The subject of mental health in 2014 in the UK remains to a large extent a matter of taboo which gives rise to stigma and sometimes worse among those who suffer from mental health difficulties. This is despite it being an issue which affects every human being to some degree or other. Much work has still to be done on these shores to alter the general negative perceptions that exist surrounding mental health issues. There is some irony in this given that the UK has some of the most progressive professionals working in the field of mental health of anywhere in the world. In this issue we are proud to co-publish together with openDemocracy, Rebecca Omonira’s revealing investigation into patients’ experiences of mental health services.

The recent soundings coming out of the three main party political conferences this autumn have done little to dispel the sense that further austerity measures are pending in the coming months and years whatever may happen at next year’s general election in May 2015. It is the speeches made at the Conservative party conference which have been the most alarming and the most naked in their hostility to the vulnerable, poor and disadvantaged in society. The Tory-led assault on the justice system continues. Not content with savaging legal aid and other areas of the welfare state, the Conservatives have announced through briefings to the press this autumn their desire to scrap the Human Rights Act if re-elected in May 2015. The ideological motives behind these announcements, coupled with the constitutional illiteracy of the proposals, have led to protests from Conservative party luminaries such as Kenneth Clarke QC MP. The former Attorney General, Dominic Grieve QC MP, was moved to call the proposals to dispose of the Human Rights Act ‘almost puerile’. He went on to tell The Guardian newspaper that his view of the proposals was that: ‘I also think they are unworkable and will damage the UK’s international reputation.’

In his regular column on behalf of Young Legal Aid Lawyers, Connor Johnston casts an eye over some of the recent defeats suffered by the Government in the High Court concerning the ill conceived cuts to legal aid which the Lord Chancellor Chris Grayling MP has sought to push through. Although it is now the subject of an appeal, the judgment of the High Court on the proposed residence test in the case of R (Public Law Project) v Secretary of State for Justice [2014] EWHC 2365 (Admin) nonetheless represents a victory in the wider struggle against the Government’s austerity programme. It is one example perhaps of why the Right Honourable Secretary of State for Justice and Lord Chancellor is so keen to cut legal aid and limit access to judicial review, despite the clear threats that this poses to both the rule of law and democracy.

The struggle for access to justice, the rule of law and democracy is as much an international theme as a domestic matter. In this issue there is a special feature on Colombia where human rights defenders such as Liliany Obando continue to struggle for peace, democracy and better living standards. In a continuation of our Defending Human Rights Defenders work, members of the Haldane Society recently visited Liliany Obando at her home in Bogotá where she is currently detained under house arrest on the charge of ‘rebellion’. The Haldane Society is supporting the campaign for the release of Ms Obando and has written recently to the Colombian authorities concerning her case. Liliany Obando’s son writes about his experience of a visit to his mother during the time of her incarceration at Buen Pastor Women’s prison.

Colombia has a sophisticated written constitution. There are many dedicated lawyers working in Colombia seeking to advance human rights and the rule of law. The hope across Colombia among many of its citizens is that the peace talks currently taking place in Havana between the Farc and the Colombian State lead to the successful resolution of a conflict that has lasted for too long and which continues to claim many innocent lives, including those of trade unionists, journalists and lawyers.

We are grateful to the photographers B+ and Coleman for being able to publish their photo essay Creating Memory is our Weapon documenting the Zapatista march on Mexico City in 2001. As the review of the play Wonderland about the 1984 – 1985 miner’s strike also reminds us in this issue, the power of memory and recollecting the struggles of yesteryear is vitally important. Gareth Peirce remembers one her most well known clients, Gerry Conlon and his struggle to overcome the impact of being a victim of one of the most infamous miscarriages of justice in recent British legal history.

Tim Potter (socialistlawyer@haldane.org)