



## MONTHLY MEETINGS 2013-14

Islington U3A was launched in October 2013 and a programme of monthly meetings began in November of that year. Every month except August and December, we invite a high profile, interesting and entertaining speaker. We have been very fortunate indeed in our speakers - as even those unable to attend will have seen from the reports on our website. So that these will not disappear into history, we've gathered them together enabling members to re-visit as suits them. The reports here cover meetings to the end of the iU3A year in September 2014. A second compendium covers October 2014 to September 2015, and 2015-16 and subsequent years will follow.

The reports appearing below are almost exactly what appeared on the website immediately after each meeting. So they should be read in context - for example, we did after all have an election in 2015. But all of the talks remain highly topical overall and well worth a second visit...

### November 2013 David Aaronovitch

#### Can anyone win the general election?



David, writer and broadcaster, said there's going to be blood on the carpet when the election comes around in May 2015. In the meantime the fortunes of the Conservative and Labour parties will fluctuate with sometimes one suffering set-backs and then the other. "It's a weird sort of bobbing up and down dance," said Aaronovitch. But none of this matters, he said. It's just inhaling and exhaling, showing that the body politic is alive. The Conservative message is that things are looking up and if the other side get

in, recovery will be in jeopardy; Labour says give money to the poor but be tough on scroungers. While the Lib Dems say they can insert their agenda into the larger parties, but they no longer represent the protest vote, according to Aaronovitch. "The two finger vote is entirely with the fourth party in Britain, UKIP, and 'Farage' is now a verb, meaning to concoct a windy image of how things could be.

The Tories made a big mistake in giving up on boundary reform "It was really stupid, but done by intelligent people," he said.

We still have a first past the post voting system that works when there are two strong parties, but can result in extraordinary results, like George Galloway winning in Bethnal Green with 33 per cent of the vote. We discuss British politics as if we were on the moon and not part of the rest of the world. So much is interconnected and we should remember that when migrants from Africa land on a little Italian island it is part of our world and we need to deal with it.

**January 2014 Kristina Glenn**

### **Combatting poverty and isolation in Islington**

Kristina, Director, Cripplegate Foundation and Islington Giving talked about Islington Giving, a campaign that asks wealthy local residents and businesses to give money or time to make a real difference to the community.



She said there are 'two Islingtons', one successful, vibrant and prosperous, the other poor and disadvantaged. The borough is one of the most densely populated in the UK and has the least open space. It has the highest level of serious mental illness in England, 15,000 children living in families where nobody has a paid job and the 4<sup>th</sup> highest level of older people living in poverty in

England. 44% of residents are in social housing alongside those living in properties with some of the highest prices in the country. Being aware of these facts, Islington Giving was set up by a coalition of local trusts and

businesses who recognised that it is through the sum of our parts that the most can be achieved for Islington. It funds projects that invest in young people, tackle poverty and confront isolation.

Young teenagers were consulted about their concerns and they said that there was nowhere for them to go on Saturday evenings. In response, Islington Giving is funding the Sobell Centre in Holloway to provide youth club activities each weekend.

One of Islington's most deprived housing estates is situated opposite the Kings' Cross development. Islington Giving persuaded the developers to accommodate a 'Skip Garden' that could be moved about as the development proceeded. This garden provides opportunities for secondary school children who live in Islington or who attend an Islington school to develop proposals for projects and seek funding for them from local businesses. An example is



their beekeeping. The hives are located not only at the Skip Garden but also in the roof gardens of local businesses. The young people collect the honey, bottle it and sell it to the employees.

Also, Islington Giving funds Islington Age UK to run events for older people who are isolated and lack the confidence to make new contacts to meet each other and make new friends.

## **February 2014 Dr Gillian Greenough**

### **Rethinking Islington's health services**

Local GP and Chair of Islington Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG), Gillian explained that the CCG is a membership organisation that is led by local GPs and is responsible for commissioning all health services in Islington other than specialist services and services provided by GPs, dentists, optometrists and pharmacists, which are the responsibility of NHS England. She said that the CCG's decisions are driven by clinical evidence and the health and wellbeing needs of the local population.



Gillian identified key health challenges in Islington and outlined the CCG's key objectives: giving all children the best start in life, improving mental health and wellbeing, and enhancing the quality of life for people in the borough with long term conditions such as diabetes. In doing so the CCG was building on the work of the Islington Primary Trust, its predecessor

body, and continuing their ten-year collaboration with Islington Council's Public Health, Children and Adult Services departments. The CCG also worked collaboratively with Whittington Health, University College Hospital and the Mental Health Trust, community and voluntary organisations, as well as many other NHS bodies.

Significant achievements in outcomes for patients had been achieved through better detection of long term conditions, a successful programme to reduce smoking prevalence and a range of other innovative services. As a result, the gap between Islington's under 75 mortality rate from cardiovascular disease and that for England as a whole had significantly narrowed.

Gillian encouraged members to get involved in influencing the development of local health services by joining the CCGs or their GP practices' Patients' Forum and by attending the CCGs Governing Body meetings.

### **March 2014    Quentin Peel**

#### **What sort of Europe does Germany want? And what does it mean for the UK?**

Quentin, the Financial Times's former Associate Editor and Chief correspondent in Germany, said that the European debate in Germany was influenced both by the Eurozone crisis and also by the longer-lasting and still unfinished process of German Unification. Also, as in Britain, France and the Netherlands, there was a rise of Eurosceptic views and the Alternative fuer Deutschland party was expecting to win seats in the European parliament for the first time. It would be interesting to see what impact a large nationalist/Eurosceptic faction in the European parliament would have on EU policy making, and the Eurozone crisis resolution process?



He asked the audience whether they recognised the significance of an image of a right and left hand pointing downwards with their thumbs and index fingers adjacent to each other. Nobody did. He said that in Germany this would be instantly recognisable because it was the way Angela Merkel holds her hands when she is speaking and in last year's election it had

been used to symbolise her on Christian Democratic Union (CDU) posters. She is known in Germany as 'Mutti' and indeed, there is a lot of praise for her potato soup, her beef loaf and especially her plum cake.

Mrs Merkel grew up in East Berlin and studied physics. Quentin said that she is a very cautious politician who likes to consider all sides of an issue before she makes up her mind. She is the first former citizen of the German Democratic Republic to lead the reunited Germany and the first woman to lead Germany since it became a modern nation-state in 1871.

Quentin said that the new grand coalition of Christian Democrats and Social Democrats differs from the CDU-Free Democrat coalition of the past four years and it was not yet clear what impact that would have on the relationship between Germany and France at the centre of the EU.

Mrs Merkel became deeply afraid of dogs after she was bitten in the mid 90s. When she visited the Kremlin for the first time as chancellor, Vladimir Putin gave her a plush toy dog as a gift. But Putin didn't stop there. The next meeting, at his summer residence on the Black Sea, he let in his black Labrador Kony, an intimidating species. Merkel sat frozen, and pictures show Putin with a sardonic grin on his face, legs widely stretched. This is not something that Mrs Merkel is likely to forget.

Quentin pointed out that David Cameron was relying on Mrs Merkel to support his plans to repatriate some powers from Brussels to Westminster. In Quentin's view, while she would prefer to keep the UK her support could not be taken for granted and British politicians would be wise to pay much more attention to the policy debates in Germany and the rest of Europe, if they wish to influence the European debate.

The likely compromise would be for a more integrated eurozone core of the EU, and a less integrated outer ring. Is it a practicable solution, maintaining the single market but with two sets of rules? And who apart from the UK wants to be a member of the outer zone in perpetuity? How could it be negotiated?

## **April 2014 Professor Sophie Scott**

### **The Science of Laughter**



Sophie, Deputy Director of the Institute of Cognitive Neuroscience at University College London is a specialist in speech, language and communication. In her spare time, she is a stand-up comedian, so she is no stranger to making people laugh. Sophie decided to study laughter because it is as important for human relationships as other non-verbal behaviour but more fun. Indeed

there are six facial expressions that are universally recognised, and laughter is the only positive one amongst them

Research shows that we laugh many more times each day than we think we do and that not surprisingly, we laugh more in our conversations with our friends and family than in other situations. In her own research Sophie was looking at how people distinguish true laughter from false smiles.

Sophie illustrated her talk with video clips of people laughing at funny situations. These amply showed how infectious laughter is as they had us rolling in the aisle and we finished the morning feeling exhilarated. Thank you Sophie.

## **May 2014 Professor Sir Graeme Catto,**

### **Choice at the end of life**

Tackling a difficult subject with calm, reason and flashes of humour, Graeme, who is Chair of Dignity in Dying, pointed out that albeit that we are

living longer, many people end their lives with chronic health conditions and some 60% of us die in hospital and under direct medical care. This is not what most of us would choose and creates challenges that were much less frequent in the past. In particular it can deprive some hospital patients of choice. Anomalously, patients receiving treatment can refuse it if they feel that life has become intolerable, but terminally ill patients have no equivalent choice even if their pain relief is ineffective. Graeme quoted figures suggesting that most people believe that they should be able to choose the time and place of their death, but the much smaller number who oppose this do so with strongly held views.



Graeme believes that mentally competent adults who are terminally ill should be able to choose an assisted death if it is their clear and settled wish. He tackles the three main arguments against this - it would be a slippery slope, it would be a threat to vulnerable individuals, it might lead to wrong decisions based on incorrect prognosis - essentially by pointing out that it hasn't happened elsewhere. The law varies in different countries (Belgium, Holland and Switzerland all have law in this area) but in Oregon, USA, which has the law closest to what he would like to see in the UK, the law has not been modified since introduction, is in fact taken up in a small fraction of deaths, and has generated no controversial cases.

Graeme then told us about Lord Falconer's Assisted Dying Bill, which will be debated in the House of Lords this summer. He thought the Lords were quite finely balanced on the issue but that the Commons were strongly opposed, reflecting the weight of opinion expressed to them. However he still hoped that what in his view was needed change would come in time.

**June 2014 Lynne Berry**

### **Revolutions on the canals and waterways**

Lynne, Deputy Chair of the Canal and River Trust, talked enthusiastically about the series of revolutions set in motion by the development of

England's canals and waterways. She traced their history back to 1425 and marvelled at 'canal mania' in the 1790s when horse drawn barges were the rapid transport of their day.



The industrial revolution relied on the canals to carry heavy goods like coal, iron and bricks around the country. But the waterways were also adept at handling delicate glass or china. Catherine the Great of Russia ordered a dinner service from Wedgwood and it was delivered to her in St Petersburg by inland waterways and sea - without a single breakage.

Gangs of navigators or 'navvies' were employed to dig more waterways. Fly boats worked through the night and steam boats were developed to speed water transport. But the development of the railways marked the decline of the canals.

The last regular narrow boat contract to deliver supplies to a jam factory only ended in 1971. But people have always lived and worked on the canals. The Rolling Stones' Ronnie Wood was the first of his family to be born on land. His family had all been bargees or water gypsies.

In 1949 The Inland Waterways Association was formed to fight the closure of canals and campaign for their restoration. The movement gained celebrity supporters including Margot Fonteyn, Peter Scott and Sir Malcolm Sargent. Later, the Waterways Restoration Group advertised for volunteers with the slogan 'Come and have a dirty weekend with the waterways'. About 500 miles of canals were restored and in 1968 Barbara Castle's Transport Act recognised canals role in providing leisure.



Now the 'People's Waterways' is the largest third sector organisation in the county. We can all do our part in making it work," said Lynne. She urged us to get involved with our local canals or the London Canal Museum near Kings Cross.

Answering questions after the talk, Lynne emphasised that canals were for shared use between walkers, cyclists, and boat owners. There are now more boats on the canals than there were at the height of their commercial success - but most of them don't go very far, she said.

## **July 2014 Lord Tony Giddens**

### **Turbulent and Mighty Continent: What Future for Europe?**



Tony was the 1999 Reith lecturer and Director of the London School of Economics, where he is now Emeritus Professor. Tony is a passionate pro-European, yet he cited Winston Churchill's 1946 Zurich speech as one of the most influential speeches on Europe ever made. But Churchill did not regard Britain as part of Europe and thought it would always look to the open seas rather

than the continent of Europe.

Tony regrets the inwardness of much contemporary debate on Europe. He argues that the European Union strengthens both Europe and its individual nation states including Britain, by promoting prosperity, peace in Europe, and what he calls 'sovereignty plus'.

This turns on its head the idea that Britain must stand alone to maintain its sovereignty. Instead Britain gains more power for itself by being within Europe as membership of the EU gives it added weight on the world stage, he said. Europe must be able to stand alongside other world powers such as China and the U.S.

Tony does have sympathy for aspects of populist anti-European feeling; he would like to see more democratic accountability in Europe and decries the lack of leadership. His view is that the current system promotes horse-trading behind closed doors and that Germany presently wields too much influence.

The imminent Scottish referendum could have a profound effect on England's relationship with Europe and other parts of the UK should the Scots decide on independence and stay in Europe. Pro-independence sentiment might gain ground in Wales and Northern Ireland should a referendum result in an 'English' vote to leave the EU. He worries that the public will not be well informed enough to decide in any future referendum on Britain leaving the EU.



Of course Britain could survive outside the EU – and he cites Canada as a good model for independence. But there is no going back to the world of the 1950s. The world is now integrated with the horizontal power of the internet and social media as well as the vertical classical political structures, he said.

If Britain left the EU, he said: “It will be the opposite of the Nigel Farage world of beer and fags. Britain would have to trade across the world and engage with a lot of countries”. Tony argues strongly that Britain should stay within the EU to retain its influence over the wider world. “We need a more committed democratic European Union.”

## September 2014 Professor Joe Cain

### Evolution Now



Joe is Professor of History and Philosophy of Biology at University College London and an expert in the history of evolutionary biology and a huge fan of the dinosaurs of Crystal Palace.

He told the meeting that when the vast glasshouse was moved from Hyde Park, where it was the centre piece of the 1851 Great Exhibition, to the 200-acre South London park, it had the wow factor of a Disneyland.

The parkland had 22,000 fountain heads – more than Versailles – and the 500-metre long crystal building was crammed with fascinating copies of treasures from around the globe and across the ages, including Egyptian, mediaeval, renaissance and Babylonian artefacts. The sphinx that guarded the entrance is still in the park.

Visitors were invited to walk from the building at the top of the hill down a slope to the lakes where water from the fountains collected to be pumped up the hill again and feed the fountains. Some of the 33 life sized dinosaur models were half-submerged in the water, and as the water level dropped, they appeared to rise out of the swamp.

The build up to the opening of the park in 1854 was helped when a party of journalists were treated to a New Year's Eve dinner held inside the mould used to make the Iguanodon.



But as well as the theatricality, so necessary for the private company to lure the masses to the park, the venture had a more serious educational mission to appeal to the middle classes. The statues were organised according to time: primitive amphibians crawling out of the water; marine reptiles; dinosaurs; simple mammals; ice age mammals; and finally later mammals. They appealed to the Victorian ideal of progress.

They were modelled out of concrete laid over brick and metal outline structures by Benjamin Waterhouse Hawkins, the assistant superintendent of the 1851 Great Exhibition. These life sized 3D statues tested Victorian science and imagination. Some of the statues show the bony substructure of the creatures and give a glimpse of the way Waterhouse Hawkins had to work using only small bone fragments as his starting point. Some of the models show features that the scientists of the day were just beginning to understand, and were unknown to the public.

Overall, they present a view of our planet's history being much longer than previous generations had understood. This caused no religious controversy:

most 'modern Victorians' just wanted to match the biblical narrative to the emerging scientific one.



The models were restored in 2002, and upgraded to Grade I listed in 2007. But they are now in need of more work. Joe is a member of the Friends of Crystal Palace Dinosaurs that is lobbying Bromley Council which owns the dinosaurs.

He urged us to take the Overground train to Crystal Palace and see the dinosaurs for ourselves, "I go every week or two. It is a joy to visit."