'sham' were virtually synonymous, and the system was anything but empowering. The new Act looked to local policy being driven from local communities upwards. Inevitably, suggestions would have to go through a selection process and this would fall to the Local Government Authority, which will short list proposals to be put to the Secretary of State. Solutions would be different, not dictated by government, and designed to combat community decline in the particular circumstances of each locality. Local authorities might be nervous about widening discussion, but should see the provisions of the Act as an opportunity to engage people in the democratic process and gain from imaginative suggestions that could enhance their functions.

Crucial to success would be the make-up of local panels. The Act did not impose a fixed structure, but clearly they needed to be genuinely representative and inclusive.

Julia Goldsworthy, a Liberal Democrat MP, came next. She saw the Act as revolutionary in allowing people from the 'grass roots' to engage in the political process. People, rather than councils, should determine the agenda. She felt that the requirement to provide local spending reports was particularly important. Discovering how money is spent can be a powerful trigger to prompt change.

It was for Oliver Letwin, the well-known Conservative MP, to sound a note of caution. The bill, he said, had encountered enormous resistance from departmental officials. They felt extreme scepticism at the idea that ordinary people had anything to say or any right to say it. It would be wise to expect continued resistance when it comes to putting proposals into practice, and not to nurse expectations that even cherished objectives will be achieved immediately.

John Wright, the National Chair of the Federation of Small Businesses, nevertheless saw the Act as a fantastic leap forward. A great thing, he said, is that the Act does not predicate that ‘one size fits all’. It allows for local wishes to be met locally. And Hugh Canning, Deputy General Secretary of the Public and Commercial Services Union, stressed that the local dimension was vital. Increasingly we are faced with the systematic withdrawal of local services in favour of centralised (and cheaper) provision. Policies that are seen as efficient are also inflexible and impact adversely on local needs in sustainable communities.

The Act, say the organisers, is “great news for us all locally. For the first time we have a law that gives local government and local communities the power to drive central government actions and policy to help promote thriving, vibrant and sustainable communities”. But the first and most urgent priority is to urge authorities that have not signed up, to do so as soon as possible.

### **THE UN CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF DISABLED PEOPLE**

The February issue of *Disability Now* has an article criticising the delay in the UK’s ratification of this Convention. And well it might. The idea of such a convention came from *The Charter for the Third Millennium*, put together in 1999 by a World Planning Group chaired by Lord Morris of Manchester. On 5 January 2000, the Charter was welcomed and received in a ceremony at 10 Downing Street by Tony Blair, then Britain’s Prime Minister, who said that it would form the basis of a global consensus on priorities for at least the next decade. He went so far as to say that his government would continue to focus on action to take forward their commitment to comprehensive and enforceable civil rights for disabled people in the United Kingdom. This policy, he concluded, presently ensured that the UK “was ahead of many other countries in legislating for and promoting civil rights for disabled people”. And here we are in 2009, still awaiting ratification of a Convention that was called for in the UN General Assembly in November 2000! How “ahead” is that?

I think it is worth recalling what Lord Morris said in my biography of him published in September 2007:

*“The UN’s founding principles recognised the inherent dignity, the equal and inalienable right of all humankind to freedom and justice. Again the UN has, in the universal declaration and the international covenants on human rights, recognised that everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth, without distinction of race, colour, gender, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or status. There was, as yet however, no specific reference there to the world’s over 600 million disabled people who had waited far too long for their rights to be fully recognised and promoted as they would surely be by the Convention proposed by the charter. That was the next step for humankind.”*

It is surely a scandal that the UK government is still dragging its feet in taking that step. If it has serious reservations, may we know what they are.



## **VALUING PEOPLE NOW: A THREE YEAR STRATEGY FOR PEOPLE WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES**

The Department of Health has published a strategy for improving services for people with learning disabilities across health, housing, employment and community care services, following an extensive consultation that ended in March 2008 and involved over 10,000 people. The benchmark is a vision that was enunciated in 2001: that all people with a learning disability are people first with the right to lead their lives like any others, with the same opportunities and responsibilities, and to be treated with the same dignity and respect.

The new three-year strategy sets out key government commitments and actions to establish an “environment in which change can happen”, and summarises necessary local and regional action. The plans are intended to be ‘person-centred’ and rooted in the fundamental principle that people with learning disabilities have the same human rights as everyone else, and sets out further steps for this to happen, building on the report ‘Putting People First’ to find ways to empower people to shape their own lives. Key aims include:

- ensuring people with learning disabilities get the healthcare they need and the support they want to live healthy lives;
- supporting more people with learning disabilities, including those with more complex needs, into paid work;
- ensuring people with learning disabilities have the choice to have relationships, become and continue to be parents;
- giving people with learning disabilities opportunities to study and enjoy leisure and social activities.

The strategy includes a response to the independent inquiry chaired by Sir Jonathan Michael set up following the 2007 Mencap report ‘*Death by indifference*’. Progress is to be reviewed annually and a new National Learning Disability Programme Board and regional boards have been set up to help ensure that the strategy works, share good practice and provide a forum for stakeholder groups to monitor progress. Cynics may wonder if the creation of yet another quango is again a way of shifting responsibility.

Mencap, which is well-placed to know the reality of the lives of people with learning disabilities, has welcomed the plans but appears circumspect. Among questions it poses on its website, allowing people to have their say, they ask whether the government’s plans can make a real difference and whether the personalisation of social care services is working in practice. Like many well-intentioned schemes, the acid test is money. As Mark Golding, Mencap’s CEO, says: “This will all be futile if government departments do not work together and back up their proposals with the right level of funding.”

The full text and an executive summary are available on the Department of Health website: [www.dh.gov.uk](http://www.dh.gov.uk).

### **A DUTY TO INVOLVE**

A new duty will come into force on 1 April 2009 aimed at improving community empowerment and giving “active citizens” and anyone likely to be affected by or interested in particular functions of local authorities greater opportunities to have a say. The White Paper introducing these provisions expresses concern at the drift away from community involvement in the political process and the centralisation of local government. It confidently spells out its objective as seeking to pass power into the hands of local communities. Consideration therefore needs to be given to opening up opportunities to influence or take part in decision making, to assess and evaluate services, and if appropriate to be involved in their provision.

Local authorities should also provide feedback on decisions, services, policies and outcomes, and the White Paper includes a new duty to respond to petitions. More accessible and open information is seen as a pre-requisite to community empowerment, and a key part of the role of a chair or chief executive of a public body is seen as a commitment to face regular public hearings.

Clearly, there will need to be detailed local discussion as to how such lofty aims can be effectively realised. Some targeting of consultation would seem to be inevitable. But local people and third sector organisations should be seen as a resource and the more that a synergy can be created between authorities and communities the better. This is an important measure, which will in time be extended to a range of local agencies in a Community Empowerment, Housing and Economic Regeneration Bill.

The White Paper, *Communities in control: real people, real power* can be seen and downloaded from [www.communities.gov.uk/publications/communities/communitiesincontrol](http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/communities/communitiesincontrol). There is an excellent summary.

### **NATIONAL TRUST'S VIRTUAL TOUR**

The Jodi awards aim to promote the cultural equality of disabled people through technology used in the service of access. Marcus Weisen reports on one of the 2008 winners:

“The National Trust’s ‘Virtual Tour’ impressed by its sheer scale and ambition. Twelve virtual tours for all visitors have been installed and tested in National Trust venues. Significant emphasis has been given to consulting disabled people. The high quality visual displays with audio information are accessible to wheelchair users and have been designed for maximum ease of use by several groups of disabled people. Two of the tours have been fitted with British Sign Language – in regional dialect. The standardised layout of the interactive Virtual Tours provides a consistent and reliable experience for disabled people anywhere. The project has outstanding potential for national rollout, is very cost-effective and could be an inspiration for improvements of scale elsewhere.”

From John Vincent’s e.newsletter. Marcus can be contacted at [marcus.weisen@gmail.com](mailto:marcus.weisen@gmail.com). The call for entries in 2009 will be made in June.

### **DELIVERING DIGITAL INCLUSION: AN ACTION PLAN**

We are sorry to be late in picking up on this really important (if overlong) consultation paper from the Department for Communities and Local Government. It appeared in October 2008 and the period for responses is already over. Nevertheless the text provides a thorough and detailed overview of the present state of the ‘digital divide’ and its impact on social exclusion.

In a thoughtful foreword, Paul Murphy, Minister for Digital Inclusion (did you know there was such a minister?), says that digital inclusion has two strands. One is having access to technology; the other is about the skills, motivation and confidence to use it. The report, we feel, is strong on action to deploy and deliver digital services within our communities, but rather less so on the question of personal motivation: the will to engage. Technology may well offer the means to improve the quality of people’s lives, but it is quite another matter for them to want to use it. Strategies must be found to stimulate an appetite to belong to the information society among the 17 million UK citizens over the age of 15 who still do not use computers and the internet, many of whom are socially disadvantaged as a consequence of their technical exclusion. Research indicates that 15% of the population – more than six million adults – are both socially and digitally excluded. The report provides a valuable profile of those who do not use the internet, and why, clearly demonstrating that internet usage decreases with age (despite some enthusiastic ‘silver surfers’). It is also clear that



those who are most socially deprived are also least likely to have access to digital resources.

To be fair, the action plan recognises a need to ensure that all citizens, particularly those who are socially disadvantaged, realise both the direct and indirect benefits of digital technologies, and analyses the reasons that underlie lack of awareness or confidence. It flags up as crucial that “engagement programmes” focus on specific targeted benefits for the “most excluded and resistant”. But we would have welcomed rather more on those engagement programmes. There is a significant gap between enabling and encouraging the use of technology.

The paper, which has an executive summary, is at: [www.communities.gov.uk/documents/communities/doc/1061561.doc](http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/communities/doc/1061561.doc).

### **LIVING WELL WITH DEMENTIA: A NATIONAL DEMENTIA STRATEGY**

An estimated 700,000 people live with dementia, and that number is likely to grow with an ageing society. They have not been well served, and the strategy to increase awareness, provide earlier diagnosis and intervention, and improve the quality of care that people with the condition receive is long overdue.

In my lay view, the name itself is unfortunate, suggesting a link with being demented. In reality so-called dementia relates to a deterioration of cognitive function and is surely different from manic psychotic disorders (will someone correct me if I am wrong).

The strategy has been well publicised in the national media, but can be seen in full at: [www.dh.gov.uk/en/SocialCare/Deliveringadultsocialcare/Olderpeople/NationalDementiaStrategy](http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/SocialCare/Deliveringadultsocialcare/Olderpeople/NationalDementiaStrategy). It aims to provide a framework within which local services can:

- Deliver quality improvements to dementia services and address health inequalities relating to dementia,
- Provide advice, guidance and support for health and social care commissioners and providers in the planning, development and monitoring of services, and
- Provide a guide to the content of high-quality services for dementia.

### **WELFARE REFORM**

The PCS union has expressed bitter disappointment over the publication of the Welfare Reform Bill, arguing that it is the wrong legislation at the wrong time. It believes that jobs, not punitive sanctions, are needed and warns that the provisions of the bill will drive people into poverty and stigmatise those who need the most help. It also considers that the private sector has neither the skills, nor the capacity to help people back to work.

**Postscript:** I read in my daily newspaper (16 February) that David Freud, an investment banker who has been advising James Purnell on welfare reform, is to join the Conservative front bench in the Lords, apparently attracted by the potential future opportunity to implement his reform agenda. I now feel vindicated in my remark in News Briefing no.3 that Mr Purnell’s proposals “appear to come more from the right than the left of the political divide”. I also remain convinced, as I said in the same article, that “the prime responsibility of government and the first element of reform should surely be to take steps to make the lower tiers of work more financially attractive, and clearly so. If work could be more generously rewarded, and not penalised, even those people who have grown accustomed to a life of dependency would be queuing up for jobs, without pressure and elaborate support mechanisms.”

**WE HATE NO.16:  
THE EX FACTOR – EXCESSIVE EXECUTIVE EXPECTATIONS**

Derek Kinrade

*Enter, stranger, but take heed  
Of what awaits the sin of greed  
For those who take, but do not earn,  
Must pay most dearly in their turn.*

J.K.Rowling, Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone

Back in the days when I first received money for work (as well as satisfaction), we were much concerned with 'differentials' when it came to negotiating pay increases. There was an acceptance of a hierarchical system of rewards, but this was constrained by a sense of fairness, a belief that the pyramid should have something of a symmetrical shape and that top salaries should not be too far removed from those at the bottom. This changed, I think, with the onset of what may loosely be called 'the Thatcher years', with her government's dedication to the free market and deregulation, when the pursuit of wealth came to be seen as a virtue, notwithstanding the inequality created for those left behind.

In the climate that has led to the current recession, when deregulation was replaced by ineffective regulation, top executives have too often looked to the best deal possible, no longer content with a reasonable return; mindful not of their junior staff but comparing themselves with the best dispensation in similar positions elsewhere, often buttressed with bonus schemes and sometimes with share options. It has been part – a big part – of a culture that the Green Party has called 'footloose finance' and Jenni Russell (*The Guardian*, 19 January) 'casino capitalism', sustained by the idea that it is necessary to pay top money to secure top people: a myth blown out of the water by the present credit crunch, which has revealed that quite often we have been paying big rewards for big failure. Nor has this bonanza, even now, been put into reverse. In a recent interview with *The Times*, Lord Myners, Minister for the City, is quoted to the effect that too many bankers fail to realise they are grossly over-rewarded and have no sense of society.

But this malaise is not confined to the private sector. The Taxpayers' Alliance reveals detailed (and to me shocking) information through its 'Public Sector Rich List', first published in 2006 and now available in a third edition. It tells us that, in 2007/8, 387 people were receiving annual remuneration packages of £150k or more (averaging £240k a year) across 140 government departments, quangos, other public bodies and public corporations. 4 of them had annual earnings of more than £1 million, 21 more than £500k and 88 above £250k. What is particularly disturbing is that these 387 people are reported to have had an average pay rise of 10.9% between 2006/7 and 2007/8. Matthew Elliott, Chief Executive of the Alliance, is quoted as saying:

“While ordinary families are suffering in the financial crisis, the public sector elite are enjoying record pay packages. Far too often, senior officials get massive pay rises and generous bonuses despite serious failures on their watch.”

Among other things, the Alliance's website ([www.taxpayersalliance.com/files/public-sector-rich-list-2008.pdf](http://www.taxpayersalliance.com/files/public-sector-rich-list-2008.pdf)) identifies, again on 2007/8 figures, the top 10 best rewarded executives working for bodies involved in the failed financial system regulation, the top 24 in departments that have presided over much publicised losses of personal data, and the 'top ten rewards for failure'.

The website does not spare personal financial data, drawn from information in the public domain. Packages over £200k a year are commonplace; indeed the Prime Minister weighs in at only 195 on

£189,994, which includes his salary as an MP, First Lord of the Treasury and Minister for the Civil Service. And some of the year-on-year increases are truly staggering. I have been told that when one NHS Trust (not on the Alliance website) achieved Foundation status the chairman was promptly awarded a whopping unstaged 147% increase and the non-executive directors 124%. In contrast, nurses were pinned down to staged increases that amounted to 1.9% per annum (below the rate of inflation). On band 5 of the NHS pay scale, on 2007/8 figures, they had to get by on £23,174.

Peter Mandelson may dismiss this kind of criticism as the ‘politics of envy’. I regard it as the politics of injustice. And the sad thing, as Jenni Russell points out, is that instead of rethinking the way we live, work or gobble up the world’s resources, the government “is evincing a devout desire to get the old system of high-consumption, high-risk capitalism back on track, as quickly as possible.”

The message, even figuratively speaking, is surely: “ye cannot serve god and mammon”.

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This information sheet has been compiled by Derek Kinrade. The views expressed do not necessarily represent those of the National Information Forum.