

Harry Brown

Harry Brown was born in Durham in 1918, where he grew up amidst poverty and unemployment. After leaving school he had a variety of jobs before enlisting in the Army in 1936. He served with the B.E.F. in France, and was demobbed in 1946. He worked in a colliery for a while, and then became a long-distance lorry driver. He had a coronary thrombosis in 1956, and has been in and out of hospital ever since.

Mr Brown is married, with two young daughters, and now lives in Wales. Unable to get employment, he writes regularly for the local press, and takes a strong interest in politics and current affairs.

Some Anomalies of Social Welfare

(Chapter 11 in Hunt, P. (ed.) 1966: Stigma: The Experience of Disability, London: Geoffrey Chapman).

'THE LONG-TERM invalids in this country are, I think, one of the most neglected groups of all.' So said Mr R. E. Prentice, Labour M.P. for East Ham, North, during the debate on National Assistance (Increased Rates) in the House of Commons in July, 1962. He was expressing his personal dissatisfaction, and that of the Labour Opposition, with the inadequacy of the increase and concluded by observing: '... We need in this country a Government which will deal more generously and humanely with these people.'

By 'these people', he was referring to approximately 700,000 sick and disabled men reduced to penury amidst a boasted affluence. Mr Prentice had previously said: '... I have heard my right hon. friend, the member for Llanelly (Mr Jim Griffiths) say on more than one occasion that they

have no pressure group to speak for them, as the British Legion speaks for the war pensioners, as the unions speak for the industrially disabled, and as the old-age pensioners' associations speak for their members. This is a small but very important group who have very special problems.'

Doctors are able to diagnose diseases from which they have not suffered personally. Similarly, any politician worth half his parliamentary majority should have the perspicacity to recognize the need for immediate reform in social welfare for the disabled.

Physical disability carries a corresponding degree of psychological change, although the person involved may be unaware of any change except the physical. A totally incapacitated person will find the transition from independence to reliance on the State a brutal and often degrading experience. Subsequent monetary dilemmas aggravate and complicate a personal tragedy, entailing sacrifices from every member of the family. At best, recovery will be retarded, and sufficient cases of suicide and murder in like circumstances are on record to testify to the abnormal stresses a sick and disabled person is subject to.

The majority of the disabled will probably have spent some time in hospital, incurring considerable expenditure on bus fares for families already beset with financial difficulties. The patient frets about the cost of visits by those nearest and dearest to him, but becomes depressed without visitors. A worthy partner will regard a hospital visit as top priority, though the additional strain on the family budget could, if interpreted as a national balance of payments deficit, frighten the most indomitable Chancellor into resigning.

A disabled father with a wife and two children aged ten and fourteen years receives £8 7s. sickness benefit. The National Assistance Board, if applied to, will probably grant an allowance equivalent to the weekly rent; and application of the N.A. scale rates would mean a further 19s. a week. Discretionary allowances may also be granted in respect of various illnesses, but only the blind and those suffering from pulmonary tuberculosis receive a set special allowance. Sufferers from identical complaints may receive dissimilar allowances. As these allowances recognize the fact that various groups have special needs, why are they not afforded the same treatment as the blind and tubercular patient?

Many of the working-class have now achieved a degree of affluence undreamed of fifty years ago. Better houses, refrigerators and other gadgetry, plus individual transport, are becoming progressively commonplace, while those disabled by illness are stranded on an island of poverty and despair amidst this sea of comparative affluence. The Autumn Budget of 1964 gave some overdue alleviation by increasing sickness benefit to £6 15s. for a married couple. But what peculiar yardstick assessed the needs of a single man at £6 15s. a week if he qualifies for a 100 per cent industrial injury benefit? This figure is not too high; sickness benefit for the totally disabled is too low and the disparity completely illogical. Why should the man who sustains a 100 per cent disability on his way to work, or who is totally incapacitated by illness, be the subject of economic discrimination?

There must be few situations more degrading to the dignity of man than the realization that his disability, which has already deprived him of his independence, will eventually demote him to a socially inferior class. A society geared to materialism makes this inevitable. Workmates and neighbours whose respect he had

enjoyed will adjust their relationship and regard him as a species apart. After the initial surge of sympathy, the condition of the afflicted will be readily accepted by all but the patient and his immediate family. Witness the treatment barn-yard fowls mete out to one of their kind who is deformed or crippled! True, our particular brand of civilization would not condone such openly barbarous tactics, because we are more sophisticated and subtle. The result is hardly less cruel if the different mental capacity of man and beast is taken into account. The cripple, human or animal, will withdraw as far as possible from his contemporaries.

One thing, however, can help a man achieve acceptance, and that is the possession of wealth. The grossest deformity of feature or character will not preclude those of reasonable means from the ranks of the gregarious, whereas a person of charm and integrity will find his circle of erstwhile friends greatly diminished when his poverty becomes apparent. Chaucer's observations on the hateful grief of indigence in 'The Man of Law's Prologue' still seem valid when, applied to modern society. '... If you are poor your very brother hates you and all your friends avoid you, sad to say.' Should anyone think that our society is not stiff with social apartheid, he, or she, might prove the point by going to Church wearing clothes no better than a disabled person can afford. The reactions of other Christians will range from condescension to disdain.

What of the effect, psychological and physical, on the children of a disabled parent? Politicians make great play of the desire for equal opportunity. Presumably they mean that all children should be adequately clothed and fed as well as receiving equal education.

Let us think of minimum requirements, and the cost to local authorities who have children boarded out to foster-

parents; not to mention children 'in care' at a cost of £12 a week in some Children's Homes. In my county, foster-parents receive up to 54 shillings per week for one child. In addition, they receive an annual clothing-grant of from £12 to £30, with extra for school uniforms. and special needs. There is a further £3 allowance for holidays. Yet throughout the country there is an acute shortage of foster-parents, and the majority who are fostering children complain that the allowances are insufficient. How, then, does a disabled parent clothe and feed a child over eleven years of age on approximately 24 shillings per week? The answer must be as inadequate as the allowance.

Local Education Authorities give an annual amount to provide some clothing for schoolchildren which, at best, represents only a small proportion of total requirements. Free school meals will be granted if the family income is below a certain level. "This, like the clothing-grant, will be allowed only after the applicant has submitted to a searching means-test, which induces an overwhelming sense of stigma in the applicant who pockets his pride for the welfare of his children.

Under these circumstances, the child of a disabled parent will be recognized by his sub-standard clothing. 'Costly thy habit as thy purse can buy ... For the apparel oft proclaims the man.' Shakespeare's words still retain their point, yet our society is sufficiently callous to allow a child's clothing to identify him as belonging to a socially inferior class.

Holidays do not enter into the scheme of things for such a child. Not for him the £3 allowance from local authorities. He will be obliged to occupy his time as best he may, and be as thankful as his harassed parents when school is resumed.

Christmas is generally regarded as a time when the least indulgent parent will provide some of the enjoyment attributed to a benevolent Santa Claus. What excuses can be offered to the children of a poor family when the gifts from Father Christmas might be mistaken for those of a Scrooge not fully converted. Is parental love supposed to compensate for every material deficiency?

The sum total of the psychological effect on children in these circumstances can only be guessed at, but the answer must be entered in the debit side of our social ledger. At present, the child of a disabled parent has to grow and develop under the guidance of a sick adult; gain sustenance from the cheapest food; wear clothes which advertise his poverty; and learn to resist the temptations which can only be gratified by a modicum of pocket-money. Children have succeeded in spite of such conditions, but in what proportion? A society which condemns its casualties to exist at subsistence level in the midst of affluence is bad enough; but to subject children to such social and economic discrimination is criminal.

One of the greatest factors in moulding public opinion is the press, and many worthy campaigns have been successfully waged through its columns. The export to the continent of Irish horses for slaughter comes to mind; conditions in our prisons and problems facing the ex-convict have covered acres of newsprint. Yet never once have I seen the facts concerning National Assistance presented as they affect the recipient. What can be guaranteed is the comprehensive coverage of isolated cases of fraud concerning National Assistance. On 8 December, 1963 a Sunday newspaper boasting a large circulation actually used the phrase: '...the charity of National Assistance.' Thus, the reader who has little or no knowledge of how National Assistance works is brain-washed to the point where he might be excused for

thinking that the majority who have to ask for this help are scroungers. My personal efforts to interest various editors in the real issues of National Assistance have proved abortive, with the exception of a local weekly.

Television producers who have dealt with a variety of social problems are not interested in the plight of the disabled person drawing National Assistance. The B.B.C. and I.T.V. have politely declined to screen anything to do with the subject. There have been programmes devoted to the problems of prostitutes and homosexuals, but these enlightened purveyors of news and comment shrink from contemplating the horror of so many long-term sick adults in this country who are receiving National Assistance. The press and television apparently share the view that the plight of all those people who receive the 'charity' of N.A. is taboo.

The most cogent indication that existing rates of sickness benefit and National Assistance are insufficient, is the practice of ignoring weekly earnings by recipients up to 40 shillings. The totally disabled are unlikely to benefit from such a rule, whereas a person classified as disabled, but who is so to a lesser degree, may dull the cutting-edge of poverty in certain circumstances. Does not this imply tacit admission by the State that benefits are at least 40 shillings below what is regarded as essential?

It seems ironic that the National Assistance Board was originally designed as a safety net for a very few people who fell outside the provisions of National Insurance. The net is now in need of urgent modification to its mesh. If the Board is going to continue its function-and there is no reason to believe otherwise - would it not be more equitable to ensure that the money available goes to those in greatest need, especially during an economic crisis? This, of course, would be to admit the necessity of

continuing the means-test, but, tempered with reason, pride succumbs to dire need.

A study of three copies of Hansard: 13 July, 1962, 26 November, 1962, and 28 January, 1963, makes it abundantly clear that even Members of Parliament then in Opposition, could not ascertain precisely how the National Assistance Board operates. Discretionary allowances, granted in extreme cases for extra nourishment, clothing grants, and fuel allowances, vary from one district to another. In some areas, the Board's visiting officer may suggest a fuel allowance, but the practice is not general. The timid applicant may hesitate to enquire, even if he knows he is eligible, and many others remain ignorant of possible help.

Surely any person who is forced to apply to the Board for assistance should at least know to what he is entitled.

It is constantly agreed, by people who have never had to apply for National Assistance, that no sense of stigma should be felt by those whom it helps. In fact recipients feel different because they are treated differently and do not receive payments as of right, while the industrially disabled receive benefits-without a means-test-which put their incomes above the National Assistance scale.

It may also be argued that malingering would be encouraged if the State provided benefits that ensure a decent living for the person totally incapacitated by sickness. This presupposes inefficient investigation. But in fact medical boards are even now constantly assessing the degree of disability suffered by industrial casualties and suspected malingerers on sickness benefit. So the necessary machinery is already available and fully operational.

Successive Governments have rightly given much thought to the problems of coloured immigrants in this country. Racial discrimination is deplored by the majority. How much longer then, can any government continue to countenance the economic discrimination between British-born nationals, whereby a married man receiving Industrial Injury Benefit gets £9 5s. per week, and a married man dying of terminal cancer is only entitled to £6 10s. per week? Indefinite acceptance of such inequality is so far removed from the concept of social justice as to be ludicrous.

Conscientious men do not wish to be subsidized idlers; but where is the positive thinking which might ameliorate the present predicament of the disabled? Those who are totally incapacitated by sickness can expect no immediate help other than the social benefits to which they are entitled, and must accept without demur the anomalous differentials. Perhaps the majority accept with equanimity the fact that society has no further use for them, and reconcile themselves to watching the world go by.

Most politicians agree that the best method of helping poor and emergent nations is not really by grants of cash and food but in teaching improved methods of agriculture and industry. In short, teaching them to help themselves. Could not similar thinking be applied to the thousands of our long-term sick? There is surely a percentage who, given the opportunity, could be salvaged and restored to dignity.

What hope has a manual worker of finding alternative employment after surviving a coronary thrombosis, having regard to his reduced physical capacity? Considering the probable age of the man, what chance does our society offer of retraining him in another craft? The subsidized Remploy factories for the handicapped seem to be one good idea to have evolved in this respect since the last

war. But apart from the inadequate number of these factories, they can only employ people above a certain physical standard; a restriction which precludes many who still cherish secret hopes of being salvaged from the scrapheap of human rejects.

The method adopted during the 1939-45 war for assessing the potential of medically down-graded personnel might, for the benefit of all, be written into the National Health Insurance Act, with certain modifications. The degree of disability was first estimated by a medical board. Psychological tests then determined the probable capabilities of the man for re-training in a skill which could best be utilized in a non-combatant unit. In this way, men who through wounds or illness fell short of the standard essential for fighting-units, could still serve the country. Disabled civilians would hardly welcome the rigours of war-time regimentation, but a modified form of this procedure might prove economically viable to the nation, and would have the added advantage of being acclaimed by many disabled people now leading barren, empty lives.

The greatest aspiration of the majority of disabled people is to be able to do a useful job of work and regain lost independence. In many industries a man who becomes redundant through no fault of his own receives severance pay with an opportunity to re-train for another occupation, and the practice seems likely to be extended in the near future. The man who loses his job through sickness is virtually on his own, and although facilities exist, there is no standard procedure for his rehabilitation and retraining. Whatever arguments may be advanced in support of the present system, the fact remains that this treatment of the sick is a form of discrimination as repugnant and effective as an active colour-bar. Arrangements for retraining, and other allied benefits for displaced workers, are negotiated

between governments, employers and unions, but those disabled by sickness are almost forgotten.

Until the sick receive corresponding consideration, the adjective 'civilized' should be regarded as inapplicable to our society. It would at least be a step in the right direction if those who continue to use it could be educated into some awareness of their lack of social comprehension.¹

¹ Besides points made by Mr Brown there appear to be a number of serious anomalies in the present welfare benefits position. Attention is being drawn to these in the national press by Mrs Megan du Boisson and Mrs Berit Moore, co-founders of the Disablement Income Group, which they started in 1965 to publicize the need for a special pension for all physically and mentally disabled people.

The Disablement Income Group proposes a modest basic income, perhaps equivalent to the Old Age Pension and pegged to the cost of living, with supplementary allowances according to the number and situation of dependents and the degree of handicap remaining after treatment and rehabilitation. All the income would be taxable so that it would give the most help to those in need and be minimal for the well-to-do. Schemes like this are already in full operation in Norway and Sweden.

No really useful figures are available about the numbers of disabled people in this country, and their circumstances and cost to the State, so D.I.G. is initiating research into these questions. But they believe their proposals would not be as costly as might appear at first sight. Most people in need are receiving some form of State aid already, and the suggested pension would be integrated with all allowances and grants (see Appendix, p. 161)

The Disablement Income Group maintains that people who cannot work, whatever the cause of their disablement, are still members of society. They should be helped to live in a reasonable degree of dignity and independence in their own homes for as long as possible. D.I.G. insists that this is a matter not just of compassion but also of common sense.

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