

PAP NEWS ISSUE 21 2015

Welcome again to PAP News. The Penal Affairs Panel of the Unitarians brings you news of issues of criminal justice, Human Rights, police and prisons. Follow the links for fuller information.

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1 Criminal Courts Charges Abandoned for Xmas The Justice Secretary, Michael Gove, announced on 3.12.15 that the controversial criminal courts charges would be stopped at the end of the month. The charges introduced by his predecessor, Chris Grayling, raised opposition from very many organisations and caused the resignation of about 50 lay magistrates. Mr. Gove has since suggested that the magistrates who had resigned might be invited to rejoin the magistracy. See www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/tax-on-justice-michael-gove-scraps-criminal-courts-charges-after-independent-campaign-a6758616.html

2 Civil Court Fees Almost Doubled in 2015 A raft of new civil court fees has been introduced since an announcement in July that the Government hopes to raise at least £60 million. Some fees have doubled. Fees for the issue of divorce proceedings have risen from £410 to £550. It has been pointed out that divorce fees are now more than twice the cost of the fees for marriage. The fees increases are not without controversy as the Ministry of Justice has also revealed that the cost to a Court of the average divorce is £270. See www.lawgazette.co.uk/law/moj-proposes-new-round-of-court-fee-rises/5050176.fullarticle

3 Prison Incentives Scheme Further Revised The Ministry of Justice's relaxations of the restrictions on books for prisoners in February 2015 has been followed by the changing and some easing of other restrictions. The current system of making changes to the Incentives Scheme is the issue of PSIs (Prison Service Instructions). See www.justice.gov.uk/downloads/offenders/psipso/psi-2013/psi-30-2013-1.doc

4 New Planning Restrictions on Travellers and Gypsies A new Planning Policy for Travellers Sites was issued at the end of August and probably drew more attention because it was issued on a Bank Holiday rather than on a working day. The policy restricts both temporary and permanent use by Travellers and Gypsies of land in Green Belts. It has been described as punishment of these communities for the failure of local authorities to provide transit and permanent sites. The same policy provisions had been vetoed by the Liberal Democrats when in the Coalition Government. The policies are expected to result in legal action on both equality and human rights grounds. See www.irr.org.uk/news/new-government-measures-on-gypsies-and-travellers-on-a-collision-course-with-human-rights/

5 Manifesto Bill of Rights Postponed to "Next Summer" Michael Gove, the Justice Secretary, has announced the publication of the Rights Bill will not take place until the middle of 2016. The Government proposes to replace the Human Rights Act, 1998. See www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/british-bill-of-rights-to-be-fast-tracked-into-law-by-next-summer-a6698261.html

6 Snoopers' Charter Bill Returns The Draft Communications Data Bill vetoed by the Liberal Democrats as part of the Coalition Government has been reintroduced by Theresa May, the Home Secretary in the solely Conservative Government, as the Draft Investigatory Powers Bill. Some concessions have been made but many issues which caused great hostility 10 months ago are again proposed. These include a lack of judicial oversight of the issue of warrants and the demand for encryption details with the demand for some information. An threat to block the new Bill in the House of Lords seems likely to cause constitutional conflict with the House of Commons. See www.newstatesman.com/science-tech/2015/11/return-snoopers-charter-what-expect-investigatory-powers-bill

7 Terror Threats Being Used to Curtail Human Rights Human Rights Day on 10.12.15 saw allegations that anti-terror legislation is being used across the world to reduce Human Rights, not least in the UK. Journalists and lawyers are being subjected to the new legal powers, it is alleged, to reduce freedoms of expression and communication. The Law Society's President, Jonathan Smithers, wrote to The Times on 9.12.16, pointing out the attacks on defending lawyers in many countries. See www.lawgazette.co.uk/law/terror-threats-used-to-curtail-human-rights-activist-warns/5052685.article?utm_source=dispatch&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=GAZ101215 and www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/opinion/letters/article4636727.ece

8 Punishment in England and Wales Prisons Rising Fast Just as the number of prison officers has reduced, the number of breaches of prison rules referred to formal disciplinary proceedings has grown by 47% in the past five years. In 2014 – 15, prisoners were given over 150,000 extra prison days under "adjudications", the internal prison system for dealing with minor offences such disobedience or disrespect. Solitary confinement or up to 42 extra days can be imposed at a hearing. The number of extra days imposed on children in custody has almost doubled in two years whilst the number of children has fallen by half. The Howard League has called for extra prison days to be imposed in only "the most serious cases." See www.howardleague.org/punishment-in-prison/

9 Arrests of Children Falling Quickly The number of arrests of children by police officers has fallen from 246,000 in 2010 to 112,000 in 2014. This good news reflects a major change in policy from arresting, processing, cautioning or prosecuting children for all but the most minor offences to a policy of diverting children out of the criminal justice system. See www.howardleague.org/child-arrests-fall-by-54percent/

10 "A Vision for our Future"- November Meeting at Upper Chapel Sheffield Have you been following the discussions on the future of our Unitarian Movement at your chapel and in The Inquirer? There were 90 Unitarians at the meeting on 20.11.15. The Executive Committee would like to hear your views in preparation for the 2016 General Assembly. The members of the Penal Affairs Panel do not share the Executive Committee's thoughts that social action is not a "primary purpose" for future Unitarians. Please do write or email the Executive Committee at Essex Hall or on www.unitarian.org.uk

11 Will you invite the PAP to visit? Tony Cann went to the Hull Unitarians in November to talk about Immigration. If you would like to discuss the work of the PAP or a particular issue, do write to bruce_chilton@hotmail.com

Social responsibility is religion in action