THE MENTAL CAPACITY ACT 2005 AND THE INSTITUTIONAL DOMINATION OF PEOPLE WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

Submitted by Lucy Victoria Series to the University of Exeter as a thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Law, January 2013.

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ABSTRACT

When people with learning disabilities are ‘placed’ in institutional care services, they are exposed to a range of interferences with their choices and freedoms. These interferences include the imposition of rules and regimes by institutional authorities, surveillance, a loss of private space and encroachments upon bodily integrity such as being subjected to restraint, seclusion and sedating medications, and restrictions may be imposed over their dealings with others within and outside of the institution. As Goffman and others have argued, the cumulative and pervasive effects of these regimes can be monumentally detrimental to self and wellbeing. These interferences have been found across the entire spectrum of care services, even in those which were initially designed to replicate the choices and freedoms of living in one’s own home.

Various writers have expressed the view that a new statute, the Mental Capacity Act 2005 (MCA), is empowering for people with mental disabilities and some have suggested it may be help to ensure such interferences are minimised and occur on a more principled basis. The MCA governs when decisions can be made on behalf of people who lack ‘mental capacity’ in their best interests and when restraint can be used. It also contains a framework for detention called the deprivation of liberty safeguards (DoLS). In this thesis, I make the paradoxical sounding claim that the MCA is not an ‘empowering’ statute, but that the DoLS contain many elements which make them better suited to tackling these types of issues.

The argument advanced in this thesis is based on ideas from new civic republican philosophy (Pettit, 1997; Lovett, 2010). Republican philosophers identify exposure to arbitrary interferences in one’s choices and freedoms with being in a ‘state of domination’. They argue that in order to ameliorate states of domination, social power must be exercised in accordance with clear and well known principles, which are effectively enforced. By showing how they have been variably interpreted by the courts, I argue that the ‘elegant’ and ‘flexible’ principles of the MCA do not adequately constrain the actions of those empowered under the Act. For many of the issues of concern in institutional placements, the legal principles derived from the MCA are barely developed at all.

I examine four mechanisms of enforcement of the MCA, in addition to the DoLS: the Independent Mental Capacity Advocacy Service; litigation in the Court of Protection; complaints mechanisms; and regulation by the Care Quality Commission. I show that each mechanism suffers from a variety of shortcomings. One major problem is a lack of independent scrutiny of the substantive outcomes of capacity assessments. Another is
that people with learning disabilities have significant difficulties using the law to challenge
decisions made under it, and rely upon ‘coat tailing’ on disputes which break out
between families and professionals to access justice.

Despite suffering from significant shortcomings, I argue that the DoLS contain
several important ingredients that could potentially overcome some of these problems. A
potential strength of the DoLS is the ability to address whether or not a person is in a
service which is appropriate for them, alongside whether their treatment within that
service is appropriate. Furthermore, the DoLS can help detainees and their families
circumvent some of the ‘access to justice’ issues they would face if they applied to the
Court of Protection under the main provisions of the MCA. Nevertheless, as presently
constructed, the DoLS themselves contain too much scope for arbitrary interpretation
and application to be a credible solution to the problem of domination.

I argue that radical reforms are required to address these difficulties. On the
basis of the republican critique I have subjected the MCA and the DoLS to in this thesis, I
argue that reformers must be clear about what interferences are tolerable in the lives of
people with learning disabilities. Secondly, there must be appropriate and accessible
safeguards to enable people with learning disabilities to assert their rights in the face of
arbitrary interferences. I argue that efforts at reform founded upon a ‘support paradigm’,
associated with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, still
establish a risk of institutional domination which must be constrained. Legal reforms
which have been tried have failed because they have never been responsive to the
needs and concerns of people with mental disabilities. Reform efforts must be dedicated
to the recovery of a legalism that is attentive to their needs and concerns. I offer some
suggestions for what a more progressive legalism might look like, based on the lessons
from the MCA and the DoLS.
# Table of Contents

**Abstract** .......................................................................................................................... 3 

**Table of Contents** ........................................................................................................... 5 

**List of Tables** .................................................................................................................. 7 

**List of Figures** ................................................................................................................. 9 

**Acknowledgments** .......................................................................................................... 11 

**Abbreviations and Terminology** .................................................................................... 15 

- A note on language ........................................................................................................... 17 
- References and citations .................................................................................................. 18 

## Chapter 1 – Introduction .................................................................................................... 21 

1.1 Introduction .................................................................................................................... 21 
1.2 The Mental Capacity Act 2005 and the problem of domination ......................... 22 
1.3 Legalism, discretion and arbitrariness ......................................................................... 27 
1.4 Chapter Outlines ........................................................................................................... 31 

## Chapter 2 - Institutional Domination .................................................................................. 35 

2.1 Introduction .................................................................................................................... 35 
2.2 Institutional domination in social care .......................................................................... 35 
2.3 The problem of domination and the new republicanism ............................................. 55 
2.4 Critiques of the ‘turn to law’ .......................................................................................... 63 

## Chapter 3 – Research Method .............................................................................................. 71 

3.1 Introduction .................................................................................................................... 71 
3.2 Principles for the exercise of power by institutional authorities ............................. 72 
3.3 Mechanisms enforcing the principles of the Mental Capacity Act 2005 ................. 74 
3.5 Other approaches, not adopted in this thesis ............................................................... 80 
3.6 Research ethics .............................................................................................................. 81 

## Chapter 4 - The Structural Pillars of the Mental Capacity Act 2005 .............................. 83 

4.1 Introduction .................................................................................................................... 83 
4.2 The ‘general defence’ ..................................................................................................... 93 
4.3 Principles relating to capacity assessment ..................................................................... 95 
4.4 Principles relating to ‘best interests’ ............................................................................. 122 
4.5 Involuntary placement: Mental capacity, public law and best interests .................. 126 
4.6 Institutional domination in the courts .......................................................................... 136
4.7 Discussion: Best interests and institutional life................................. 154

CHAPTER 5 – ENFORCEMENT OF THE MENTAL CAPACITY ACT 2005 ......................... 159

5.1 Introduction.................................................................................................. 159
5.2 The efficacy of Independent Mental Capacity Advocates in enforcing the MCA ..................................................................................................................... 161
5.3 The efficacy of the Court of Protection as a safeguard.......................... 178
5.4 The efficacy of complaints mechanisms as a safeguard ...................... 200
5.5 The efficacy of regulation of care services as a safeguard .................... 207
5.6 discussion: enforcement mechanisms for the Mental Capacity Act ...... 222

CHAPTER 6 – THE DEPRIVATION OF LIBERTY SAFEGUARDS ............................................... 227

6.1 Introduction.................................................................................................. 227
6.2 An overview of the DOLS.......................................................................... 233
6.3 The safeguards.......................................................................................... 241

CHAPTER 7 – DISCUSSION ................................................................................ 295

7.1 The loss of faith in legalism...................................................................... 295
7.2 Legalism recovered? .............................................................................. 296
7.3 Legalism for the future .......................................................................... 301

APPENDIX A – FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT 2000 REQUESTS............................ 309
APPENDIX B – SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS ON REGULATION AND OMBUDSMEN ......... 317
APPENDIX C – SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS ON THE MENTAL CAPACITY ACT .............. 343

BIBLIOGRAPHY ............................................................................................................. 359

List of Instruments .................................................................................................. 359
List of Cases.............................................................................................................. 360
References ............................................................................................................... 365
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1 Professional role and gender of interview participants ................................................................. 77
Table 2 Table of Freedom of Information Act 2000 Requests ........................................................................ 309
Table 3 Properties of CQC and CSCI inspection report sample ..................................................................... 320
Table 4 Frequency of codes arising in CQC reports for residential care services for people with learning disabilities in Cornwall, by source and reference ................................................................. 321
Table 5 Methods used by CQC inspectors to examine the experiences of care home residents .................. 324
Table 6 Enforcement actions by CQC, 2010-2012 ........................................................................................ 327
Table 7 Compliance actions undertaken by CQC for different essential standards, 2010-2011 ................ 327
Table 8 Complaints and enquiries about Adult Care Services received by LGO ........................................... 335
Table 9 Applications, orders and deputies appointed by the Court of Protection, 2007-2010 ....................... 343
Table 10 Number of hearings in the Court of Protection, 2009-10 ................................................................. 343
Table 11 Number of Court of Protection Visitors in England, by region, as of October 2012 ..................... 346
Table 12 The number of prosecutions initiated by the CPS under s44 MCA or s127 MHA ............................ 348
Table 13 Number of formal complaints and Court of Protection proceedings initiated by IMCAs, 2009-11 ... 349
Table 14 Number of times a third party or CQC alerted local authority supervisory bodies to a possible unlawful deprivation of liberty (April 2009 – November 2010) .................................................. 352
Table 15 Identity of applicant in DoLS appeals brought between April 2009 and January 2011 ............... 353
Table 16 Number of DoLS court cases local authorities have been involved in (FOIA #29) ...................... 354
LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE 1 Volume of complaints about care providers received by the CSCI and LGO ........................................ 204
FIGURE 2 Residential care services registered and inspected each year (NCSC, CSCI and CQC), 2003-2012 .......... 213
FIGURE 3 Domiciliary care services registered and inspected by NCSC, CSCI and CQC, 2003-2012 ............... 213
FIGURE 4 Schematic diagram of the deprivation of liberty safeguards ................................................................. 235
FIGURE 5 Number of DoLS applications per year - predicted and actual data (England) ................................................. 242
FIGURE 6 DoLS application rates by local authority, 2011-12 (England) ................................................................. 243
FIGURE 7 Total combined expenditure on regulation of health and social care, and Mental Health Act visitation (£000) ................................................................................................................................................. 317
FIGURE 8 Annual expenditure of CQC and its three predecessor commissions (£000), 2005-2011 .................. 318
FIGURE 9 Expenditure on regulation and inspection for adult social care, 2005-2011 ........................................ 319
FIGURE 10 Relationship of applicant to P .................................................................................................................. 344
FIGURE 11 Success rates of applications for permission by relationship of applicant to P .......................... 344
FIGURE 12 Applications for permission received by P’s diagnosis ........................................................................ 345
FIGURE 13 Success rate of applications with known outcome by diagnosis of P ............................................. 345
FIGURE 14 Number of Court of Protection welfare and deputyship cases involving the Official Solicitor ...... 347
FIGURE 15 Breakdown of IMCA referrals 2007-11 ................................................................................................. 349
FIGURE 16 Number of DoLS applications per year - predicted and actual data (England) .......................... 350
FIGURE 17 Number of applications granted and refused for care homes and hospitals, 2009-2012 .......... 351
FIGURE 18 Durations of authorisations granted by care homes and hospitals, 2009-12 .............................. 351
FIGURE 19 Qualifying requirements not met for deprivation of liberty applications from care, 2009-12 ...... 352
FIGURE 20 Number of appeals against detention under the Mental Capacity Act 2005, April 2009-September 2011 ........................................................................................................................................ 354