

Peter Beresford

### **Austerity: All in it together? Or increasing inequalities?**

Hello everyone, it's good to be here today. I want to get straight into what I'm talking about, because this is a vital event at a critical time. I've just come back from a few days doing some work in Milan Italy. As we walked about in this beautiful city, I saw several visibly disabled people. Significantly most of them were begging. There were a lot of beggars in Milan; they were either from black and minority ethnic groups or they were disabled people. I was able to have a little chat with one of them, called John, who had his dog and a placard on the wheelchair and as best as I could translate the Italian it said he couldn't work, he was homeless living on the street and asked for kindness. Also it said Bau, maybe the Italian for woof woof from his dog. We also saw a black disabled man lying on the pavement with his twisted feet visible showing that he couldn't walk. Italy did not create the same kind of welfare state as Britain. I tweeted that maybe this was what was lying in wait for us in the UK with welfare reform. Very quickly someone posted that a blind man in Scotland had been forced to beg after his benefits were cut. So it's not a fear for the future, but a present reality.

I want to make something clear, this situation is not an accident or an act of god, it is part of a political philosophy, a plan. It is man-made. This government and its coalition predecessor believe in a neoliberal political value system. They may not deliberately be trying to diss disabled people, it's just that this is the effect of their philosophy. It is

based on the belief that the state is bad; that there should be a small state so that people pay less tax. This usually tends to mean that people with more won't pay their fair share. It especially means cutting the supportive state, cutting public spending, reducing regulation so that there is more of a free for all for those who are powerful and important. It places a big value the private sector, it tends to blame the individual if things go wrong for them, so it is sink or swim. It says that for a few who it believes can't cope there should be some kind of intervention, but this tends to result in them being negatively stereotyped to have access to some kind of a so called safety net, conceived in old style terms.

That clearly is what has been happening here. It wasn't about the financial crisis or a real way of dealing with so-called austerity. It was about redistributing wealth and resources; less or even minimal taxes for rich organisations and individuals; less support for poorer people who would still pay full tax.

You don't have to believe me about this. There is a world of evidence. But there is no other explanation that fits the evidence and even what these politicians themselves actually say. They see services as a source of profit for the market sector, rather than a universal framework for social justice. So first of all, if we want change, we need to find out more about, understand, be explicit about and challenge this philosophy. So long as it is the basis for politics and policy, so long as policymakers are allowed to suggest it is right and for their media allies to spread that word, we have a fundamental

worsening problem as disabled people. We have to have our story – a different story to tell.

We also know that these policies have damaging effects which have different if nonetheless equally destructive effects for different groups. Thus discrimination around equality issues is exacerbated; black and minority ethnic communities fare particularly badly. Mental health service users face oppression because of the failure to understand their issues and to frame them in narrow medical terms and people with learning difficulties, especially those without supportive families are at particular risk of being framed as having negative challenging behaviour and at risk of abuse. All the issues of diversity come into frame; women, people who part of the LGBTQ community, older people, younger people, people of different faiths and cultures, are all penalized.

I now just want to offer some more evidence about what's actually happening so no one can say we are just panicking, or being extreme in what we say, when we say that disabled people are dying, killing themselves and thinking about killing themselves because of what is being done to them. So here are facts and figures.

First from a new research study by the Kings Fund and Nuffield Trust, looking at the state of social care- the policy that disabled people of all ages particularly need to rely on. The report is framed in terms of older people, but we know that it applies to disabled people whatever their age and those of working age are being especially hit because

of the double whammy of benefits reform.

The report on the state of social care offers a situation report framed in terms of extreme crisis, people and their families 'left to fend for themselves' and a priority service scaled back despite years of warnings about major demographic change and rapidly rising need

The report says that the social care system is struggling to meet the needs of older people. No, it is clearly failing to meet them, causing damage to them, their families and an NHS system that has come to be seen as increasingly undermined by the failure of social care to ensure community support. Thus all the talk of wasteful and damaging emergency readmissions and 'bed-blocking'.

It says that increasing pressure has been placed on service providers through central government grant reductions. Or put another way, social care is now dominated by a private sector which isn't working either to look after those who need it, or to make the profit the system now necessitates.

It reports that over the past five years, local authority spending on care for older and disabled people has fallen by 11% in real terms, and the number of people who received state-funded help had fallen by 26% despite the numbers needing it increasing. Public spending on adult social care is set to fall to less than 1% of GDP by 2020, with a predicted funding gap of £2.9billion by 2019 and many councils struggling to meet basic statutory duties. One million people with care

needs now receive no formal or informal help - a rise of 10% in a year. Over 40% of money paid to care homes came from people paying for themselves. It says that those better able through higher income or cultural capital get the most out of social care and those who, poorer and disadvantaged, do especially badly. We also read that:

- Home care services face particularly acute workforce shortages and are in a critical condition.
- The possibility of large-scale provider failure is only a question of 'when'
- By having to concentrate on the most acute need, any hope of a preventive approach is being lost
- Family carers are increasingly being expected to do more yet this is becoming more and more unsustainable.

The rights and needs of hundreds of thousands of older and disabled people are being neglected and their difficulties left to worsen under a hopeless system of social care. The official response to this worsening crisis: 'this government is committed to ensuring those in old age throughout the country can get affordable and dignified care' tells us there is little to hope for social care under this administration (<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/sep/15/elderly-people-social-care-cuts-kings-fund-nuffield-trust-report>).

I want to turn next to other evidence about the failure of support for disabled people. This is research about the effects of the ending of the independent living fund.

The first piece of new research is a report from Inclusion London ([https://www.inclusionlondon.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/InclusionLondon\\_ILF\\_Report\\_2016.pdf](https://www.inclusionlondon.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/InclusionLondon_ILF_Report_2016.pdf)), published as part of Disabled People Against Cuts' (DPAC) campaign week of action, *Rights Not Games* (#RightsNotGames) (<http://dpac.uk.net/2016/08/rightsnotgames-week-of-action-september-4th-10th/>) The second is a peer reviewed journal article by Tom Porter and Tom Shakespeare published in the prestigious journal *Disability & Society* (<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09687599.2016.1208604>)

The decision to end the ILF it was based on the view that the new Care Act heralded a transformation in social care. It would now be a personalised service focused on bringing about well-being. Therefore, there would no longer be a justification for having a separate fund. Both the ILF and mainstream social care would supposedly now be working to the same agenda. It is hard to fault the logic. But in reality, the Care Act was never going to bring about these changes with Government requiring local authorities to work exactly as they had done before, with the only real change being in rhetoric.

This is exactly what the two studies found. They report

- Swingeing cuts to the level of support, despite Government giving to councils the money the ILF had been providing to those people. The cuts were invariably unexplained or justified with any kind of rationale.
- Assessments by practitioners who had no understanding of what was meant by independent living, or had any other vision of how life should be for disabled people
- Practices that had no regard to the views and thoughts of the disabled people themselves

The researchers in both pieces of work believe that the ILF, in some form, should be restored – a national service to ensure resourcing of the vision of independent living for disabled people or people with complex needs. Given they could see no reason to believe the mainstream care system will ever deliver the personalised service that political and sector leaders have promised, this is entirely understandable and the only route to enable this group of people to continue to enjoy a reasonable quality of life. But this cannot be the whole story.

While the Care Act opened up a path to a better future for social care, the government's guidance to its delivery is unlikely to result in that path being taken (Government Guidance to the Care Act – undermining ambitions for change?

<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09687599.2014.954785> ).

Sadly it ensures the perpetuation of the long established and depersonalising practices that serve only to enable political and sector leaders to maintain that the amount of money they are putting into the system is sufficient. This is because is a system whereby 'eligible' needs are always met. The catch, however, is that councils can define what is meant by 'eligible' need. And they do this to suit their declining budgets. Anything not 'eligible' is simply ignored or assumed to be someone else's responsibility. This is a recipe for the failure of social care, the undermining of the NHS and most important of disabled people and people with long term conditions of all ages. We must fight for the recognition and recording of unmet need so that the social care funding gap will be shown up and pressure for action to address it increased.

Turning now again the Kings Fund report. It's impossible to see how social care can be fit for purpose so long as it remains means and needs tested like a relic of the poor law, as well as inadequately funded. At present only the poorest get help to pay for services, including help in the home for daily tasks such as washing and dressing, as well as round-the-clock support in care homes and nursing homes. Yet most people think that social care operates on the same principles as the health service. Adequate funding and real integration are only likely to come when social care services shares the same funding base and principles as the NHS. This means a health and social care system jointly based on principles of universalism and being funded by a progressive system of general taxation. Recent governments have seen this as an unrealistically

costly option. However, if they look at the financial and human costs for millions of the present unsustainable system, they might be convinced of the need for such fundamental reform. We must make this one of the principles for our campaigning I believe. Otherwise we will always suffer.

## References

Beresford, P. (2016), *All Our Welfare: Towards participatory social policy*, Bristol, Policy Press.

We also need to strengthen, renew and build new alliances with other groups facing the destructive effects of neoliberal policy and politics and those prepared to ally themselves with them and support them. We need to work to recognise our commonalities as disabled people and people with long term conditions and be inclusive of diversity in how we work, while recognising our differences and uniqueness.

Finally I want to turn to recent comments made by Liz Carr, long term disability activist, artist and actress. In a major speech, the star of *Silent Witness*, compared present welfare reform policies with nazi disability policy. She said:

It's about being forgotten and derided and abused and sanctioned and attacked and killed and cut and rationed and reduced and starved and homeless and hungry and fearful and terrified and alone and isolated and abandoned and denied

resources and silenced and rendered invisible and made to jump through hoops to prove your worth, devalued, punished, subject to vicious attacks - both by individuals and the state.

We must take careful note of the direction of travel of government disability policy, not listen to its rhetoric. Things are getting worse and worse for more and more disabled people. We have to be as canny and informed in developing our responses to it and our objectives for ourselves. We need to develop into an effective second generation disabled people's movement, to challenge this new generation of oppression and exclusion. Thank you.