

# 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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## **TRENDS IN THE EMPLOYMENT OF DISABLED PEOPLE IN BRITAIN**

Richard Berthoud, a research professor at the Institute of Social and Economic Research, has reported on a survey that considered a possible correlation between the large increase in the number of people claiming incapacity benefits in the last three decades of the 20th century and the extent of employment disadvantage experienced by disabled people. The research confirmed that both the prevalence of reported disability and the extent of economic disadvantage faced by disabled people increased over the period analysed, but found it “difficult to link the timing of the trends to changes in either national unemployment rates or in social security policy”.

We think it may be simplistic to suppose that the increase resulted from a widespread over-readiness among GPs to sign off jobless patients as suffering from chronic conditions making them incapable of work – a perception that appears to be driving the present review of entitlement.

**Go to [www.iser.essex.ac.uk/publications/working-papers/iser/2011-03](http://www.iser.essex.ac.uk/publications/working-papers/iser/2011-03) for details.**

## **DENIAL OF VOTING RIGHTS TO PRISONERS**

We commented on this question in our December issue (no.28). It is now reported that it is likely that although a right to vote will be extended to prisoners the UK it will be limited to those serving sentences of one year or less. This seems to us to fly in the face of the European judgment in the case of Helmut Froidl, which emphasised that a decision to deny a prisoner the vote should be taken by a judge “taking into account the particular circumstances”. There needed to be a link between the offence that the prisoner had committed and issues relating to elections and democratic institutions.

It may be that European case law could yet change, but at present the reported proposal surely amounts to a blanket ban on anyone whose sentence exceeds one year, and as such is antagonistic to the unanimous finding of the Grand Chamber.

## **VARIATIONS IN THE COST OF HOME CARE**

‘Which? Money’ has found that a postcode lottery governs how much local authorities charge for home care and who they determine is eligible to receive it. Hourly charges have been found to vary from £5 to over £20.

- Go to [www.which.co.uk](http://www.which.co.uk) and search for 'cost of care'.

### **THE CURSE OF UNEMPLOYMENT**

The unemployment rate for the three months to November 2010 was 7.9%, representing 2.5 million people without jobs. The position of young people was particularly depressing, with a quarterly increase of 1% to 20.3% (951,000), the highest figure since comparable records began in 1992. This sits very uneasily with welcome legislation to free-up the age of retirement. Historically (and one of us was around at the time), we notice that in December 1929, following the Wall Street Crash, the number of unemployed people in Britain also rose to 2.5 million. (G.D.H.Cole *A History of the Labour Party from 1914* (1948, pp.234/5).

### **REFORM OF THE NHS**

The proposed changes to the NHS have been widely reported (and criticised). We confine ourselves to drawing attention to the overview published on 20 January by the National Audit Office.

Go to [www.nao.org.uk](http://www.nao.org.uk)

### **CALLING ALL DEAF PEOPLE AGED 18 – 28 IN SCOTLAND**

Researchers at the University of Edinburgh are doing a survey to find out about young deaf people's lives. If you are deaf or partially deaf, aged 18 - 28 and you went to school in Scotland, they are asking you to fill in an online questionnaire. The questionnaire is in English and in British Sign Language. Your name will be entered into a £100 prize draw if you complete the survey.

Go to [www.deafachieve.org.uk](http://www.deafachieve.org.uk)

### **POVERTY: SUMMARY OF WHAT THE JOSEPH ROWNTREE FOUNDATION HAS LEARNED IN 2010 (FROM THE JRF WEBSITE)**

It's that time of year again! At JRF we say that we are "the place to go to get the facts". So as everyone starts reviewing the last twelve months, here are some interesting facts from 2010.

This is what we know now, that we didn't know a year ago, thanks to JRF research and JRHT innovation in practice:

- A single person in the UK needs to earn at least £14,400 per year to be able to afford a minimum socially acceptable standard of living.
- A single person living in a village needs to earn at least 50% above the minimum wage (£5.93 per hour) to make ends meet.
- Scotland's unemployment rate is back to 1996 levels.
- 44% of the 13m people in poverty are in 'deep poverty', the highest proportion on record.
- Hundreds of thousands more adults and children will be in absolute poverty by 2014.
- After inflation, Jobseeker's Allowance and Income Support (£65.45 a week) are worth the same as they were in 1997.
- People on low incomes face a much higher inflation rate than benefits are raised by.
- Welfare sanctions can work in the short term, but at what cost?
- Unemployed people usually have a strong work ethic.
- Work by itself is not the route out of poverty.
- The risk of mental illness for someone in the poorest fifth of the population is twice the average.
- White working-class communities have been damaged by long-term decline, but residents and community activists are working to change their estates.
- The risk of being a victim of violent crime for people aged 16–24 is 9.3 per cent – five times higher than for others.
- The unemployment rate aged 16–24 (20%) is the highest in 18 years.
- The number of children living in poverty in working households has increased to 2.1m – the highest on record.
- Attitudes and aspirations play a big part in children achieving in education.
- Young people want to be given compulsory education on housing.
- They face lots of difficulties in finding their own place to live.
- 2009 saw the first rise in a decade of children aged 11 not reaching basic levels of numeracy and literacy.

- For most young adults drinking to get drunk is seen as the obvious choice for socialising.
- Government targets on zero carbon housing are unlikely to be met by 2016.

But there were some positives:

- Premature death rates (under 65) have fallen for men and women.
- Crime and fear of crime have been falling for years.
- The value of community work to connect new migrants and settled groups.
- Overall, the number of children living in poverty fell, to 3.7m.
- The number of 16-year-olds and 19-year-olds without basic qualifications fell in 2009, the lowest for 10 years.
- Talking Mats® help people with dementia to communicate more effectively with family carers.
- There are practical ways to support people with learning difficulties who develop dementia.
- Our ageing population is cause for celebration as well as a challenge.
- We've learned a lot from our own practice about setting up housing with care schemes.
- A new care levy could be fair across generations, affordable, sustainable and provide immediate revenue.

Joseph Rowntree established his Foundation to search out the root causes of poverty and disadvantage in the UK. Our aim is to shine a light on the UK's poorest people and places. The Government claims to want to be judged on how they treat the poorest people in our society. Our research highlights just what that really means, and the scale of the challenge they face.

For the original, which has comments and links, go to [www.jrf.org.uk/blog/2010/12/2010-what-weve-learned](http://www.jrf.org.uk/blog/2010/12/2010-what-weve-learned)

### **CHANGING DIRECTION?**

Despite signs that our society is fundamentally unfair and is going from bad to worse, the government has published *The Equality Strategy – building a fairer Britain*.

Go to [www.equalities.gov.uk](http://www.equalities.gov.uk)

### **AN ALTERNATIVE VIEW**

In a letter to *The Guardian* (10 January), Michael Meacher suggests a number of ideas to balance Britain's books [and towards a fairer society]:

- Continue the tax on bankers' bonuses at an increased rate of 75% to yield over £5 billion a year.
- Don't reduce HMRC staffing. On average, tax inspectors raise £60,000 a year above their salary costs. At present £42 billion is lost each year, £15 billion of it from evasion, fraud and criminal attack. At least half of this could be recouped given proper staffing.
- A tax on foreign exchange trades, as originally proposed by economist John Tobin. Even at as little as 0.005%, this would, according to the Institute of Development Studies, yield £7.7 billion a year in Britain.
- Abolish the ceiling on National Insurance contributions [the so-called Upper Earnings Limit]. This would yield £11 billion a year, [something we have suggested repeatedly].
- According to The Institute for Public Policy Research, banks could repay an extra £20 billion out of the bailout subsidies they received.

By our reckoning this totals at least £64.7 billion a year, rather more than yielded by the increase in VAT and the mean-spirited assault on the mobility component of DLA paid to disabled people trapped in care homes.

### **THE FIELD REPORT**

The final report of a review chaired by Frank Field has been published as *The Foundation Years: preventing poor children becoming poor adults* (Cabinet Office, 2010).

Go to <http://povertyreview.independent.gov.uk/>

### **CONSUMER ADVICE**

From 31 March the Consumer Direct website will close and the Office of Fair Trading's information will instead be available on the Directgov site.

## **THE FIRST CLICK CAMPAIGN**

BBC Learning is running a two-year First Click campaign to encourage over-55s (who represent a large proportion of the digitally excluded) to get online. If you can, go to [www.bbc.co.uk/connect/campaigns/partner\\_form.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/connect/campaigns/partner_form.shtml), where free beginner's computer course materials are available. If you are interested in finding a course or receiving First Click materials for a friend or family member who isn't yet online please call 08000 150 950 or e.mail: [firstclick@bbc.co.uk](mailto:firstclick@bbc.co.uk).

## **IN PRAISE OF U-TURNS**

Margaret Thatcher famously said "You turn if you want to. The lady's not for turning." Was this simply rhetorical obstinacy or commendable resolution? We think the former. Outside of standing by one's promises and pledges (and being careful before making them), there is a lot to be said for reversing if you find that you have taken a wrong turning. In politics, especially when travelling too fast, there is merit in thinking again, admitting mistakes and changing direction. We think that the media should not "accuse" policy-makers of doing a u-turn. A policy shift may be welcome.

Right now, government initiatives are coming at us thick and fast, some would say too thick and too fast. But it may be wrong to suppose that they have not been thought through. It seems likely that the dramatic reforms have been carefully developed while the Conservatives were in opposition. Our concern is rather that they are generated from a rigid ideology conceived by politicians from a privileged background.

## **ADULT SOCIAL CARE**

In November last the coalition government published its vision for the future of adult social care in England. Its emphasis is one of "shifting power to the people", prevention, greater personalisation of services, the promotion of independence, and breaking down the barriers between health and social care funding (where have we heard that before?). Trumpeted as part of the 'Big Society' it sounds to us more like a movement towards self-reliance. Within limits, perhaps no bad thing. Proposals for the thorny question of how we pay for care are deferred pending reports from the Law Commission and the Dilnot Commission.

**Go to [www.dh.gov.uk/en/publicationsandstatistics](http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/publicationsandstatistics)**

## **TERMINOLOGICAL INEXACTITUDE**

We notice that many BBC presenters, particularly in sporting contexts, persistently misuse the word 'disinterested', when they mean 'uninterested'. Disinterested, of course, refers to impartiality.

## **UNIVERSAL CREDIT**

Are you bemused by the concept of Universal Credit? The White Paper *Universal Credit: welfare that works* at [www.dwp.gov.uk](http://www.dwp.gov.uk) offers a measure of reassurance, promising an integrated working-age credit that will provide a basic allowance with extra elements for children, disability, housing and caring. From 2013, it will support people both in and out of work, replacing working tax credit, child tax credit, housing benefit, income support, income-based job seeker's allowance and income-related employment and support allowance. The government has given a commitment ensuring that no-one will lose out as a direct result of these reforms and that no-one will experience a reduction in the benefit they receive as a result of the introduction of Universal Credit. But what the new allowance will do is to simplify the welfare benefits system and ensure that welfare support is not largely withdrawn when people start working, but instead is reduced at a consistent and managed rate as working hours and earnings increase, thus offering greater incentive to enter employment.

## **A HARSH CUT**

As part of the Comprehensive Spending Review the government has decided that from October 2012 the mobility component of disability living allowance (to be renamed 'Personal Independence Payment') will be withdrawn from disabled adults and children who live in care homes funded by local authorities. The Prime Minister has justified this change in order to achieve consistency with the position of people in hospital. But the two groups are fundamentally different. Those in hospital at the expense of the NHS simply cannot make use of an allowance designed to allow them to go out and about, whereas people in care homes usually can.

The mobility allowance was first announced in September 1974. Alf Morris, then Minister for Disabled People, told an audience in Liverpool: "Although they [disabled non-drivers] cannot drive, they have as much right as anyone else to look beyond their own four walls." At the time, opposition focused on the inadequacy of the provisions and the financially constrained exclusions. The coalition government is now moving in the opposite direction. It is surely a retrograde step.

### **A REMARKABLE ACHIEVEMENT**

On 24 November 2010 Action for Blind People's mobile sight loss information unit, while located in Cambridge, checked in its 100,000th visitor. The service travels to over 200 locations a year, providing information and support to people with visual impairments.

**Go to [www.actionforblindpeople.org.uk](http://www.actionforblindpeople.org.uk)**

### **PUBLIC HEALTH**

The coalition government has published a White Paper *Healthy Lives, Healthy People*, setting out its strategy for the future management of public health in England.

**Go to [www.dh.gov.uk/healthypeople](http://www.dh.gov.uk/healthypeople)**

### **WE HATE NO. 38: CLASS DISTINCTION**

*"The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of the class struggle."*

Karl Marx, opening words of 'The Communist Manifesto' (1848)

*"Bow, bow, ye lower middle classes! Bow, bow, ye tradesmen, bow ye masses."*

W.S. Gilbert 'Iolanthe' (1882)

*"There is always more misery among the lower classes than there is humanity in the higher."*

Victor Hugo, quoted in the 'Illawarra Mercury' and repeated in 'The Week'.

In a recent service to mark the 40th anniversary of the Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons Act the Archbishop of Westminster reminded the congregation that all people are of equal worth in the sight of God (so why was the prelate wearing fancy dress?). We cannot vouch for God's eyesight, but here in Britain, as it were on the ground, it is painfully apparent that there is an enormous gulf between the esteem accorded to the lower orders and to toffs (we would say proletariat and aristocracy, but that would itself imply a class bias); between beggars and the landed 'gentry'; between those who endure a half-life on benefits and those who annually parade their affluence at Ascot racecourse; between those who struggle alone and those who can afford to employ hundreds of servants; between servile subjects and rulers; between commoners and royalty; between the masses and their masters; between the uncouth and the elegant (we could go on). With, of course, a great swathe of people in an extensive and variously valued middle ground.

Despite the growth of an amorphous middle class, social barriers are still very much alive and kicking. Even our sports, as Barney Ronay recently put it, "are still horribly divided along class lines – from darts to skiing". In the simplest terms we generally recognise four broad class divisions: under, lower, middle and upper. But in our complex society it is possible to identify other distinct classifications, such as professional, military, artistic, chattering, political and above all (literally) ruling. In a memorable article in *The Guardian* (22 December) John Harris observed that "In the Dickensian season a Victorian clique still rules". "Now surely," he wrote, "we can confidently scoff at the coalition's claims to being somehow 'progressive', and feel a shiver at so many of the Victorian fundamentals of Con-Dem politics – noblesse oblige, an updated notion of the undeserving poor and, naturally enough, fiscal exactitude...we now find ourselves governed by people from a narrower social category than has been seen in years, and one of their motivations becomes clearer by the day – to somehow recast the country according to the ancient mores of the English upper class."

Divergence by class, of course, is not purely economic; worth can also be measured in terms of respect, prestige, authority, power, deference and honour. There are certain clear variations at the extremes: thus the poor are more numerous but tend to die younger, while the 'upper' classes generally remain distinct, tightly grouped and exclusive, mostly born into wealth and privilege, but not necessarily therefore intelligent, cultured

or imbued with energy or moral sensibilities. The hereditary system, despite its defects, survives. In France and Russia an inclination to aristocratic decadence in contrast to the abject poverty of the peasantry was at the root of bloody revolutions. Here in Britain, despite some eminent supporters of the need for change (if not for blood-letting), we have shown greater acceptance and tolerance. Indeed it is a peculiarity of British society that the supreme anomaly of monarchy appears most popular among the underprivileged, marked by a distinct absence of animosity. Give the masses a royal wedding and joy abounds.

We believe that class differences and the unfairness that goes with them are endemic and bound to persist. So what do we really hate? By now that is probably obvious, but let us try to be more specific. We hate pretension: ascribed social standing not based on achievement, the display of medals awarded for lord knows what, luxurious lifestyles and extravagant travel at taxpayers' expense. At the other end of the spectrum we hate policies which make the poor even poorer. We need to mitigate class distinction and move towards, not away from, social equality, encouraging a meritocracy and governance that rewards aspiration and promotes social mobility, but also gives help to the helpless. But as a recent Steve Bell cartoon puts it what we now appear to have is a doctrine of "From each according to their vulnerability, to each according to their greed".

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**This briefing has been compiled by Ann Darnbrough and Derek Kinrade. The views expressed do not necessarily represent those of the National Information Forum. Earlier briefings and the 'We Hate' series are available on the Forum's website: [www.nif.org.uk](http://www.nif.org.uk).**