

DICK WHITTINGTON
AND
HIS WORK CAPABILITY ASSESSMENT

A Pantomime in One Act

by

Brighton Benefits Campaign

Logical Integrated Medical Assessment (LIMA)

Brighton Benefits Campaign originally created the pantomime 'Dick Whittington & His Work Capability Assessment' for the second national day of action against welfare cuts. Claimants and campaigners focused on the role played by Atos Healthcare, a private company paid millions to force sick and disabled people off benefits and onto the dole queue.

The contract to perform medical assessments for the Department of Work and Pensions was originally awarded to Atos under the Labour government, and recently renewed by the Coalition to the tune of £300 million. Atos is currently undertaking assessments of all those on Incapacity Benefit for its replacement, Employment and Support Allowance (ESA).

Atos is a multinational IT company, and one many questionable aspects of its operations is the use made of its LIMA software to assess the claimant's ability to work. During the interview, the assessor asks the claimant a series of questions, and then uses the computer to construct sentences which resemble what the claimant has said. The company does not need to employ doctors to perform assessments because the testing is based on 'disability analysis'. There is no medical examination as such, and the recommendations of GPs and specialists are frequently ignored.

The computer-generated sentences are often incorrect and sometimes downright surreal, such as 'the client's amputation of upper limb is mild'. Another claimant was recorded as doing pottery all day because she had said she spent all day pottering about. Yet this is how the points are awarded that can lead to a severely disabled or even dying person being told that they can work. Nearly half of these decisions are overturned on appeal, but Atos can call a sick person back again for another assessment after only a few months.

Atos will not reveal the logic that connects the computer-generated sentence to the scoring system because of 'commercial confidentiality'. What is clear however, is that the assessment does not measure claimants' degree of disability. The DWP say that it is to assess what you can do, rather than what you cannot, but in practice it provides an excuse for forcing the sick and disabled off benefits. This is how Atos, and the other private providers in the 'benefits industry', make their profits.

Despite complaints and damning reports from agencies such as the Citizens Advice Bureau, in November 2010 Atos had a £300 million contract renewed for three more years, and will receive more millions to develop yet another computer based test for a new benefit – the Personal Independence Payment (PIP) - which will replace Disability Living Allowance.

Cuts and privatisation go hand-in-hand. While claimants see their benefits slashed or support removed altogether, Atos continues to profit from them. It is time to demand the dismissal of Atos and a return to a professional medical service, publicly run and not for profit.

Brighton Benefits Campaign
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Dramatis Personae

Dick Whittington
a high-flyer now fallen on hard times

Examining Medical Practitioner
a health care professional who has sold out

Computer
an entity created to force the disabled off benefits

Audience
sundry friends & comrades leading the responses

Two people hold a banner saying ATOS HEALTHCARE TESTING CENTRE. Behind them a table representing a desk stands centre stage, a chair on each side of it. The EXAMINING MEDICAL PRACTITIONER sits at the desk leafing through some papers.

The actor playing the COMPUTER walks up and down in front of the banner and addresses the audience in the manner of a fairground barker, calling for a sick or disabled 'volunteer' to be tested. Having selected DICK, he directs him to sit down.

DICK walks slowly, leaning heavily on a crutch, his stump held out, to the seat on the other side of the table. As he does so, the people holding the banner move to the back of the stage.

EMP: Good morning Mr Whittington.

DICK: Good morning Doctor.

EMP: Doctor? (to audience) No, we don't need those.

DICK: I thought this was a *medical* assessment for my benefit.¹

EMP: Tut Tut Tut. A doctor would look at your illness, and at what you *can't* do, Mr Whittington. (to audience) We look at what you *can* do!

DICK: But...didn't you get the letter from my GP?

EMP: Oh yes, of course. But we throw those in the bin!

DICK: (*confused*) Then how are you going to know what's the matter with me?

EMP: You will be assessed by Atos Healthcare's Computer System. Modern, Objective and Logical.

C jumps forward, making DICK almost fall off his chair.

C: EX-TRE-ME-LY-LO-GI-CAL-IN-DE-ED.

DICK: God almighty! What the hell is that?

C: I-AM-A-TOS-HEALTH-CA-RE'S-LO-GI-CAL-IN-TE-GRA-TED-ME-DI-CAL-SYS-TEM.

I-AM-THE-COM-PUT-ER.

I-DO-THE-ASS-ESS-MENT.

EMP: (*cross*) No, I do the assessment.

C: (*with contempt*) NO-I-DO-THE-ASS-ESS-MENT.
YOU-JUST-ASK-THE-QUESTIONS.
FIRST-QUES-TION-PLEASE.

Embarrassed, EMP makes a gesture of silent appeal to the AUDIENCE, then turns back to her papers.

EMP: You appear to have had many illnesses Mr Whittington.
Which do you find the most troublesome?

DICK: Depression.

EMP: And what medication do you take for it?

DICK: (*takes a piece of paper from his pocket & read slowly*)
Sit-allo-pram sixty mi...mi...milligrams.

C: SIT-IN-A-PRAM-SIX-TY-MILL...?
A-HA! CIT-A-LO-PRAM-SIX-TY-MILL-I-GRAMS!
THE-CU-STO-MER'S-ME-DI-CA-TI-ON-IS-MILD.
ME-DI-CA-TI-ON-IS-MILD.ⁱⁱ

EMP: But Computer! 60 mg!!

C: THE-CUS-TO-MER-STATES-DE-PRE-SSION-BUT-ME-DI-CA-TI-ON-IS-MILD.

EMP: (*silently appeals to the audience but returns to the papers*)
Er...perhaps we can move on Mr Whittington.
Do you...do you have other problems that affect you?

DICK raises his stump. EMP looks at it & then at him with raised brows, then turns to the audience with an exaggerated shrug.

DICK: (*losing patience*) I lost me hand!

EMP: That was very careless of you!
How on earth did you do that?

DICK: (*miserably*) I fell over the cat.

C: THE-CUS-TO-MER-AM-PU-TA-TION-IS-MILD.
AM-PU-TA-TION-IS-MILD.ⁱⁱⁱ

EMP: (*to the audience*) Boys and girls, do you think that the computer is right?

AUD: No!

EMP: Let's have a look at that stump, shall we?

AUD: Yes!

EMP: (*standing and leaning forward to look at the stump, adjusting her glasses*)
Mr Whittington, do you think you could use this stump at all?

DICK: (angry) What kind of a stupid question is that?
What could I do with a stump?

EMP: As a paperweight for instance?

DICK: (*very slowly*) I suppose I could ...

C: A-HA!

EMP and Dick turn to stare at C

THE-CUS-TO-MER-IS-ABLE-TO-USE-THE-STUMP.
THE-CUS-TO-MER-CAN-WORK!

EMP: (*still standing*) Computer... are you sure?

C: WE-DON'T-LOOK-AT-WHAT-THE-CUS-TO-MER-CAN-NOT-DO
WE-LOOK-AT-WHAT-THE-CUS-TO-MER-CAN-DO
THE-CUS-TO-MER-IS-A-BLE-TO-USE-THE-STUMP
NEXT-QUES-TION-PLEASE

As C speaks the EMP sits down slowly and covers eyes for a moment, then sighs and returns to the papers resignedly.

EMP: Mr Whittington, do you have any hobbies?

DICK: Hobbies?

EMP: Do you have any pets for instance?

DICK: Not any more. I did use to have a (*pause*)goldfish.

C: A-HA!

EMP and DICK turn to the computer

C: THE-CU-STO-MER-IS-ABLE-TO-TAKE-A-DE-QUATE-CARE-OF-HIS-GOLD-FISH. ^{iv}

AUD: Boo!

DICK: Well, actually... My goldfish died last month. I couldn't feed it for days.

C: *(with obviously fake pity)* AHHHHH...
THE-CUS-TO-MER-WAS-ABLE-TO-BU-RY-A-DEAD-GOLD-FISH!

DICK: *(upset)* I flushed it down the loo!

C: THE-CU-STO-MER-WAS-ABLE-TO-FLUSH-A-DEAD-GOLD-FISH-DOWN-THE-TOI-LET!
NO-PRO-BLEM-WITH-DE-PRE-SSION
NO-PRO-BLEM-WITH-STUMP...

EMP: *(standing)* This is too silly computer. I will override your decision!

The EMP tries to catch hold of C's mouse. The computer walks backward, trying not to be touched.

C: THINK-CA-RE-FUL-LY!
I-HAVE-BEEN-TESTED-YOU-HAVE-NOT

EMP: *(to the audience)* Please help me decide boys and girls! Should I override the computer?

AUD: Yes! Yes! You can do it!

C: OH-NO-SHE-CAN-NOT!

AUD: Oh yes she can!

C: OH-NO-SHE-CAN-NOT!

AUD: Oh yes she can!

C hides behind DICK'S chair.

C: NO-YOU-CAN'T!
NOT-ANY-MORE.

EMP: *(standing with her hand out)* Why not?

C: YOU-HAVE-A-TAR-GET-OF-46-MI-NU-TES-PER-ASS-ESS-MENT.
THERE-IS-NO-TIME-FOR-MORE-QUES-TIONS^V
NO-TIME-FOR-MORE-QUES-TIONS
NO-TIME-FOR-MORE-QUES-TIONS...

As C carries on triumphantly the EMP puts her hands over her ears and leans down to speak to DICK.

EMP: Mr Whittington, you'll hear about your benefit by post.

C: (to *DICK*) COM-PUT-ER-SAYS-NO!
NOW-YOUR-BEN-I-FIT-WILL-BE-CUT-OFF...
JUST-LIKE-YOUR-HAND!(with chopping motion)

DICK looks distressed and wipes his eyes as he stands up.

AUD: Aw!

EMP: Goodbye Mr Whittington.

The EMP goes to shake DICK's hand and after several false starts she finally shakes the stump. DICK and the EMP turn to exit in different directions.

EMP: (loudly to *C* as she leaves) Behave or I'll unplug you!

EMP exits. DICK is walking slowly off. C stands still.

C: THE-CUS-TO-MER-MADE-GOOD-EYE-CONTACT
THE-CUS-TO-MER-DID-NOT-LOOK-DE-PRE-SSED
THE-CU-STO-MER-WAS-ABLE-TO-DRIVE-TO-THE-ME-DI-CAL-CEN-TRE^{vi}

DICK: (turns) Hang on, no, I didn't!

C: THE-CUS-TO-MER-HAS-NO-PRO-BLEM-WITH-HEA-RING

DICK: (furious) Oh shut up!

DICK exits
C comes forward and addresses the audience.

C: (slowly as if trying out the words) BOYS-AND-GIRLS....
I-THINK-THE-EXAM-INING-MED-ICAL-PRACTITIONER-SHOULD-LOSE-HER-JOB
DO-YOU-NOT-THINK-SO?
I-DO-EVERY-THING
I-DO-THE-ASS-ESS-MENT
I-ASK-THE-QUES-TIONS

AUD: No!

C: BOYS-AND-GIRLS-I-KNOW-YOU-LOVE-COMPUTER
YOU-LOVE-COM-PU-TERS-DO-YOU-NOT?

AUD: Yes! No!

C: AND-YOU-HATE-DOCTORS-DO-YOU-NOT?

AUD: No! Doctors are good for you!

C: NOT-THESE-A-TOS-DOC-TORS
THEY-DO-NOT-GIVE-A-TOSS

C moves to the table.

C: THE-EXAM-IN-ING-MED-I-CAL-PRAC-TI-TION-ER-DOES-NOT-DES-ERVE-HER-WAGE
I-WANT-HER-DESK
I-WILL-TAKE-HER-DESK
WILL-YOU-TELL-ME-IF-SHE-COMES-BACK?

AUD: Boo!

C: COME-ON-THEN.

C looks around to check that the EMP is not there, then sits down, puts his feet on the desk and his arms behind his head.

Shortly the EMP returns, creeping up behind C.

AUD: Look behind you!

C springs off the chair. As he moves to the left, and then to the right, the EMP keeps behind him. The AUDIENCE shout out either to help or hinder C. Eventually the EMP speaks.

EMP: (loudly) I'm here!

C: I-HAVE-NEWS-FOR-YOU-EXAM-INING-MED-ICAL-PRACTI-TIONER
YOUR-JOB-IS-NOW-OB-SOLETE
I-CAN-CUT-OFF-PEOPLE'S-BENE-FIT-MUCH-BET-TER-THAN-YOU
YOUR-JOB-WILL-BE-CUT

EMP: (grabbing the mouse) Then I will cut off your power!

C bends forward. DICK enters & they all move to the front of the stage to take a bow.

Notes

ⁱ From Harrington's Report, §24,p. 40: 'The review has found that many claimants expect their Atos assessment *to be a medical examination* that looks at their illnesses or impairment rather than an assessment of their functional capability. They expect a doctor to examine them physically and some are dismayed that conclusions can be drawn about them without such an examination'.

ⁱⁱ 'Medication is mild' from typical medical reports

ⁱⁱⁱ From real medical report!

^{iv} From real medical report!

^v From Harrington's Report, §8, p. 37: 'The review has found that each Health Care Practitioner has a target to complete their assessment in an average of 46-49 minutes each. This has increased from 42-45 minutes, which was put in place at the introduction of ESA. This time starts from when they greet the claimant to when they finish their report. Evidence from some Atos HCPs to the review suggests that they felt constrained by these targets when interviewing complex cases'. Quote from Mental Health Aberdeen (H. Report, §27, p. 40): 'Questions were fired at the clients and they had no time to answer fully'. Quote from Mrs S. (H. Report, §38, p. 43): 'The interview was very intimidating, and I was stopped by the assessor from being able to explain and add essential supplementary information. The assessor frequently just held his hand up to stop me from talking and then he moved directly on to the next question'.

^{vi} Harrington's Report, §29, p.41: 'Too many claimants do not recognise [Atos's] report as reflecting their circumstances and the discussion that had taken place in the assessment. In some cases, seeing the report has allowed the claimant to find information that had been incorrectly recorded by the HCP: "I received the transcript of the assessment that my son had for ESA. I found that there were at least 20 wrongly recorded answers... for instance, it was recorded that my son drove himself to the medical, when my husband drove us to the medical", Mrs T., mother of claimant'.