

Pay no Attention to the man behind the curtain.

My desire to volunteer with the Citizen's Advice Bureau (CAB) was driven by my need to marry the Open University's course material on 'Access to Justice', with real world examples from my local community.

Kreber (2016) highlighted that supporting others in pursuit of a common good "is a constitutive and life-enriching feature of human identity", and I wanted to prove her point, through volunteering my time to help residents of South Essex access help and advice. Perhaps less altruistically, I wanted to be "able to work with a range of people in society, with widely different backgrounds and needs, and importantly people that don't look and think like me", (Extract 1) with my belief that the law is most effective when it's applied to the needs of the individual.

During my face-to-face surgeries, I helped several individuals across a range of topics, including liaising with the Benefits Agency on behalf of a severely disabled man who was unable to pay for carers due to a pension reduction following an historic benefit overpayment. (Extract 2). He was unaware of his rights and could not access the appropriate support as he had no internet connectivity and was unable to understand the complexities of the benefits system alone. Other people I assisted had issues around immigration, family law and access to children following a separation, or day to day issues around the cost of living and access to support for unmanageable energy bills. When advising these individuals, it wasn't a detailed understanding of the law they required. It was support, understanding and the competency to guide an issue through to resolution. Often, they had tried to help themselves but hit on barriers through lack of understanding, literacy, or even basic access to telephone credit or internet access.

It felt amazing to be able to provide guidance, but I left each session feeling a little flat. The pleasure of helping one person didn't replace the melancholy as I began to comprehend the scale of the wider issues in our society. For good or for bad, the CAB was my first experience of 'looking behind the curtain' of our society and seeing the things that normally remain hidden from view. Seeing the scale of support that people need and rely on, both in my community and wider afield was a sobering experience. Understanding that CAB received limited government funding and was sustained largely by limited local council funding and volunteers. It's hard to reconcile how such an important service needs to rely on goodwill to sustain itself. Anyone who has worked within the service or has been a user of Adviceline or the day surgeries can testify as to their importance. The service tackles many of the issues in our society that remain hidden. From homelessness, to poverty, individual rights and access to justice are all themes that run to the core of what the CAB is about.

In L. Frank Baum's 'Wizard of Oz', he famously quoted to "pay no attention to the man behind the curtain" (Baum, 1900), but perhaps looking behind the metaphorical curtain of our society is the kindest thing we could do, even if we don't always like what we see. If we never take the time to look, we may just keep believing that our society is run by political 'wizards' with the power to fix injustices. When we defer responsibility to others, we stop asking the difficult questions of ourselves and the communities that we live within.

References:**Books**

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