

Stuart's political diary

Stuart Morgan-Ayrs



Spring 2015 has brought us a royal baby, a terrible disaster in Nepal and hanging over all of it, a general election with undercurrents and nuances largely suppressed with febrile sound bites and ‘spin’ on all sides.

Our own treasured area of healthcare and wellness has been a significant battleground, with the National Health Service (NHS) being ‘weaponized’ and used for political point-scoring. Those of us who work in wider care and healthcare are all too aware of the false distinction of arguing about the NHS, when regulatory issues, care in the community and benefits sanctions are all directly impacting the poor patients and contributing to crisis in many lives. ‘Calum’s List’, an online website summarizing the personal tragedies of 60 people who have died as a result of benefit ‘sanctions’, is a sobering account of the lack of joined-up thinking and human empathy in the previous coalition government’s version of ‘society’ (<http://calumslist.org/calums-list/>). Rather than ‘Big Society’, we appear to be experiencing a fractured society, with victimization of groups and lack of care for the most vulnerable.

The House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee (2015) made scathing comments about the lack of scrutiny applied to cases of claimant death, with Chair Dame Ann Begg commenting:

We have asked DWP [the Department of Work and Pensions] to confirm the number of internal peer reviews in which the claimant was subject to a benefit sanction at the time of death, and the result of these reviews in terms of changes to DWP policy. It is important that all agencies involved in the provision of public services are scrutinized, to ensure that lessons are learned after members of the public are let down by the system, particularly where the failures of a public body may have contributed to a death. We believe that a new independent body should be established to fulfil this role.

Unfortunately, as the report also mentions, many recommendations have already been made by previous reports, and there is a failure to implement the changes that have *already* been recommended, leaving it debatable as to whether we should hope for real change now.

Meanwhile, David Sparks, the head of the Local Government Association, described social care funding in England and Wales as being in a ‘ridiculous situation’ (Perraudin, 2015). Councils have faced unequal cuts in areas across the regions, leaving key services such as care for the elderly being slashed. This has been well publicized as a key cause of ‘bed blocking’, a cold sounding term which seems to imply blame on service users left in desperate straits by the system.

The Alliance for Counselling and Psychotherapy has taken a stand on these issues, and its letter published in the *Guardian* on Friday 17 April 2015 called for recognition of the damage that austerity and a malign benefits regime are having on the most vulnerable. With an astounding 6500 ‘shares’ on the *Guardian* website, the letter also warned again of the Conservative plans to link state therapy to benefits receipt, with the danger of compulsory therapy enforced through the threat of benefit ‘sanctions’ rearing its ugly head again in their election manifesto. If it were not bemusing enough that the government thinks Job Centres are appropriate therapeutic venues for Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) provision, rather than a place of fear and anxiety, the idea of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) provision to adapt the claimant’s perception and behaviour to being more conducive to being a ‘striver’ and not a malingerer is literally mind-boggling.

Meanwhile, Britain’s Conservative Party has repeatedly refused to explain where the axe will fall in achieving the declared ‘savings’ in benefits, while leaked hints point to reducing the ‘in work’ benefits such as working tax credits. On this scenario, claimants of ‘out of work’ benefits would have less money to survive on if the compulsory therapy were to magic them back into the low-paid workforce. The Labour opposition declares loudly that ‘It does not have to be this way’, yet have signed up for massive budget cuts and austerity too, with only the Green Party, Plaid Cymru and the Scottish National Party providing an alternative strategy to austerity.

In other news, mindfulness has been recommended in *The Lancet*, and heralded in the *Guardian* on 21 April (Boseley, 2015) as a significant alternative to medication, but criticized on the same day, in the same paper, as ‘hype’ (Burnett, 2015). It would appear that even though the study published in *The Lancet* was a clinical trial complete with control group and a sizeable number of participants (424) from GP surgeries, Burnett questions the validity of Mindfulness-based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) claims because of the quality of research. One interesting point is made, however, that mindfulness is not a well-defined area since it is sometimes presented as part of Buddhism, and sometimes as part of MBCT or other secular therapies. It is of course threatening to the biomedically biased establishment that there might be variance or variety in the field!

Meanwhile in Scotland, resistance continues to the Scottish government’s plans to appoint named persons to all children in Scotland, which plan continues to cause controversy. The idea is to provide each child with a named person from whom to seek support in the event of abuse or neglect. As campaigners such as the organization No2NP point out, this is tantamount to having a state spy in each family in Scotland. Since the named people are all in education or healthcare, this also means a certain kind of viewpoint being held by the new ‘protectors’. During a trial, a head teacher was appointed to a child whose main issue was non-attendance at school, making for a farcical conflict of interest. As well as implying an assumption of probable guilt, rather than trusting parents, the scheme also threatens

to overload social services with false accusations and time wasting, which inevitably will lead to vulnerable children waiting longer for assistance.

At the time of writing, Russell Brand has just endorsed the Labour Party and the general election is just three days away. By the time it is read, it will be fascinating, and possibly scary, to see what the outcome has been.

Notes on contributor

Stuart Morgan-Ayrs has been in clinical practice since 1993, currently in Scotland. With a range of post-qualification training, including an M.Sc. in Psychology, he is a Fellow of the Royal Scottish Society of Arts, the Royal Society of Public Health, and the Institute of Health Promotion and Education, and an associate fellow of the Royal Society of Medicine. He can be contacted via his blog and website – www.psychanalysis.center

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