

Welfare Reform (Sick and Disabled People)

11.22 am

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House calls on the Government to commission an independent cumulative assessment of the impact of changes in the welfare system on sick and disabled people, their families and carers, drawing upon the expertise of the Work and Pensions Select Committee; requests that this impact assessment examine care home admissions, access to day care centres, access to education for people with learning difficulties, provision of universal mental health treatments, closures of Remploy factories, the Government's contract with Atos Healthcare, IT implementation of universal credit, human rights abuses against disabled people, excess deaths of welfare claimants and the disregard of medical evidence in decision-making by Atos, the Department for Work and Pensions and the Tribunals Service; urges the Secretary of State for Health and the Secretary of State for Education jointly to launch a consultation on improving support into work for sick and disabled people; and further calls on the Government to end with immediate effect the work capability assessment, as voted for by the British Medical Association, to discontinue forced work under the threat of sanctions for people on disability benefits and to bring forward legislative proposals to allow a free vote on repeal of the Welfare Reform Act 2012.

We are making history today. This is the first time in the history of this Parliament that people with disabilities have secured a debate in the Chamber on an agenda of their choosing, so let us pay tribute to the War on Welfare campaigners. They initiated the campaign, drafted the petition that we have before us in the form of a motion, and worked hard for a year to gather more than 100,000 signatures in order to secure this debate. They are heroes and heroines who worked, many of them despite their disability, to ensure that this campaign was a success.

MPs may speak in this debate, but it is the voice of the WOW campaigners and petitioners that will be heard. What do the WOW campaigners want from this debate? They have said that they want a serious debate. They want MPs, party spokespeople and Ministers to listen, and to listen well to the statements that they have made. What do they want us to say? I have asked WOW petitioners what they want me and other MPs to say in today's debate. They said, "We want you to get across as best you can what the welfare changes brought in over the last four years have meant to us and our families—the stark reality." Why do they want that? Perhaps naively, they believe that if MPs and Ministers really knew what it is like, what disabled people are going through, they would not stand by and let fellow human beings suffer and be degraded in this way.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate. Ahead of the debate, the Brighton Housing Trust sent me some alarming data of 25 cases it had looked at concerning claimants of employment and support allowance. All of them won their appeal and had the decision overturned. In 72% of cases the decisions were overturned on the basis of a mental health condition, and 32% of that sample group stated that the process

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had caused an increase in suicidal intention. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the implications of the policy are literally a matter of life and death?

John McDonnell: I agree completely. The figures in Brighton are echoed around the country and have been reported for a number of years.

We met some of the disabled campaigners this morning. One of them said, referring to Ministers, "Do they realise that many of us feel terrorised by what the Government are doing?" Another disabled campaigner said to me this morning, "Can you tell them that they call their programme fulfilling our potential, but we feel that many of us simply won't survive this round of cuts? A generation is going to be lost." The central demand of the petition is straightforward: the motion is, in essence, a call for a cumulative impact assessment of all the welfare changes that have been introduced by this Government. The argument that campaigners put forward is that if politicians and society only knew the full effect of all the changes on the lives of disabled people and their families, surely they would not let that happen in a civilised society. Let us see whether we can move hearts and change minds in this debate.

Let us run through some of the figures. There are 11.3 million people with a disability in the UK, 4.5 million of whom have a significant disability that entitles them to a disability benefit such as the disability living

allowance or the attendance allowance. The group the welfare cuts are hurting the most is the 2.7 million people with disabilities who live in poverty.

I remember the Prime Minister's statements in 2010 when the Government launched their austerity programme to cut public spending. In October 2010, he said that "it is fair that those with broader shoulders should bear a greater load",

that the greatest burden would be placed on the better off, and that the cuts would be fair. Well, the reverse is the case.

I urge Members to read at least one of the relevant reports. In "Counting the Cuts", Simon Duffy, the director of the Centre for Welfare Reform, explains that disabled people in poverty are bearing the cuts four times worse than the average, while the burden on people using social care is nearly six times that on the average person. Other reports escalate the figure and say that the burden on people with disabilities is perhaps 20 times the average. The reason for that is that disabled people are being hit by a combination of cuts in funding for social care and support and by wave after wave of cuts—almost annually—in welfare benefits.

Let us look at the cuts in care and support. Many disabled people rely on local authority social care and support. By next month, £2.68 billion will have been cut out of adult social care budgets across the country. In 2012-13, 320,000 fewer disabled people and 37,000 fewer adults aged between 18 and 64 with physical impairments received local authority care and support than in 2005-06. The number of adults with mental health issues receiving care and support has reduced by 30,000.

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that decent social care is about not just helping people cope with their disabilities, but helping them live an ordinary life that the rest of us take for

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granted—being able to get up, wash, dressed and fed, spend time with their families and go out into the community, as well as being able to work, if they can? Is that not why the cuts in social care have been so devastating?

John McDonnell: That is exactly why people feel that the impact is so harsh. Many local authorities have changed the eligibility criteria—that is the problem—to cover only those with substantial needs, which automatically cuts out about 100,000 people from receiving any form of social care whatever.

Chris Williamson (Derby North) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that this is very much a false economy, because cutting back on social care will inevitably lead to people's conditions tending to deteriorate, meaning that they will need more urgent care and that many of them will find themselves in hospital? Consequently, the cost to the public purse is substantially greater as a result of this false economy and these cuts, which are so devastating to disabled people.

John McDonnell: That is exactly right. There are three consequences from what is happening. First, disabled people are being forced more and more to rely and depend on care from their own family members, who are themselves, to be frank, overstretched in providing that care, especially as local authority respite care is now being cut back so dramatically. Startlingly, as we found in a previous debate, a large number of these carers are children caring for their parents. A year-long investigation by Carers UK confirmed that carers, who save this country an estimated £119 billion a year in care costs, are about to lose £1 billion in benefit cuts.

Secondly, the care needs of many disabled people are simply not being met. A recent inquiry by the all-party groups on local government and on disability found from the evidence they took that four in 10 disabled people are failing to have their basic social care needs—which my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall) has mentioned—met.

Thirdly, as my hon. Friend has said, the withdrawal of social care and support services is cutting many people off from any form of social contact with the outside world. Many are driven back into their homes, while others are forced out of them, losing all their independence, and into residential care or even hospital care as a result.

Alongside cuts to social care, there are the mounting cuts in welfare benefits. Like most hon. Members, the vast majority of disabled people whom I have met are, like any other employed person, desperate to work and support their family with a regular wage. For some, the tragedy is that their disability is so severe that they will never be able to work and will have to rely on welfare benefits to ensure that they do not live in poverty, while others need positive and sensitive practical support to help them to get back into work or to work in the first place.

The system introduced during the past six years to support people in securing work or the appropriate benefits could not have been better designed to undermine disabled people's ability to get into work or receive

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the appropriate benefits to assist them. The previous Government started the process of reassessing all those on incapacity benefit to see whether they could be assisted back into work, and if not, to ensure that they had the right level of financial support. They introduced the work capability assessment, and brought in Atos to implement it. That might have been well intentioned in theory, but in practice, thousands of disabled people have been caused untold suffering, humiliation, stress and, at times, absolute despair.

Mrs Anne McGuire (Stirling) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend recognise that the introduction of the work capability assessment under our Government was phased? Part of the distress he mentions was due to the fact that the contract was renegotiated to go for a big bang of assessments and reassessments of everyone on incapacity benefit.

John McDonnell: The work capability assessment was flawed from the start. It stemmed from the work of the American insurance company Unum, and the so-called biopsychosocial model of disability assessment. That was exposed as an invention by the insurance companies simply to avoid paying out for claims. My right hon. Friend is, however, absolutely right that Atos was brought in and then given a contract to churn through large numbers of assessments very rapidly—as fast as possible. The staff employed in order to achieve that often had minimal medical or professional qualifications, and their expertise or experience was often totally unrelated to the condition or disability of the people they assessed. Assessments largely disregarded people's previous diagnosis, prognosis or even life expectancy. The recent "Panorama" programme "Disabled or Faking It?" exposed the scandal of seriously ill patients—people diagnosed with life-threatening conditions such as heart failure or end-stage emphysema—being found fit for work. The so-called descriptors, or criteria, on which assessments are based bear no relation to the potential employment available, take little account of fluctuating conditions and are particularly unresponsive to appreciating someone's mental health issues.

According to all the Department for Work and Pensions figures, the appeals roll in—on 40% of decisions—and most appeals are now successful. The test has been condemned by the British Medical Association and the Royal College of Nursing. The report by the president of the appeals tribunal to the Government denounced the test as "failing to coincide with reality".

Even when someone wins their appeal, there can be a lengthy wait before their benefits are reinstated. In one period, 37,000 people were waiting up to a year to receive benefits after they had won their appeal.

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the cuts to the legal aid system—taking away the right to get legal aid for welfare benefit appeals—have caused additional distress to the sick and disabled people who are seeking an appeal?

John McDonnell: Interestingly, all the statistics prove that people who are represented win their appeal in vast numbers, while those who are not represented are suffering. To be frank, it is no wonder that 84% of GPs have reported that patients have presented with mental health

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problems, such as stress, anxiety and depression as a result of undergoing or the fear of undergoing the work capability assessment.

For all those reasons, the BMA has called for an end to the WCA “with immediate effect”, believing that it should be replaced with “a rigorous and safe system that does not cause avoidable harm”.

Such systems are used in other countries, so why can we not use one of them here? That is why the motion calls for the WCA to be scrapped.

People assessed as capable of work and put on employment and support allowance within the work-related group now lose their contributory ESA after 12 months. Some 700,000 disabled people are losing a total of £4.4 billion as a result of the 12-month cut-off. There has been a massive escalation in the use of sanctions against people who are on ESA or jobseeker’s allowance; some 900,000 people were sanctioned last year.

Sheila Gilmore (Edinburgh East) (Lab): Is it not ironic, at the very least, that the people who are most affected by the one-year cut off are those who, for instance, have a working partner or small savings—the very hard-working people whom the Government say they want to protect?

John McDonnell: People thought that they were contributing to a scheme that they would see the benefits from. They now find that they have contributed, but that they will no longer get the benefits. That is unjust. One in five of the people on JSA who were sanctioned is disabled. Sanctions mean the loss of benefits altogether for weeks or even months. That is compounded, as my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Yvonne Fovargue) said, by the increasing difficulty in securing advice or advocacy to appeal or challenge sanctions.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I wonder whether my hon. Friend is aware of the case of one of my constituents. He was receiving ESA, but had a heart attack during his assessment and was sanctioned as a result of leaving it. I called on the Government to hold an independent review of the inappropriate use of sanctions. They committed to do so in the Work and Pensions Committee, but are now reneging on that. Is that not a disgrace?

John McDonnell: Members have brought forward example after example like that one. We are simply looking for some compassion and logic in the governance of the system. The Government have ignored that, tragically.

Many people report that, as a result of sanctions, they are dependent on doorstep loans and are using credit cards for everyday items. Some people have fallen into long-term debt. Some Members met a representative of Disability UK on Monday. He described all this as a route into destitution for many people. Disabled people who are on ESA are placed on the Work programme and offered support from Work Choice. The latest figures on the success rate of the Work programme in finding employment for disabled people show that only 5.3% of them secured employment. That is a 95% failure rate. Work Choice is meant to assist

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those with complex needs, but it has helped only 58 people since 2011. The forced closure of the Remploy factories under this Government has taken away the opportunity of sheltered work for many thousands of disabled people.

Dame Anne Begg (Aberdeen South) (Lab): I visited my local Work Choice provider the other week. I was amazed to discover that everyone who was there to participate was on jobseeker’s allowance. They were not on a disability benefit, even though they had disabilities. I did not think that that was what Work Choice was meant to be about.

John McDonnell: That is exactly what is reported by constituency Member after constituency Member after their visits. I am concerned about time, so I will press on and take no further interventions, if Members do not mind.

Let me turn to the personal independence payment. Some 3.2 million disabled people receive disability living allowance. DLA is not a work benefit; it is meant to help with the additional costs caused by disability. It allows disabled people to get by and to overcome some of the restrictions that are forced upon them by their disability. From April 2013, DLA was supposed to be replaced gradually by PIP. I urge Members to read today’s National Audit Office report that assesses the roll-out. It states:

"Backlogs have developed at each stage of the claimant process. Both the Department and assessment providers have processed fewer claims than they expected".

It states that by October, "the Department had made only 16% of the number of decisions it expected, over 166,000 people had started new claims for Personal Independence Payment and 92,000 claims had been transferred to the assessment provider and not yet returned to the Department".

Who is the assessment provider? After the WCA debacle, it is hard to believe that the Government allowed Atos to share the contract with Capita.

The report goes on to say: "Claimants face delays, and the Department is not able to tell them how long they are likely to wait, potentially creating distress and financial difficulties."

It states: "Citizens Advice has found that claimants are concerned about paying for their care, covering housing costs and having enough money to pay for necessities such as heating, electricity and food."

The Demos-Scope study calculates that 600,000 people will be impacted by the introduction of PIP, with a total loss of £2.6 billion.

Among the many eligibility changes, there have been changes to the eligibility for the mobility component. That means that 148,000 people will lose out on that additional benefit. It also potentially denies access to a Motability vehicle, and we know today that many people are having their Motability cars removed. The irony is that, as a result, they cannot get to work.

Disabled people are especially vulnerable to other benefit changes, and they will be disproportionately hit by the bedroom tax. Some 72% of affected households include someone with a disability or major health problem, and 420,000 disabled people will lose on average £14 a week in housing benefit. One in three disabled people is refused the discretionary housing payment. Shockingly,

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local councils have rejected applications from disabled people living in adapted properties who are unable to downsize. Last week, it was also revealed that the £347 million local welfare assistance fund to local councils had quietly been cut by the Government.

The Welfare Reform Act 2012 also changed the uprating of benefits basis from the retail prices index to the consumer prices index, costing some families receiving DLA and the carer's allowance £80 a week. It has been estimated that 142,500 disabled people will be hit by the benefit cap, costing £2 billion. Universal credit looms over all of this. Research by the National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux estimates that 116,000 disabled people could lose £40 a week; that 230,000 severely disabled people who live alone or with only a young carer will get between £28 and £58 less a week; and that 100,000 disabled children will lose £28 a week.

What do all these figures add up to? Although the Government have refused to undertake a cumulative assessment of the effect of all the benefit changes on disabled people, others have done so. The Demos-Scope study calculated that disabled people will lose £28.3 billion by 2018. Dr Simon Bamber concludes that disabled people in poverty, who make up 4% of the population, will bear 13% of the cuts and lose £4,660 a year. People using social care who make up 3% of the population will also bear 13% of the cuts, and lose £6,409 a year.

In conclusion, what do these changes mean in reality? They mean poverty for many. They mean not enough income for someone to heat their home adequately—there are nearly 1 million disabled people now in fuel poverty. They mean someone choosing not to eat so that their children can do so, and their feeling shamed and humiliated by having to rely on the generosity of others and support from the food bank. I urge people to look at the website, Calum's List. For some it is all too much and they become another in a coroner's report whose suicide is associated with the loss of benefits. Many of the disabled people I have met say the same thing. They tell me they feel hounded by the media, by politicians and by this Government, just for being disabled and claiming the benefits they are entitled to receive.

What the War on Welfare campaigners are demanding today is the truth. They want a cumulative impact assessment of all welfare changes, so that the truth of their plight can be revealed. They believe—perhaps naively—that if the truth is told, no decent society would allow its most vulnerable members to be treated in

this way. That is why I supported the petition and tabled the motion before the House, and why I will be pressing it to a vote.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dawn Primarolo): Order. There will be a six-minute time limit on Back-Bench speeches starting now. It will be necessary to reduce the time further if it takes longer to get through the speakers, and because there are two debates today, this one must finish promptly.

11.43 am

George Hollingbery (Meon Valley) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I have prepared a shorter version of my remarks, so I hope Members will forgive me if there is not as much detail as I might like to have given.

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The motion before the House

"calls on the Government to end with immediate effect the work capability assessment"

and if I may, I would like to look at the WCA in some detail.

It is a simple fact of government that policies designed to deal with the general often struggle with the specific. Despite the need for a clear structured process to assess whether someone qualifies for a benefit, I acknowledge that no responsible Government can approach something like the WCA as if it is some sort of industrial quality control test. This is not a question that can always be answered with a simple yes or no because decisions taken have a clear effect on people's lives, and reaching the wrong decision can be devastating. However, the Government have not approached the test that way.

The test was created in 2008 by the previous Labour Government, as incapacity benefit was designed to be replaced by the employment and support allowance. The coalition Government have carried that programme forward, including the key commitment that the WCA testing regime needed annual review and improvement for at least the first five years of its life. There have been four such reviews: three under Professor Harrington and the latest under Dr Paul Litchfield, which was published in December. Of Professor Harrington's cumulative 49 recommendations, 35 were accepted in full and a further 10 in principle. Of the 35 accepted, 29 have been fully implemented and three partially implemented. A further three are still in progress. Of the 10 accepted in principle, five have been fully implemented, two partially implemented and three are in progress. We are making progress on improving the WCA.

On 12 December, the evidence-based review of the WCA was published. It compared the results produced by the WCA and those of an alternative designed by a consortium of experts and disability representative organisations, with a panel of experts reviewing each case. Many cases were looked at more than once. The report makes for interesting reading and two conclusions jump out: the WCA creates a much more consistent result than the proposed alternative; and the WCA is significantly more likely to accord with the judgment produced by the expert panel reviewing each case than with the proposed alternative.

The conclusions are important because they tell us how the WCA should work as a whole. We know that it is pretty much impossible to find a single general test that fits all eventualities. What we have is a system with an appeal mechanism that clearly anticipates that the WCA, even with Department for Work and Pensions staff interpretation and other evidence overlaid, will not always produce perfect results. That is why there will be a considerable number of successful appeals. That is exactly how the system should work, and it does.

The review of WCA found that the expert panel judged that about 26% of all cases presented were borderline, even with full access to information. If that is the case, we would expect an appeal process, which after all consists of expert opinion, to alter some decisions. They do so at a rate that is very similar to the rate the panel found as borderline in the review process. That should surprise nobody.

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Dr Julian Huppert (Cambridge) (LD): The hon. Gentleman is making some interesting comments. I have been very concerned about the effect of the WCA on people with mental health problems, which are

particularly badly assessed, and have taken people to see the Minister. Did the study look at mental health issues, which are particularly hard to assess with a single snapshot?

George Hollingbery: Indeed it did. The expert panel that sat to adjudicate on every single one of those test cases took the advice of mental health experts. A number of mental health specialists are now provided with specialist training in the testing regime. I think the figure is 30, but that is off the top of my head and it may be as many as 60.

In the fourth report, Dr Litchfield largely endorses the position I outline. He says: "Any 'test' is necessarily a trade-off of many factors and the WCA appears to be a reasonable and pragmatic tool."

There remain those who call for its abolition, but suggestions for what to replace it with are rarely forthcoming. No test is ever perfect, but the WCA has been designed with considerable rigour and is subject to a process of continuous improvement.

I hope that hon. Members will forgive this slightly tortuous journey through the WCA, but it is very important to show just how much trouble and care has been taken to design and improve it. It is not perfect and it will not always produce fair and just results, but that is what the appeals process is for and there to catch. That it is necessary to have some sort of objective test to help decision makers seems to me to be undeniable. Hence I cannot support the motion's call for the abolition of the WCA.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is giving a very technical analysis of the WCA. My constituent, Mr McArdle, who runs the Black Triangle campaigning group, has on his website and Facebook page a whole list of human stories about how the WCA acts in practice. I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman would mind looking at that after his speech today to get some of the human side, because it is not just about a technical analysis of how these things work.

George Hollingbery: I hope the hon. Gentleman will acknowledge that in prefacing my remarks I made it clear that this cannot be a mechanistic process, like some sort of quality control process. It has to involve the human. I acknowledge that there are many cases where results have been, shall we say, questionable—there is no doubt about that. Nevertheless, that it is necessary to have such a test is, I think, undeniable: the Government cannot, will-nilly, go judging entitlement to benefits without any test of any sort. Yes, it is difficult to make the case that I am making without sounding dry and technocratic—I take his point absolutely.

In the time remaining, I would like to draw the House's attention to some real outcomes produced by my local providers, which I hope the hon. Gentleman will take as a human face of what can be a reasonably successful programme. My local providers are the Shaw

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Trust in Portsmouth and A4e in Southampton, which is run by a team led by George Gallop. I hope that we can all celebrate some of the results of their work.

Alex, aged 20, was diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and found it almost impossible to settle down to any kind of work. A4e's relationship with Harsco, a large building services company, was crucial in enabling Alex to train for a certificate under the construction skills certification scheme, and to become a scaffolder. Alex said:

"I felt like nobody would ever employ me. I didn't even know what I was doing wrong...it is the kind of job that sets you up for life and I love it. If I look at how my life has changed in the last year I can't believe it".

Daniel, aged 19, was homeless and unable to look after his young family because he suffered from depression. He was one of the first young people to enter Radian Housing's "proving talent" programme, delivered by A4e in Southampton. He came through the scheme, and now has a permanent job in technical services with Radian. He said:

"It feels amazing to be back on track, in employment providing for my family and feeling good about myself."

Sandra, aged 45, was a proud working mum of two, trapped in a wheelchair. Because of ill health, she was made unemployed and became dependent on employment and support allowance. At first she resented

being referred to the Work programme, but her advisers and trainers helped to motivate her, and to give her the confidence and skills that she needed in order to return to work. She said:
"Now I think about what I can do, instead of what I can't".

David broke his back in an accident in 1997, and received incapacity benefit for more than 15 years. At an ESA work-focused interview in December 2012, he was asked when he had last had a good laugh and when he had last smiled. He replied that what had saved his life was a passion for his reptile collection. David and his wife have now signed off from ESA, and have set up their own business in a shop in Copnor road, Portsmouth, selling and boarding exotic pets.

To me, those are inspiring stories of people afflicted by disability and sickness who, with the right help from the right people at the right time, have managed to find their way back into employment, and, in so doing, have rediscovered their sense of self-confidence and self-worth. Of course there is much more to do and many improvements can be made to the system, but surely those are outcomes that we should all celebrate.

Is all rosy in the garden? Of course not. There are still many challenges, and many changes are required. There are still too many people who do not find permanent employment. There are many whose benefit applications and assessments take far too long to process, and who are left without an income in the meantime. As has already been said, the transition from disability living allowance to personal independence payments is proving to be a challenge. For all that, however, the evidence that I see on my visits suggests that many of our fellow citizens are being given a new lease of life by the Government's approach to welfare, and the central assumption that there is nothing compassionate about—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dawn Primarolo): Order. The hon. Gentleman's time is up.
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11.52 am

Dame Anne Begg (Aberdeen South) (Lab): I too, pay tribute to the WOW campaigners not only for securing more than 100,000 signatures to the petition, but for securing today's debate. If anything could be said to illustrate the effectiveness of social media in opening up the lives of disabled people and allowing them to connect with other people throughout the country, it is an event such as this, inspired by the ability to connect with others who may be experiencing similar trials and tribulations—in this instance, at the hands of the Department for Work and Pensions.

The Government say that they are not picking on disabled people and those with severe health problems. Let us look at the evidence. The main benefits that are paid to people with disabilities and health problems are ESA, benefits paid following work capability assessments, and the new personal independence payment which will replace the disability living allowance. Every one of those benefits is currently undergoing enormous changes and reforms, initiated by the Welfare Reform Act 2012.

We know that those reforms are not going well. Only this week, we learnt that the work capability reassessments had been suspended, and that Atos, the company delivering them, wants to end its contract. We are hearing rumours that a face-to-face work capability assessment in the home is taking up to six months to arrange. We know that those who are lucky enough to receive ESA, if they are in the work-related activity group and claiming the contributory element, will receive the benefit for only a year. Also, as has been mentioned, the people who are in the contributory ESA group are the ones who have worked all their lives—who have paid their national insurance and who thought they were paying into an insurance scheme that would look after them if the worst came to the worst and they were not able to work any more. Interestingly therefore, it is not just those who come from the poorest backgrounds, and whose whole families have perhaps depended on benefits, who are suffering under this Government—although that group most definitely is—but it is also people who thought they had done the right thing. It is people who have done what previous Governments asked and have worked and contributed and have done as well as they could.

The National Audit Office report published today shows that the roll-out of PIP seems to be in chaos as well. There are huge backlogs, and there are constituents of mine who have been waiting for over six months to get a determination after they have had their face-to-face interview.

Caroline Lucas: The hon. Lady is making a powerful point. These delays in PIP payments in particular are causing so much stress. Does she share my horror that, for example, in Brighton some front-line services

have been doing their own surveys of how long people have been waiting, and the advice centre in Brighton and Hove found that only three of 60 clients—fewer than 5%—have actually been assessed? Does she agree that that causes massive uncertainty and stress?

Dame Anne Begg: Yes, and it is particularly difficult for people who have quite progressive diseases. For those with terminal illnesses, there is an attempt to get payments out quite quickly, but even then it takes

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longer than normal. I have a constituent who has very aggressive multiple sclerosis who is desperate for this help but who cannot get it because he does not fall under the special measures category.

The benefits I have mentioned are those that everybody knows are specifically for disabled people and people with health problems, but there are other benefits, too, and other changes to benefits that fall disproportionately on that group. Which single group is hardest hit by the changes to housing benefit and local housing allowance? It is disabled people and those with health problems. Which single group is hardest hit by the bedroom tax? Surprise, surprise, it is disabled people and those with health problems. Which group is hardest hit by the removal of the full council tax relief? Again, it is disabled people and people with health problems. That is because all these changes fall on people of working age, and the people of working age who are most likely to be on these benefits are people who cannot work because of a disability or a health problem.

Who is the hardest hit by the overall benefits cap? The Government said it would not be disabled people, and it probably is not them, but it is their carers, particularly if they are family carers. Who is hardest hit by the social care cuts that mean that local authorities are not able to provide the social care that people need? Of course, it is disabled people and those with health problems. If universal credit ever comes in, severe disablement premium goes, which was paid to people who are single and living alone. Because it is not just the obvious benefits that go to disabled people that are being cut or are in chaos or not working, but all these other benefits and changes that are also affecting people who have a disability and their families, there is an absolute need for a cumulative impact assessment. I have been calling for a cumulative impact assessment for a number of years now and that is because no one knows precisely the full force of everything that may be falling on individual families and individual households. Unless we do that cumulative impact assessment, we will never know, and in the meantime those families and households are struggling to make ends meet, falling into debt and having to make the choice between eating and heating. They are having to make choices we should not have to make in 21st century Britain. That is why I am very happy to support this debate this afternoon.

11.59 am

Mr Alan Reid (Argyll and Bute) (LD): I congratulate the War on Welfare campaign on its petition and on securing this debate. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) on introducing it today. Although I have not supported every detail of the Government's welfare reform, I certainly support the overall thrust of what they are doing. Under Labour, the welfare budget had spiralled out of control and become unsustainable. Liberal Democrats in government are building a stronger economy and a fairer society so that everyone can get on in life. We are fully committed to enabling people with disabilities to have the same opportunities and choices in life as everyone else. It is important to note that disabled people are moving into jobs at the rate of more than 100 placements every working day.

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Liz Kendall: Why does the hon. Gentleman support the bedroom tax, which has affected 2,300 people in Leicester? The council has overspent the discretionary fund by £100,000 this year because there has been such demand for it, and it had to increase it from £212,000 last year to £813,000 this year because of a tax that he supported. Why does he support it?

Mr Reid: The hon. Lady's question is based on the wrong premise. I actually voted against the bedroom tax. As I said in my introduction, I did not support every detail of the Government's proposals.

It is interesting to note all the opposition from Labour Members to everything the Government are doing. I look forward to hearing what the Opposition spokesperson says about this later, because I understand that Labour do not propose to spend any more on welfare payments than the Government are doing. It will therefore be interesting to hear what the official Labour line is, as opposed to all the complaints that we are hearing from its Back Benchers.

As well as tackling the economic mess that Labour left behind, Liberal Democrats in government have blocked the excesses that a Conservative-only Government would have implemented. For example, we prevented the Conservatives from freezing disability benefits. Instead, they are going up by 2.7% this year. Assessment of applications for disability benefits is an integral part of welfare reform, and this Government have improved on the system left behind by Labour. Thanks to Liberal Democrat amendments to Labour's Welfare Reform Act 2007, the Government are required to conduct five annual independent reviews of the work capability assessment. In government, we are now acting on those reviews to improve the system. Professor Harrington completed the first three reviews, and found that our efforts to improve the WCA were making a difference.

Sheila Gilmore: For the purposes of putting the record straight, the requirement for independent assessments of employment and support allowance was in the original legislation, pre-2010.

Mr Reid: I did not catch the year that the hon. Lady mentioned. The WCA was introduced by the Labour Government, and this Government have improved on it.

Following Professor Harrington's reviews, the Government gave Department for Work and Pensions decision makers more flexibility to request additional evidence, such as a letter from an applicant's consultant. The fourth independent review was completed in December 2013 by Dr Litchfield. He found that the DWP had made good progress on implementing recommendations from the previous reviews, which have made notable improvements. However, despite all the improvements to the system, and having a system that looks fine in theory, we all know from our constituency work that, in practice, Atos has failed miserably to carry out the assessment contract. Appeals have been upheld for 40% of the original decisions. That shows that there is something wrong with the initial assessments and that more improvements to the assessment system must be made.

We are all aware from our constituency case load of people waiting for many months for their assessment to be carried out. That applies to assessments for personal independence payments as well as for work capability

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assessments. The limit for PIP assessments is supposed to be 30 working days, but Atos is clearly failing miserably to meet that target. I was contacted recently by the Bute Advice Centre in my constituency. It pointed out that it, and the client, have three weeks from the initial phone call in which to complete and return the application form. The centre and the client have met the deadline on every occasion, but then the long wait begins. One client who has been waiting since 2 July 2013 has heard nothing from Atos. Two other clients on Bute have been waiting since early October. The advice centre tells me that phone calls to the Department for Work and Pensions get a helpful response, but the DWP puts the blame on Atos, and from Atos there is complete silence. That is utterly unacceptable.

Another constituent has e-mailed me to say that her current employment and support allowance claim started last May and she submitted her medical questionnaire in July. After many months of waiting, she was eventually told by Atos that her work capability assessment would be conducted two days after her contribution-based ESA ends if she is placed in the work-related activity group. Such delays make complete nonsense of the system.

It is true that any benefit awarded will be backdated but, as my constituent points out, a claimant may have been eligible for the support group at the time of their application. If their health improves over the year, they may be placed in the work-related activity group backdated to the time of their application, yet if the assessment had been conducted quickly, they may have been placed in the support group. If the person has savings, their ESA will stop after a year, and that may well be before it has even started to be paid. That just makes nonsense of the system.

The long delays are very unfair to claimants, putting them under increased financial pressure and stress. Their suitability for work could be wrongly assessed as the assessment is completed such a long time after the application was made.

As I have said, the system looks fine in theory, and the Government have made improvements, but Atos has clearly completely failed. As we all know, it has announced that it wants to throw in the towel. The Government must get the mess created by Atos's abject failure sorted out as a matter of urgency, appoint a company that can do the job properly and get the backlog cleared as quickly as possible. People applying for disability benefits deserve their application to be assessed speedily and accurately.

Simon Danczuk (Rochdale) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman take any responsibility for the Government whom he supports?

Mr Reid: The hon. Gentleman should remember that Atos was appointed by the Labour Government. It was an appalling decision by the previous Labour Government, and this Government inherited the contract. I support most of the Government's welfare reforms. They are fine in theory, but in practice, there is a huge number of problems. Atos has failed completely. The Government must get the mess sorted out urgently, and I hope that the Minister will be able to reassure us on that point today.

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12.7 pm

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friends the Members for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) and for Easington (Grahame M. Morris) for securing this debate via the Backbench Business Committee and for bringing to our attention the fact that the WOW campaign has gathered 104,000 signatures on its petition on the Directgov website.

The fact that this motion has to be considered by Parliament is an indictment of our political system. It is an issue and a cause that I brought to the House's attention via a debate in Westminster Hall a little over a year ago. I am pleased to say that it continues to receive the deserved consideration of this House as a wrong that needs to be righted. The truth is that we do not need an independent cumulative impact assessment to tell us what is going on. Every week, Members in this House have to deal with the devastating damage caused by the so-called welfare reforms.

In my own constituency of Gateshead, the reforms are having a profound impact on people's lives, disproportionately affecting disabled people, their carers and their families. The policies and their implementation are causing immeasurable anxiety and tangible human suffering. We all know what the effects of them are. We support this motion as a means of exposing the truth, which is that the Government are driven by one consistent ideological principle—a determination to protect the privileged by demonising and attacking the poorest and most vulnerable in our society.

Guto Bebb (Aberconwy) (Con) *rose—*

Ian Mearns: I will not give way for the moment.

How else can we explain the fact that of the £63.4 billion of public expenditure cuts forecast by 2015, 29% of them fall on disabled people who make up only 8% of the population? Even worse, how else can we explain the fact that those with the most severe disabilities, who make up only 2% of the population, have to endure 15% of the cuts? In the face of that, can we continue to regard ourselves as a civilised society?

What kind of civilised society seeks to finance its deficit recovery programme out of the suffering of the poorest and most vulnerable while managing to target tax cuts to the most privileged? Thirty-one people died in the three years to October 2011 waiting for their appeals against the assessments which said that they were able to work. The BBC's "Panorama" programme reported in July 2012 that, on average, 32 people died every week who the Government had declared could be helped into work in the medium term.

Grahame M. Morris (Easington) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making some excellent and powerful points. Does he agree that the work capability test is not fit for purpose and that taking a template from an American health care model on the descriptors is absolute nonsense?

Ian Mearns: I am about to discuss that, and I could not agree with my hon. Friend more. Put bluntly, this Government, the Department for Work and Pensions and their agencies are telling us, repeatedly, that people who are dying are fit for work.

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Between January 2011 and November 2011, some 10,600 employment and support allowance claims ended and a date of death was recorded within six weeks of the claim end. This Government have repeatedly refused to release updated 2013 statistics on deaths within six weeks of the end of an ESA claim, calling such requests for information “vexatious”. Four people a day are dying within six weeks of being declared fit for work under the WCA—it is scandalous and an indictment of this place. Some might consider this bad taste, but I am told that there was a story doing the rounds that when the bones of Richard III were discovered in Leicester, Atos carried out an assessment and judged him fit for work. It would be funny if it was not so sad. It is a sad truth faced by 12,000-plus families who every year face their own personal tragedies of this nature—it is a reality.

As if not bad enough, workfare and welfare reforms are of course only part of the impact; cuts to local government expenditure also have the heaviest impact on the most vulnerable. The largest share of adult social care users—older people, people with physical disabilities and people with mental health problems—have to bear the brunt of reductions in social care. The recent joint inquiry by the all-party groups on local government and on disability showed that four in 10 disabled people are failing to have their basic social care needs met and that nearly half of disabled people say that services are not supporting them to get out and about in the community. Three quarters of the 4,500 respondents to “The Tipping Point” survey said that losing some of their disability living allowance income would mean they would require more social care support from their local council, at a time when the councils with the largest numbers of chronically sick and disabled people are suffering the largest cuts in grant funding from central Government.

In my youth I was actively involved in many Amnesty International campaigns, such as those on Chile and South Africa, and those against oppressive regimes in central and Latin America. I never would have imagined then that in 2014 the UK would be the subject of an Amnesty campaign, yet at its annual general meeting in 2013 Amnesty UK passed a resolution recognising that the human rights of sick and disabled people in the UK had been dreadfully compromised.

The convention on the rights of persons with disabilities, which the UK ratified in 2009, makes provisions for access to support services, personal assistance access to social protection, and poverty reduction programmes for disabled people and their families. The Government’s cold and callous welfare changes are in direct contravention of all those stipulations. The time has come for a grown-up debate, to move beyond the smearing of poor, disabled and chronically sick people—demonising them should stop. We need to move to a debate on how we design a society where all UK citizens are supported and given opportunities to contribute. I utterly support today’s debate and I will vote in favour of the motion.

12.14 pm

Graham Evans (Weaver Vale) (Con): I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak on this very important subject, and it is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns).

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As a member of the Work and Pensions Committee, I understand that the benefit system is an extraordinarily complex one. The system was born out of a desire to provide support to those who need it the most. However, years of mismanagement, and well-intentioned but ill-thought-out additions and changes, have left the system in a shocking mess. Listening to accounts of mismanagement, wrong payments and the relegation of people who are taught that there is no role for them in the workplace has shown me that reform is not only important but essential.

This Government’s reforms offer responsible protection for those who need it the most, while supporting those who can move back to work. First, let me say that this Government are committed to supporting those with disabilities. Here in the UK, we are committed to spending more than £40 billion a year, which is more than Italy, Germany or France spend, and is a fifth more than the European average.

We have taken the strategic view that it is not enough to think of disability as a singular issue. Instead, we have chosen to work across Departments to look at transport, employment and social involvement. The Opposition enjoy flashing big figures; they go for the headline and do not fill in the detail. Let me give them a few figures to consider while we look at the rationale. The amount of disability living allowance underpaid per year is £190 million; the amount of DLA lost through fraud and error between 1997 and 2010 was £10 billion; and the amount that welfare payment increases between 1997 and 2010 cost the average hard-working family per year is £3,000. These stark figures show that something has gone seriously wrong in our support system.

Grahame M. Morris: I note the figures that the hon. Gentleman has given, but does he recognise that in the UK in 2009 we spent 2.9% of our GDP on disability and sickness while nine of our OECD neighbours spent an average of 3.2% of their GDP? Far from spending more than our OECD partners, we spend less.

Graham Evans: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I was talking about the current spending. I also point out to him that in 2009, 1 million more people were in relative poverty; 500,000 more children were in relative poverty; 200,000 more pensioners were in relative poverty; 150,000 more people were unemployed; 25,000 more young people were unemployed; and 1.3 million fewer people were in work. These figures show that the Government's policies are working.

I will return to my original point. When 71% of claimants are given indefinite awards, with no need for reassessment, it is no surprise that changes in conditions are not picked up. In fact, a third of people with an impairment or a long-term health condition in one year report that they do not have it a year later, according to the Office for National Statistics. People's conditions and needs change all the time. It is no surprise that people feel that they have been paid off and forgotten when no one takes the time to look at how their lives have changed; it is no surprise that those with deteriorating conditions do not receive the support that they are entitled to; and it is no surprise that those who have conditions that are improving are not helped out of a state of dependency and back into work.

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The personal independence payment, which is being introduced gradually to ensure that there is a responsible change to protect disabled people, will involve regular assessments. This means that people will receive funding that is tailored to their individual changing needs. In actuality, this will result in the proportion of people receiving the highest rate for both components increasing to 20%, and the proportion of people receiving at least one component at the highest rate increasing to 56%.

The Government's Work Choice programme has already helped 9,500 people to move into employment. The new enterprise allowance will support disabled people moving into self-employment, and my hon. Friend the Member for Meon Valley (George Hollingbery), who is no longer in his place, gave us some good examples of that. The £15 million investment in the Access to Work scheme will ensure that small businesses do not have to bear the costs of additional aids or equipment when taking on disabled staff. This programme helps more than 30,000 disabled people to gain mainstream employment, and stay in employment, every year. The steps taken by this Government bring back the core principles of the welfare system: to provide support where it is needed; and, just as importantly, to enable those who can go back to work to do so. I am proud to be a member of a Government who are taking logical steps to address the fact that each person is individual, that conditions change over time and that each person in Great Britain has a place in our society.

12.19 pm

Mrs Anne McGuire (Stirling) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Graham Evans). This is not the first time that the House has called for an assessment of the cumulative impact of welfare reforms on disabled people, but this time it is being called for by not only disability organisations and the official Opposition, but by the more than 100,000 people who signed the War on Welfare petition. Like others in this House, I encourage and congratulate the people who signed it, and who made us bring this issue to the Floor of the House.

I recognise, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), that this is probably an historic occasion: it is the first time that disabled people have framed the agenda in this House. I hope that we can respect that, regardless of our views.

I recognise some of the good work that the Minister of State, Department for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Mike Penning), is trying to do, including with employers, to fulfil potential. His heart is probably—I was going to give a caveat, but I will not: his heart is in the right place. The

difficulty that we all have is not with his heart, but with his and his Government's proposals for welfare reform.

It is with sadness that I note that we are yet again asking for a cumulative impact assessment that the Government should have undertaken when they introduced their welfare reform package. Since then, there has been a pretty crude campaign of vilification of those in receipt of disability benefits. The Government have attempted to conflate the tiny proportion of claimants who defraud the system, with whom none of us in this House have any truck, with others. The hon. Member for Weaver Vale fell into that trap when he talked about

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fraud and error. Those are two completely different things. The Government have conflated those attempting to defraud the system with those legitimately in receipt of a range of benefits. As we all know in this House, that has resulted in an increase in disability hate crime.

I also feel sadness because the Prime Minister made the following commitment in 2010:

"people who are sick, who are vulnerable, the elderly—I want you to know that we will always look after you".

He even assured us that cuts would be made in a fair way, and that we would ask "those on higher incomes to shoulder more of the burden than those on lower incomes."

Yet the reality is that disabled people lose nine times more than most others, according to the Centre for Welfare Reform, and those disabled people with greater needs sometimes lose up to 19 times more than other people.

Opposition Members are not against welfare reform; indeed, as many have pointed out today, we started it when in government. In opposition, we have offered on more than one occasion to work with the Government in a consensual way to try to find a way forward. I know from conversations with disabled people that they are not against welfare reform, but they are against what has happened over the past three years, because the welfare package fails on various counts.

The Prime Minister's comments about looking after the most vulnerable run counter to the fact that the Government's welfare package disproportionately affects disabled people, who are hit simultaneously by various changes, as my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen South (Dame Anne Begg) pointed out. There is the employment and support allowance, universal credit, the bedroom tax, the benefit cap, the change from the disability living allowance to the personal independence payment, and the changes in social care provision that others have pointed out.

I want to turn briefly to PIP, because we were told that it would help the most severely disabled people. If that had been the outcome of the policy change, perhaps we could have understood it, but the Government started with a number and framed a policy around that number. The National Audit Office report published this morning is devastating; it shows that the Government went into a reform of benefits that affects the most disabled in our community without knowing where they were going, or how they would implement the reform. According to the report, on the first day of the claims process, the Government met their target, but when we get to the claims being passed to the assessment provider, that information is not recorded. The expectation is that assessments will be completed in 42 days, but 64 days is what is actually being delivered. Worst of all, the terminally ill—those who have a life expectancy of no more than six months—are having to wait 28 days. The Minister may tell me that that has changed, and I hope that it has, but it seems that a sixth of those people's total lifespan will be used up while they are in the bureaucratic morass of the PIP assessment.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): My right hon. Friend has described the effects of the Welfare Reform Act 2012; is she concerned that it was cast in a way that

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gives the Government scope, without the need for further primary legislation, to make serious changes to terms and interpretations relating to the benefits that we are talking about, including PIP? With the changes

that the Chancellor is promising in relation to annually managed expenditure, there will in future be more times when a number is fixed on, and people are squeezed off benefit to reach it.

Mrs McGuire: Yes. I could not agree more with my hon. Friend, and I am delighted that he has made his point.

The Minister got quite agitated just now. I hope that he will give us some facts and figures about the implementation of PIP, because there has been a wall of silence. We all know what is happening in our constituencies, but we are accused of giving anecdotal evidence; he is in a position to give us the real evidence.

Since 2010, it obviously has not mattered what was said to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions about his welfare reforms. He has become a victim of his rhetoric and is obsessed by the idea of his legacy. We used to have beneficiaries of the social security system; now many people feel that they are victims of that system. I ask the Secretary of State to put his cumulative impact assessment where his reforms are. I say to him, "Do the assessment, and prove me and 100,000 people out there totally wrong, if you have the courage." I say categorically that if he will not or cannot do that, we are entitled to ask why he is still in his job.

12.27 pm

Guto Bebb (Aberconwy) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Stirling (Mrs McGuire). I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) on securing this debate and representing the 104,000 petitioners. The National Audit Office report published this morning on the implementation of PIP is a disappointment, but it is important to point out, at the outset, that the report talks about the implementation, rather than the policy aims. That is important. The report is not a criticism of the policy aims. It makes it very clear that it is far too early to give any view of the implications of the policy change that is being implemented through PIP.

This issue and this debate are framed in the context of the idea that changes to the welfare state are being undertaken in response to the need for austerity. I would argue that the issue is far more important than that; it is very important that it is dealt with, not because of austerity but despite it, because we have a failing welfare system. Anybody in this Chamber who argued that, prior to 2010, we had a system that we could be proud of would be very brave indeed. It is to the credit of the Government that the welfare reform agenda is being implemented not primarily to save money, but to ensure that the system does not trap people in a way that is unproductive and unfair.

Today's debate highlights the significant problem that the Opposition have in relation to welfare reform. When I spoke to Welsh Labour Members last night, I was surprised to hear that they were on a one-line Whip for this debate. I am staggered by that, and I am pleased to see the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) here. Given that the Welsh Labour Government have produced

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significant documents—they are not particularly impressive, when one reads the detail—complaining about the impact of welfare reform in Wales, I would have expected Labour Members from Wales to highlight their concerns in a debate as important as this one. Surprisingly, they are not here. Perhaps that is because they know full well that the Labour party is committed to a zero-growth spending review. We have heard Members express a lot of passionately held points of view today; it is important to point out that in a zero-growth spending review, it is very difficult to envisage any increase in the welfare budget. That is a point that any honest Member should be happy to make from the Opposition Benches.

My hon. Friend the Member for Meon Valley (George Hollingbery) highlighted the fact that work capability assessments, the abolition of which the motion calls for, have been changed and reformed throughout the Government's period in office. Most of the recommendations of Professor Harrington's reviews have been accepted, and the number of complaints coming through my constituency office has reduced. The implication of Labour Members' speeches is that there should be no work capability assessments whatsoever, although I do not think that that is Labour's policy. Are they saying that there should or should not be some sort of work capability assessment? If we have work capability assessments, as I believe that we should, any responsible Government should obtain medical advice from experts and implement their recommendations, which is exactly what the Government are doing.

Is the system perfect? Clearly not yet. Is it a problem that 40% of cases are won on appeal? I take it as a badge of pride when I win an appeal, but of course the figure of 40% is too high. However, we are implementing the changes that have been recommended, and it is irresponsible to call for the abolition of any work capability test because that is not in keeping with the whole purpose of welfare reform—to target support at the poorest in society.

The hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington talked about the impact of removing the spare room subsidy—the so-called bedroom tax—on people with disabilities, and Labour Members told us that the policy has had a tremendous effect in many local authorities throughout England. I take a keen interest in the issue and regularly speak at length with my local authority in north Wales. Figures for Conwy county borough council and Denbighshire county council, which are both close to my constituency, show that the discretionary housing funding will probably not be spent in full and that rent arrears in north Wales housing associations are falling in two out of three cases. The statistics shows that more than two thirds of discretionary housing awards have been made because of a need arising owing to factors outside welfare reform. From listening to Opposition Members, one would think that every single change is having a huge impact, yet figures from a Labour-controlled local authority clearly show that that is not the case.

The Work programme is a success. It attempts to treat people as individuals and is getting people back to work. However, on getting people back to work, I want to highlight a disgraceful fact. Wales has European-funded projects that give people training and skills, and ensure that they get closer to the workplace, yet the Welsh Labour Government have denied any Work programme client access to those training programmes. If Labour

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were genuine about helping people back into work, they would allow disabled people in Wales who need training and support to access those programmes.

12.33 pm

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): Just after 1970, when I was first elected, I remember speaking in a debate about social security with Sir Keith Joseph, the arch-right winger of the Heath days. We all believed at the time that he was going to hit the poor, and of course—in a marginal way, compared with today—he did. However, remarkably, in the Macmillan era and even the in Heath-Keith Joseph era, the welfare state was by and large a status quo. I have to say—I will probably never say it again—that even in the Thatcher years this chaos did not happen. She did a lot of things—she privatised all the public utilities, smashed the pits and all the rest of it—but, by and large, we never had capability assessments or a march by 3,000 blind and disabled people, which was what heralded the beginning of this coalition.

I had never seen such a march. I was on crutches at the time, having had a hip replacement, so I thought that as I qualified for the march, I had better get on it. Blind people were telling me then about what was likely to happen. I hardly believed them, but we now know the truth about the mess that has been created for the people I met at the Atos headquarters last Wednesday. It was not a trade union gathering; it was a different gathering altogether. There were more wheelchairs than there were police. Fancy speaking to a crowd of 70 to 100 people surrounded by wheelchairs. Those people had been crippled for years. Like my constituent, David Cowpe, many of them had been turned down after their work capability assessment, although they were too disabled even to get out of their wheelchair without help.

That crowd I was speaking to was totally different from those at the meetings I took part in at Tower Hill, Pentonville jail and wherever. These were disabled people who wanted someone to speak up for them. There are many of them in the House of Commons today. We met some this morning and there are loads of them—I am told I am not supposed to refer to them—in the Public Gallery, and they are different. This country is made of money, so we are told. The Prime Minister tells us that money is no object—that was what he said—and that was what I told those people last Wednesday. I said, “You know, I wish he’d say money was no object for disabled people.”

It really is a scandal. When I used to do the tribunals for the National Union of Mineworkers, I would represent five people and there would be probably only nine in total at a meeting in Nottingham, but we regarded that as a busy day. Now, with this business of Atos, that lousy, rotten firm that is in charge—for a while anyway, so I am told, before it moves on to other pastures—literally hundreds of thousands of people are being turned down. When I represented people at tribunals, it used to be that we would have an appeal in four weeks and I would be off to Nottingham with those miners, but David Cowpe had cancer and waited

10 months for an appeal, and he died before he had a chance. It is high time that people understood that that is the chaos we are living in today and got rid of this mess.

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We need to realise that this is a country with enough money to give those on millionaires' row a tax cut of more than £150,000 a year. There is enough money for Trident and all kinds of things that Governments love to do, but here we are with an ageing society and a lot more disabled people—what is wrong with that; we should be providing for them—and the reason they are on demonstrations like they never were before is that they are desperate, desperate people who want us to do something to help them. That is what this debate is really about. It is about that Atos demonstration last week when people were saying—not cheering me on, but asking me—"Dennis, do something about it," and that is what we should be doing today.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dawn Primarolo): Order.

12.39 pm

Dame Angela Watkinson (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): Follow that, as they say. I promise not to play to the Gallery, but it may disappoint the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr Skinner) to know that I share his poor, working-class credentials.

The motion has three elements. The first calls for a cumulative impact assessment on a wide range of social services, which would be extremely complex. The spectrum of disability alone includes those that are unchanging, those that are progressive—there is constant change—and those that are variable, such as multiple sclerosis and bipolar disorder, where people have peaks and troughs, feeling well and extremely unwell. Such an assessment would also have a wide range of contributors, including local authorities—in particular social services departments—children and adult services, the Departments for Work and Pensions, for Communities and Local Government and for Health, care homes and charities. Collating all that information would be an enormous task.

The hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) referred to Remploy and I want to relate a visit that I made to a large Marks & Spencer distribution centre in Castle Donington with which Remploy works closely. It does not provide jobs itself, but it works in partnership with Marks & Spencer, directing people with a wide range of disabilities, including ex-servicemen who had suffered injuries, people with disabilities and everything between those two points that could possibly be imagined. There was a very good training element, with each newly employed person going through the training centre and having their strengths and weaknesses observed so that they could be placed appropriately. I would like to see such a system replicated throughout the country.

We must also remember carers in general, but in particular children who care for disabled parents and have duties to perform before they go to school in the morning, often coming home at lunchtime rather than taking part in school activities, and shopping on the way home. They prepare meals and take on all the other domestic responsibilities. It is a huge burden for young children. When they come to the end of statutory education, they have a big decision as to whether to go on to further education and think about their future career or to stay at home and care for their disabled parent. They need special attention.

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For the findings of such a wide-ranging assessment to be useful they would have to be collated over a set period, and it is too soon in the welfare reform process for the results to be meaningful.

The second part of the motion, in calling for the abolition of the work capability assessment, rather conflicts with the element of the motion that says that we should improve support for people who are not in work. The whole purpose of the assessment is to look at the level of disability of each individual and the impact that it has on their work capability, and, where possible, to provide opportunities for them to acquire work skills and get back into work and achieve independence, which is infinitely preferable to being benefit dependent.

The problems with the Atos contract are well documented and have already been referred to. The work capability assessments are important and should continue, but accuracy is essential, waiting times should not be excessive, there should be proper use of supporting medical opinion, and assessors should be of a

sufficient calibre to ensure that the process is carried out accurately, helpfully and properly. Standards throughout the country need to be consistent, and we need to recognise that some people have lifelong conditions that will never change or improve, so there is no point in their having repeat assessments.

People with learning disabilities need extra help to get into work. A very good project in my constituency does exactly that. I am running out of time; I do not know where it has all gone. Welfare reform is right in principle. We should support those who cannot work— that is non-negotiable—but identify those who can and should.

12.45 pm

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): This is one of the most important debates that we have had, certainly since I have been a Member of Parliament, because it concerns 11.3 million people who are the most vulnerable in our society. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) and those who signed the petition on securing the debate, and the Backbench Business Committee on providing time for it. We know that the mark of a decent society is how it treats the vulnerable—the sick, the disabled, the elderly. There may be a case for reforming welfare and introducing reforms, but reforms that impact most on the disabled are wrong. I will not go into the statistics because they have already been referred to, but I think it is universally accepted that the benefit cuts hitting the disabled mean that they are about 30% worse off than other people. My mind boggles as to why we should put the greatest burden of cuts on the disabled and the unwell—the vulnerable in society. That is why I welcome the opportunity to debate this matter.

I want to refer in detail to the effects on deafblind people. The changes—the stress from the form filling, the assessment and the convoluted process, and the changes in the payments—are having a tremendous impact on the 365,000 people who are both deaf and blind. A mother of two deafblind adult sons describes how one of them uses the disability living allowance. She says:

“I worry that MPs don’t understand how deafblind people communicate and just how important communicating is to them. It can be very lonely and frustrating for the deafblind person and can ultimately affect the deafblind person’s mental health. My

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eldest son uses his DLA to pay for his 1-to-1 support; that money gets him the life he wants. Before he had the right support, he exhibited very difficult behaviours because he was frustrated.”

She says that he could cause danger to himself and to others, but when he got his one-to-one support, his life completely changed. She continued:

“My son is a sociable friendly man who is now able to take a full part in everyday life and make decisions for himself, the difference is amazing! It would have been a waste of money”—

and obviously cost more—

“to place him in the secure residential accommodation.”

He is now much happier and his family is happier as well. We must always remember that saving money at one end might mean spending more money later and so be a false economy.

I also want to mention the closure of Remploy factories. I used to visit my Remploy factory in Bolton all the time. The people there were really happy to have a job to go to. They wanted to work and earn a living, not to take state benefits. The closures were very much an ideological decision by the Government. There were difficulties in the Remploy system, but they were with the management at the top of the hierarchy, who were keeping a lot of the money. The changes that were needed to make Remploy more effective should have been made at the top, where money was being wasted. The ordinary disabled person working in the factory was not causing that waste. Rather than looking properly at how to make Remploy work better, the Government managed to abolish it. As a result, many of the people who worked there have ended up unemployed. They are sitting at home, claiming state benefits and getting incredibly depressed, because—let us face it—with so many people unemployed, their chances of getting a job are negligible.

Lastly, I want to talk about work capability assessments and Atos. Much has been said about that in Parliament. My constituent, Mr Jason Froggatt, lost his job because of illness, but Atos then said that he was fit to work but needed to do so near a toilet—that was actually in the assessment. He, his wife and their son

now face losing their home because they do not have enough money. I wrote to the Secretary of State a few weeks ago about that case but am yet to receive a response. We have heard many other examples of people who are very ill being told that they are fit for work.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

12.51 pm

Jim Sheridan (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (Lab): I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame M. Morris) and all those responsible for securing this debate, which deals with the concerns of real people out there in the real world. I should clarify, for the benefit of the Opposition Whip—his knuckles are about to explode in anticipation—that I intend to join my hon. Friends in the Lobby this afternoon.

Life experiences and events change and influence our lives. I want to talk about two events in my life that influenced my political thinking significantly. The first was being unemployed for three years, through no fault of my own, simply because I had been blacklisted as a

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result of my trade union activities. I was not a shirker, because I wanted to work and support my young family, but I could not get employment.

The second experience was talking with a former Remploy worker who was about to lose his job. I remember him telling me that he was fit to work but that his face was so badly disfigured that he could not go out in public without getting a terrible reaction. I remember him saying, "Mr Sheridan, where can I work? Where can I go? If I get on a bus, people will get off. If I go into a restaurant, people will walk out. So where do I go?" The only enjoyment that man had was going out in his disabled person's car to get some privacy. That was taken away from him. This is about treating people with respect and dignity. The people who conduct the Atos assessments do not take those things into consideration.

When I was unemployed and trying to look after my young family, I was not a shirker, as some Conservative Members might have portrayed me. This debate shows how putting workers against the unemployed and public against private is a sinister but typical policy of the coalition Government.

Mr Reid: The hon. Gentleman will recall that it was a former shadow spokesperson from his party who used the word "shirker."

Jim Sheridan: Well, whoever said it, I was certainly not a shirker, because I was desperate for work but could not get it.

I look at the Minister and must say that—I sincerely hope this will not damage his career, or indeed my reputation—as Conservatives go, he is quite a decent man. I hazard a guess—it is no more than that—that he would not mind being shifted to another portfolio. Those on benefits are demonised, and no consideration is given to the circumstances behind why they are claiming. There are some in this place and in the popular press who are obsessed with demonising people on welfare or disability benefits, which I think is unfortunate.

The Minister of State, Department for Work and Pensions (Mike Penning) *rose—*

Jim Sheridan: I hope I did not offend the Minister.

Mike Penning: The hon. Gentleman might have destroyed his career by saying such nice things about me. I wanted to say that he is very generous.

Jim Sheridan: The Minister is safe in that regard, because I do not hold out any hopes for career prospects. Welfare reform has not only encouraged the "shirker" myth about the sick and the disabled, but made life increasingly difficult for them. The Minister will probably say that the Government have put in place this legislation to ensure that the right people receive benefits, but it is a tactic to divert attention from the gross abuse of power by those with money in this country. Reference has already been made to the obsession with people receiving welfare benefits, but for those with money—the tax avoiders and evaders—life goes on as normal. If only a fraction of the resources used and the time spent on

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chasing down those on welfare benefits was diverted to tackle tax avoidance and evasion, some people might understand the rationale behind it.

Like many colleagues here today, I have had many constituents come to me with various concerns about the proposed reforms. There are so many different problems that it is difficult to know where to start. The move from DLA to PIP has been a particular concern. Since that move began, fewer than one in six people who have applied have had their claims decided. As other Members have indicated, some people have died before the process is complete. That reminds me of the cases some years ago when people were dying after being diagnosed with mesothelioma cancer but while still waiting for compensation. At that time, their claim died with them.

Inclusion Scotland has highlighted the case of the father of an applicant who was told that they would have wait at least 10 months for any kind of decision, and perhaps even for a first assessment. A constituent of mine who is undergoing cancer treatment has been told that the eight-week time frame given by DWP is an unrealistic amount of time in which to process an application and offer an assessment slot. When my staff called the MPs' hotline, they were told that they simply cannot process the number of applicants as there are not enough staff. They also say that most people who have applied for PIP will not be entitled to it, even before individual cases have been looked at. If that is the mindset of the staff processing the applications, it is hard to see how balanced decisions will be made.

When people finally hear about their assessments, there is not much hope. Only 15.4% of new claims have received a decision, and only 12,654 of the 220,300 people who have made a new claim since April 2013 have been awarded some rate of PIP. A constituent of mine got in touch because her father had been diagnosed with lung cancer. Because there is a possibility that his treatment will work, giving him a life expectancy of up to five years, he has not been classed as terminally ill. He is not well enough to attend a medical assessment and so will have to wait longer for a home visit. It appears that letters from his GP, cancer doctor and cancer hospital are not enough to prove the seriousness of his illness.

Like many people in this House and outside it, I had the pleasure of hearing my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mr Skinner) explain clearly where this Government's priorities lie. Even under Mrs Thatcher we did not treat people like this. I wonder why, even given these austere times, we are now treating people in this country in that way.

12.59 pm

Dr Eilidh Whiteford (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) on securing this debate.

I pay special tribute to the campaigners who are with us today, particularly John McArdle and Susan Archibald, who have travelled from Scotland and who have done so much over a long period for disabled people's rights and well-being. The main thing we talked about this morning at the breakfast meeting was the ongoing Atos debacle and the consequences for the

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lives of sick and disabled people of the abject failure of the work capability assessment. I was told that in 2011 over 10,000 people died within six weeks of being placed in the work-related activity group or being found fit for work.

We have known for a long time that there are major problems with the assessment process, and I am sure that all MPs have seen constituents in their surgeries about it, but to get it so very wrong so many thousands of times frankly beggars belief. The Government need to take their head out of the sand and start listening to the experiences of very sick and disabled people whose lives are being made worse by the callous disregard of the system.

The other key issue is the roll-out of personal independence payments and the expected reduction in the number of eligible claimants. The Government are looking at this through the wrong end of the telescope. Raising the bar on eligibility will not make anyone any less sick or any less disabled; it will just make it more difficult for them to function in society and place more pressure on those on whom they rely for their care and support.

Several times now I have met a great group of young people with learning disabilities in Fraserburgh. They call themselves People First, they are very vocal, and they are very concerned about the impact of welfare reform on their lives. A number of them have had problems with Atos assessments and the benefits system more generally. Most of them have at various times been on courses to improve their employability, some have done work experience placements, and some have had supported employment, but the challenge is to find employers who can take them on and give them a proper job. I have been working with employers and talking to social enterprises, but the number of opportunities does not match the number of adults looking for work, and the work capability assessment does not cut them any slack. It is all very well to place adults with learning difficulties in the work-related activity group, but we need to be honest with them about the real barriers they face in the workplace.

Almost all the adults I meet in this context are living at home with older parents or living in supported accommodation with a lot of family support. Carers are having to attend assessments, fill out forms, and answer questions. If people find a work placement, they have to get support in doing so, yet carers are also having to pick up the tab if people are sanctioned. Research by the Scottish Government on the sanctions regime shows that the most vulnerable claimants are the most likely to be sanctioned, and that is very worrying.

In Scotland, a cumulative impact assessment has already been carried out. It shows that £4.5 billion of cuts are resulting from welfare reform, but it is much harder to assess how much of that is falling directly and indirectly on disabled people. Citizens Advice Scotland estimates that disabled people stand to lose £1 billion in benefits payments alone, but, in a sense, that is the easy bit to calculate. It is important to understand that it is not just changes to disability benefits that affect disabled people. We debated the bedroom tax at length yesterday, and I will not dwell on that, except to repeat that 80% of households in Scotland affected by the bedroom tax are the home of a disabled person. The vast majority of people paying the bedroom tax are disabled, so the

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steps we have taken in Scotland to mitigate its impact will primarily benefit disabled people. Similarly, the decision to mitigate the cut in council tax benefit for over 500,000 households will be helping disabled people, along with other low-income households. However, working disabled people—probably about half the working-age disabled population—are also likely to have been badly affected by changes to tax credits, especially if they have children. Disabled people are more likely to be in part-time or low-paid jobs and therefore more likely to depend on extra support, and they are likely to be worse off overall because of changes to the tax and benefits system.

Citizenship and dignity need to be at the heart of our tax and benefits system. No one in this room today can say with any certainty that the relative affluence that we enjoy might not end at any time due to unforeseen health problems. We do know, though, that the majority of us will become carers at some point in our lives. In that respect, we are all stakeholders in this debate, and we all want to know that there is a safety net should we need it. Over recent years, that safety net has been eroded to the point that it is no longer functioning.

One of the most profoundly disheartening experiences for me as an MP since being elected in 2010 has been the relentless way in which disabled and sick people have been vilified and stigmatised in the public discourse about welfare reform. Those who had very little responsibility for the financial collapse and subsequent economic problems have nevertheless had to carry the can. The attempt to discredit disabled people in order to justify harsh and punitive cuts in their already fairly paltry incomes is quite shameful. It appals me that the most disadvantaged have been asked to pick up the tab disproportionately for the profligacy of others. As we look to the future, we see further cuts of £12 billion, at least, promised in the years ahead. For disabled people in Scotland, the choice between two very different futures is opening up before them: one with decisions on welfare made in Scotland, or one where further cuts slash their incomes even more. That choice must seem very stark indeed.

If this motion passes, it will be the third time this year that the Government have been defeated on a welfare-related motion. On two previous occasions, the Government have ignored Parliament in this respect; perhaps today it will be third time lucky. The cumulative impact assessment that the motion calls for is just the first step. I urge the Government to listen.

1.5 pm

Katy Clark (North Ayrshire and Arran) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford), who always makes very informed contributions on this subject.

This is the third time this week we have debated issues to do with benefits. In all these debates, the position of people with disabilities should be one of the major considerations. Earlier in the week, we debated the change from the retail prices index to the consumer prices index in the uprating of benefits. That has a big impact on many people with disabilities, who, in effect, will be getting less than they would have if we had kept to the old system of uprating. Yesterday, as has been said, we discussed the bedroom tax, which is another policy of this Government that disproportionately impacts on people with disabilities.

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Today, as a result of the campaigning work of many disabled people and many disabled people's organisations, including Disabled People Against Cuts and the WOW petition campaign, we are debating a motion that has come about as a result of the work of people campaigning on these issues who are at the sharp end and have disabilities themselves. It is a huge step forward that we are able to get debates of this nature. In the previous Parliament, before the reforms that led to the introduction of the Backbench Business Committee, there would have been no way for people outside campaigning on issues that they know about to get their words discussed in this place. I therefore strongly welcome this debate.

I was elected in 2005. Since the general election in 2010, I have seen a massive increase in the number of people with disabilities and those who are sick contacting my office because of the Government's various welfare changes. I would like to focus on two constituents who have been in touch with me and, I think, illustrate routine problems of the kind that people are facing. My constituent John Scott was diagnosed with cancer in the summer of 2013 and sent in his application for personal independence payment soon afterwards. I raised his case in Parliament on 13 January, when he was waiting for his initial medical assessment. At that point, he had had no payment, never mind a decision in his case. Since then, he has been in for an operation and had his bladder removed owing to the extent of his cancer, and cancerous cells were found in the muscle tissue in his prostate. He is still recovering, but to date has not received a medical assessment to see whether he qualifies for a personal independence payment. He has therefore not had a payment since July last year, although he has obviously been struggling with household bills and accruing arrears, and has had to carry on without any assistance.

Another constituent, Brian McAllister, last year had his benefits stopped and was found fit to work by Atos. He put in an appeal and was placed in the work-related activity category. He believes that he should be in the support group, as he has an inoperable back problem and has also been diagnosed with brain injury and has related mental health issues. He is separated from his partner, but they have a child and therefore found it mutually beneficial that he stay in the house to supervise the child while his former partner was at work. However, the Department for Work and Pensions thought that they were co-habiting and sanctioned his benefits. We found out last week, of course, that one in five people in receipt of jobseeker's allowance who are having their benefits sanctioned are disabled. My constituency office is increasingly having to deal with people who face that problem.

As a result of the fact that the DWP thought it inappropriate that my constituent stay in the house, he moved from Largs to Dalry—there are a number of miles between them—which has put more strain on the family and, obviously, led to more child care problems. He submitted an appeal against the decision to place him in the work-related group and he has been waiting four months for a decision. His paperwork was lost—which is quite common, as I am sure many Members are aware—and the case has been passed around the country. It has been dealt with in different offices in England and Scotland and he still awaits a decision. These are very normal cases, which any constituency Member will have

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come across. There is a very high success rate when people appeal and that rate is far higher when they get representation.

The Government have let down some of the most vulnerable people through their changes to the welfare system since 2010. They are also letting some people down at the most vulnerable point in their lives. I therefore support the motion, which calls for a cumulative impact assessment, and all those who are campaigning against the attacks on the sick, the vulnerable and the disabled.

1.11 pm

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): I want to humanise the debate somewhat. I spoke to a number of disabled people this morning and what they had to say was amazing. Over the past couple of years or so, my surgeries, like those of most Members present, have been visited by lots and lots of disabled people who want to discuss the benefits system. The reality is that many disabled people have given up. A lady said to me this morning, "Mr Lavery, do you understand what it's like to be treated like an animal?" That rocked me. Why are disabled people being made to feel as if they are being herded into a corner and treated like animals?

That is how they feel. They do not even feel that they are counted as a statistic in life anymore, other than as being an embarrassment to society. They feel as if they are personal rejects—total outcasts from society—because they are disabled and unwell. We should not be making people feel like that in one of the richest countries in the world.

The attack on the disabled and the vulnerable is relentless. Disabled people, the sick, people who have been sick for many years and those who might have just become sick or disabled in the past few years need a voice. We should not forget that it is fantastic being able-bodied and well in health, but some of us are just around the corner from being poorly, disabled, sick, unwell or perhaps terminally ill. We should not forget that when we make decisions in this place to hammer the disabled and the vulnerable, because we could be next.

We should put ourselves in some of these people's shoes: they become ill or have been ill; they attend test after test; and they attend the Atos centres, which are like the scene in "Little Britain" where "Computer says no." There is no flexibility and they have to try to explain their problems to somebody who is not even medically qualified.

Grahame M. Morris: I apologise for interrupting a very passionate speech, but is my hon. Friend aware that the Department for Work and Pensions is facing a court case because of its failure to provide proper information and support to blind and partially sighted people whom they are supposed to be helping to get into employment?

Ian Lavery: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I am very much aware of the fact that there are a number of cases proceeding through the courts, but as we have seen over the past couple of weeks the courts do not seem to be terribly in favour of the disabled or the disadvantaged.

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I want us to put ourselves in the shoes of the people who face these tests. After they leave the test centre, they wait for weeks and weeks—in fact, they wait for months and months—for the envelope to drop through the door and tell them whether they have been accepted for benefits or not. Can Members imagine how these people, particularly those with mental health problems, feel every morning, waiting for that envelope? People who are looking for employment and support allowance or jobseeker's allowance are being sanctioned for different reasons. A constituent of mine was sanctioned by the DWP after he attended a hospital appointment because he has a severe heart condition. As a result of being sanctioned, he did not have any money to put food on the table for months. It has been suggested that people have been sanctioned when they are in a coma in a hospital bed in intensive care. Is that any way to treat ordinary human beings? The answer is, of course not.

Let us look at the other legislation that has been introduced. Just in the past few weeks, up to 50,000 people in this country had to pay the bedroom tax. A lady committed suicide because of the bedroom tax and then her family got a letter from this Government saying they were sorry, but she should not have had to pay because she was covered by the pre-1996 housing benefit regulations.

Universal credit is a failure. It has been rolled out in two or three places and is an absolute car crash, but it is not the DWP or Members of Parliament who are suffering; it is the disabled people who rely on these benefits who are anxious and suffering as a result of this Government's absolute nonsense and chaotic organisation.

People who make ESA applications have to wait to learn whether they are in one group or the other. How many have appealed? I believe that 40% have appealed successfully, and others are waiting to appeal. The

hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Mr Reid) mentioned how long they are waiting. People's conditions change before their appeal is heard. It is utter nonsense. The way in which we are treating these people is an absolute disgrace.

A lot of facts and figures have been mentioned today. The 11.3 million disabled people—8% of the population—are bearing 29% of the cuts. Those with the severest disabilities—2% of the population—are bearing 15% of them. It is an absolute outrage.

To sum this up, people are dying as a result of the Welfare Reform Act 2012. Disabled people are being evicted from their homes and people are being forced into the arms of unscrupulous lenders. Is this really the sort of country we want to leave to the next generation? This is IDS UK.

1.19 pm

Simon Danczuk (Rochdale) (Lab): Let me start by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) and those who have campaigned so passionately for this debate to take place. I want to read out a letter that was recently received by one of my constituents:

"Dear Miss HOLT,

You are now approaching the end of the 1st Stage of your Intensive Job Focused Activity. We hope that all the activity or

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training intervention completed so far has not only supported you to achieve your aspirations but has moved you closer to the job market.

You will shortly enter the 2nd Stage of your Intensive Job Focused activity.

Sessions and Workshops may vary depending on the centre you attend."

The letter was sent to my constituent Sheila Holt on 30 January. I am sad to have to inform the House that Sheila will not be able to attend the second stage of her intensive job-focused activity because she has been in a coma since December. Members of her family have repeatedly informed the DWP and Seetec that she is not well, but those organisations have continued to harass them.

To recap, Sheila has suffered from severe bipolar disorder since childhood and has regularly had traumatic experiences. She has not been in employment since she was 16, but she was pushed into the Work programme before Christmas. She found it extremely difficult, and she was also concerned about having to pay more tax because of changes to council tax benefit. On 17 December, she was sectioned under the Mental Health Act, because she was struggling to cope. While in hospital, she had a heart attack, which caused her to be in coma. Now, at the end of February, I can report to the House that Sheila is still in a coma, but is in a stable condition in the Floyd unit at Birch Hill hospital. Her sister and family continue to visit her daily and, at their request, I have also visited her.

The important point is that before the election, the Prime Minister often toured the TV studios to talk about "broken Britain". I must say that if his idea of fixing broken Britain means hounding disabled people suffering from mental breakdowns and harassing their distressed relatives, I would prefer the broken Britain that previously existed.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington mentioned the bedroom tax that will punish disabled people who need extra rooms for carers, and the scrapping of crisis loans on which disabled people rely. This Government have demonstrated that helping disabled people is simply not a priority. I am also concerned by the continuing uncertainty about the future of the independent living fund. The Greater Manchester Coalition of Disabled People has brought to my attention that at least 873 people in Greater Manchester currently rely on it. Will the Minister tell us whether that fund will remain available for disabled people?

Mr Deputy Speaker, you will not find anybody in this House who is more keen on welfare reform, but to make such reforms the right values must be in place. From what we have seen during the past three years, it is pretty clear that this Government cannot be trusted to reform welfare fairly, and people such as Sheila Holt are paying the price. I want to end with a comment made by Sheila's sister Linda, who said: "Sheila can never live a full life again".

That is a reminder that although the people of this country will have an opportunity to get rid of this Government next May, the damage that the Government are doing will last for decades.

1.23 pm

Mark Lazarowicz (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful for the chance to speak briefly in this debate, and I thank the hon. Members who arranged

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it. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) said in the opening speech, in this debate we in Parliament are giving voice to the thousands of disabled people and many others throughout the country who are concerned about the impact of Government welfare policies on those with disabilities.

Like many hon. Members, in preparing for this debate I thought that the most useful thing I could do was to highlight the experience of, and briefly quote, some organisations who work daily with disabled people in my constituency. The welfare rights officer at the Royal National Institute of Blind People Scotland, whose Edinburgh office is in my constituency, has told me:

“The main issues that we are seeing in the RNIB service are long delays in the applications for PIP. So far I have only had one decision out of 9 claims made between July and November of last year... Clients making PIP claims are waiting 3 months and longer for medical assessments...also, if assessment has been carried out still not getting a decision from DWP.”

I am sure that hon. Members are aware of the report published today by the National Audit Office, the spending watchdog, which has highlighted, as one would no doubt understand, that such experiences are not unique. In its words, thousands of disabled people are facing “distress and financial difficulties”, because claims for the new personal independence payment are taking too long to process. Most claimants are waiting more than three months for their cases to be decided, rather than the target of 71 days, while terminally ill patients are waiting up to a month, instead of getting a decision, as they are meant to do, within 10 days.

I have been told by Waverley Care, a charity that provides care and support to people living with HIV or hepatitis C, that as a result of the overall benefit changes, the case load of staff dealing with benefits has increased dramatically, especially regarding appeals. It says that an increasing number of people are going to it for help because they find it too daunting to deal with the Department for Work and Pensions. Demand has also gone up sharply for the food parcels that it distributes, as has demand for help from its hardship funds. Typically, it has found that people are struggling to pay for food, toiletries and fuel. One reason why the demand for food parcels has increased is that people are running out of money between benefit payments, often because they have been switched to a benefit on which they receive less money, but also because, in the process of being switched from one benefit to another, there is a gap of two to three weeks during which they do not receive any money.

I have received similar information and reports from HIV Scotland, and reports from Citizens Advice Scotland again highlight that such experiences are not unique to my constituency, as I am sure hon. Members would understand and expect. I have spoken not only to organisations, but directly to disabled people who are going through those experiences daily. On the national day of demonstrations about Atos, I went along to join disabled people at the demonstration outside its Edinburgh headquarters, which happens to be situated in my constituency.

Like colleagues across the House, I of course hear the experiences at my surgery every week of people whose lives are being turned upside down by the impact of Government welfare policies, of people who are sanctioned without any apparent cause and—in relation to all the

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problems of the work capability assessment procedure, which many hon. Members have mentioned—of people who are rejected in spite of having the clearest medical advice that they are incapable of doing the work that they are expected to do.

I contacted Inclusion Scotland, which represents a wide range of organisations involved with disability issues, and I am afraid that its report just highlights the fact that although we have so far seen chaos—as

well as inhumanity and, bluntly, cruelty—the way Government policies are going suggests that the worst is yet to come. It highlights that the consequences of those policies, taken together, will be incredibly damaging for so many disabled people in this country. In Scotland alone, 80,000 working-age disabled people will lose some or all of the mobility allowance to which they would otherwise have been entitled if the DLA entitlement criteria were still used, while 90,000 fewer disabled people in Scotland will qualify for the assistance with their care needs and daily living costs to which they would otherwise have been entitled under the DLA eligibility criteria.

The same experience is of course true across the entire UK. Under this Government's welfare reforms during the past four years, we have had chaos, misery and a bureaucratic nightmare, as well as a waste of money with the bedroom tax, as we are increasingly seeing throughout the country. The policies are fundamentally wrong and they need to be reversed.

1.29 pm

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Like other Members, I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) for securing this important debate. I also pay a huge tribute to the petition proposers and supporters, and all the people who are watching this debate, either in person or on Twitter. They will have noticed that the number of Members on the Government Benches has gone up to three—it was two until a few moments ago. Sadly, that reflects the priority that Government Members give to this issue. I pay tribute in particular to Francesca Martinez, who has done so much to bring forward the petition that we are discussing this afternoon.

I will focus on the work capability assessment, which was introduced by the last Administration in 2008 and has so very clearly failed people in need. The British Medical Association's GP committee voted unanimously in 2012 that, after four years, the policy had been a failure. It was clear when it was introduced that it was part of an attempt to appear to be hard on benefits and to be clamping down. It happened at the same time as things were being made harder for lone parents, with more and more conditions being piled on. It is part of the rhetoric about the deserving poor versus the undeserving poor that, sadly, we still hear today. I was disappointed that the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), on taking up her post as shadow Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, used the opportunity of her first interview to say that she would be tougher than the Tories on people on benefits.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): My hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West did not say that. She said that she would be tougher on welfare spending, not on people on benefits.

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Caroline Lucas: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for the clarification, but, to be honest, it does not make much difference. In my view, benefits should be payable on the basis of need, not on the basis of an arbitrary cap. It is on precisely that point that the official Opposition and I part company. It will be deeply disappointing if the official Opposition abstain on this motion. There is a lot of sound and fury from Labour Members, but that must be followed through in a vote. I cannot understand why the official Opposition would not vote for this motion.

Sheila Gilmore: Does the hon. Lady agree that there are some forms of welfare spending that we should bring down? In my view, one of those is the excessive amount that is paid to private landlords through housing benefit. I am certainly in favour of reducing that form of welfare spending. Is she not?

Caroline Lucas: I am very much in favour of that if the hon. Lady wants to put it under the heading of welfare spending, but I am not sure that most people would. We can argue about the precise language, but the official Opposition will demonstrate later this afternoon that they are sitting on their hands. That is a great shame.

Let me make some progress, because the purpose of my speech is not primarily to attack the official Opposition, but to attack the Government. This afternoon, the Government have witnessed hon. Members giving case after case from their own experiences of the impact of the welfare reforms that the Government have introduced. I will talk about what the figures mean for Brighton and Hove, and tell the House about the local advice agencies in Brighton and Hove that came together to produce a powerful report on their experiences of working with ill people and people with disabilities. Those agencies include the local citizens advice bureau, Advice Brighton and Hove, Age UK and the Federation of Disabled People.

To illustrate the reality behind the figures, I will talk about two local case studies from Macmillan that were included in the report. It mentions Mr C, a 56-year-old single man who, following cancer of the spine, lost his mobility and became confined to a wheelchair. Mr C was forced to stop work owing to ill health and constant pain. Macmillan made contact to start the PIP application process last September. To my knowledge, it is still not resolved. At the same time, an application was made for ESA. That application followed a similar path to the PIP application. Mr C is still being paid the assessment phase rate of just £71.70 a week, with no information from Atos as to when it will assess him further. Four months on, we are still counting and he is still waiting.

Macmillan also relayed the story of Mr J, a 32-year-old who is suffering from advanced bowel cancer and who came to the charity for help. It took more than 10 weeks for him to be assessed. His wife was acting as his full-time carer because he was so ill. She was also looking after their baby and young child. The report states:

"Throughout this process both Mr and Mrs J were very anxious and suffering serious financial hardship. Mr J at this time was seriously ill, vomiting day and night plus major issues re fatigue due to chemotherapy etc. Both also felt throughout the period that they were not believed and had been labelled scroungers and benefit cheats by the DWP."

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The work by Advice Brighton and Hove makes it clear that people who are applying for PIP—some of the most vulnerable people—are being left without adequate finances. That is having a massive impact on their physical and emotional well-being. The cases in the report are dreadful, but they are no longer surprising. I have multiple examples of sick and disabled constituents who have been awarded no points, but have then been assessed for benefits under the Government's regime.

The DLA regime is being tightened, even for disabled children such as my five-year-old constituent who has cystic fibrosis and needs constant 24-hour care to prevent her from falling and being a danger to herself and others. Her DLA has been cut from the higher to the lower rate. Just before Christmas, her parents asked for that to be reconsidered, but it still has not happened. As well as the loss of essential financial support, the family have lost their eligibility for things such as the blue badge.

Another of my constituents has, at last, got a date for a medical assessment in March, after submitting her application in August last year. In the meantime, funding for her electric wheelchair has been stopped. She managed to get funding for three months through the council's discretionary fund, so she has not lost it yet, but she is extremely worried about what will happen if her claim is not processed in time.

I hope that the House will forgive me for taking up a little more time, but I want to give the example of a constituent who suffers from severe mental ill health. After months of delays, which caused her extreme anxiety, and with support workers very concerned about her suicidal state, an application for benefits that was submitted in August last year has only recently been resolved. She has rightly been placed in the support group, which means that the DWP recognises that she is definitely unable to work. Despite that, she was put through months of unnecessary anxiety.

Many people feel that the system is extremely counter-productive, in the sense that it makes people who are already ill much more ill. We hear example after example of that. I hope that the Government will not ignore them. If advice agencies are getting together to assess these problems, it must be about time that the Government looked at the impact of their own policies.

The conclusion of the report by my local advice agencies is that people are going through what they call "awful experiences" while waiting for their claims to be processed. Advisers are spending disproportionate amounts of time making calls to the DWP and the privatised PIP providers. That is frustrating and is a drain on resources. Claims that need to be followed up are taking more than double the amount of time that is usually allocated to such work. The advice sector in Brighton and Hove has made it very clear that the situation is untenable. It is looking to the Government to sort it out. In the meantime, it is asking for local contacts within the DWP and Atos so that organisations do not have to keep wasting huge amounts of time contacting DWP and Atos nationally. I hope that the Minister will respond to that specific request. It is quite a small one, but it would make a huge amount of difference to the time that is spent following up claims. Finally, other hon. Members have given the shocking figures on the number of people who are dying while appealing against a decision that they are fit to work.

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Not every death will be related to fitness for work or to the stress of an unfair or wrong assessment. If a link could be proven, there would be a case for corporate manslaughter. However, Ministers cannot ignore the strong likelihood that significant numbers of people are being assessed as fit for work by the Government when, in reality, they are very close to death. That has to change.

1.37 pm

Sheila Gilmore (Edinburgh East) (Lab): Like other Members, I have supported the call for a cumulative impact assessment and voted for it in this House. I do not know why it is so difficult for the Government to work out the impact of their policies. The people who are affected know what the impact is.

Jean and Jim are in their 50s, which is a typical age for illness to strike and is the age that has the highest uptake of many benefits. They are losing ESA because Jim's contributory benefits are running out. Jean has part-time employment. That is another reduction of £91 a week in their household income after they have already lost his earnings. They have also been affected by the bedroom tax, because they are in a two-bedroom house. They have put a lot of money into that house over the years. When they first applied for discretionary housing payment, they were turned down because, with Jean's earnings and Jim's DLA, they had too much income to be eligible, despite his clear disability. I am glad to say that that has changed, due to extra money being made available.

That is what is meant by an impact assessment. That is the kind of interlocking effect that we are asking and reasonably expecting the Government to look at. Governments should look at what is happening to people. A piece of research was commissioned by the previous Government and published in 2011, but it has never been followed up by this Government. One very worrying statistic from that research is that 43% of the people who had been found fit for work were neither in employment nor on any out-of-work benefit after a year. The percentage of that cohort who were in work after a year, 23%, was hardly higher than it had been after three months, at 22%. That is a whole lot of missing people, and those are the sorts of facts and research that a Government should commission. It is disappointing that the Government chose not to follow through on those sorts of studies.

I will pre-empt what I know the Minister will say, which is, "Labour introduced the WCA, you introduced Atos, and therefore it is all your fault", but that is not good enough for a number of reasons. In my maiden speech I mentioned ESA and WCA, and said that whoever formed the Government, I would be raising that issue. There have been points over the past nearly four years when the Government could have changed tack. They did not have to extend Atos's contract or proceed with the migration of people from incapacity benefit to ESA as fast as they did, without looking again at what the first few years had told us.

The Government have been adamant until now that they had to carry out frequent reassessments of people, and they would not stop even when cases were clear cut. "Oh no, we have to do these reassessments", we were told, but now they are suddenly in a panic because the assessors cannot cope, and it is, "Actually we don't need

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to do these reassessments after all, but we won't bother telling people that they might not be called up in the next few months. We won't even bother telling MPs." The Minister was here on Monday for Work and Pensions questions, and he never breathed a word about it.

The personal independence payment, however, is entirely this Government's baby, and the problems go back to the beginning. This change was driven by finances, not by any research or understanding that a change needed to happen, and it had to be geared to financial savings. There was an urgent—and shortened—consultation on the changes, which many people complained about at the time. Despite the demographic changes, the straw man of too many people receiving DLA was erected, and there were assertions that DLA was granted constantly without medical evidence and that hardly anyone was ever reassessed. That ignored the big changes that had taken place in the previous 10 years, and the fact that increasingly, new awards were time limited.

If we start with poor evidence, and with arguments and assertions rather than fact, we end up with a flawed proposal. In 2013 we saw the start of the personal independence payment, and the delays and assessments have been growing exponentially. It is not just Atos, because Capita is having exactly the same problems. The flaw is in the system that has been set up.

People in the Government and elsewhere have said a number of things about why that is happening, and in December the Minister said to the Work and Pensions Committee that every single assessment for PIP was being audited internally. That suggests either a lack of training or a lack of confidence in their own staff. We are now told that each individual assessment is taking twice as long as expected, and that far more face-to-face assessments are having to take place. Might that be because the forms are not very good and the information is not coming in? Those are all things that a proper pilot would have tested. Instead of that, however, many thousands of new applicants—not just a few hundred—are being treated like guinea pigs in a system that the Government did not scope out or test properly; they did not look to see whether the people they had asked to do the assessments had the capacity to deliver them.

1.43 pm

Grahame M. Morris (Easington) (Lab): I congratulate all right hon. and hon. Members who have participated in this debate, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) for introducing it. I also thank the many groups and individuals who have taken the trouble to lobby their MPs and come to Parliament today and earlier this week. I give a special mention to Jason Roche from the Royal National Institute of Blind People in my constituency, who does such sterling work raising issues for the blind and partially sighted, to Simon Duffy from the Centre for Welfare Reform, and to Philip Connolly from Disability Rights UK. They have done a terrific job and we should acknowledge the efforts of disability activists and supporters in this campaign in collecting such a huge number of signatures to secure the debate.

The dedication shown by members of the public in getting this debate held in Parliament's main Chamber indicates the strength of feeling and the widespread concern about the extent of the Government's cuts. We

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are short of time, but there are issues such as housing, the bedroom tax, income cuts, policies such as changing RPI to CPI, the social care cuts highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall), and the general cuts to public services that directly impact on people with disabilities. People with disabilities tend to rely more heavily on libraries and other public services, and it is ironic that in my constituency an organisation called EDPIP—the East Durham Positive Inclusion Partnership—which is a charity set up some years ago to support some of the most disadvantaged families, is closing today. That is another indicator of the pressure that disabled people, their families and carers are under.

This is a trust issue, and I hope the Minister will take note of that because the Prime Minister pledged that the cuts would be made fairly. He said that those with the broadest shoulders would bear the greatest burden, and that people who are sick, vulnerable and elderly would always be looked after. We must remember that the sick, the vulnerable and the disabled were not responsible for the economic crash, yet they seem to be bearing the brunt of the economic burden.

We have heard from other Members about the impact of the loss of income and services. Disabled people are suffering nine times more than those who are not disabled, and disabled people who require social care 19 times more. If the cuts had been made fairly, they would have fallen on the better off, and the changes contradict the promise made by the Prime Minister that those in greatest need of help would not suffer under austerity.

A measure of the civilisation of any nation is how well it treats the weakest members of society, and by that standard the Government are failing miserably. Rather than being protected in a time of hardship, sick and disabled people seem to have been targeted. The services they rely on are being attacked from all directions, resulting in greater inequalities, poorer health and a growing sense of anxiety, fear and trepidation over their future. The cuts have not been made fairly, and they are not spread evenly across public services or entitlements. The cuts have been targeted, with more than 50% falling in just two areas—benefits and local government—affecting sick and disabled people disproportionately.

Ian Mearns: Does my hon. Friend share my massive concern that the company that has been delivering the flawed—as we have heard many times today—work capability assessment, has now been given the job by the Government of harvesting the whole population's health data from their GP practices?

Grahame M. Morris: I think that is cause for alarm. It certainly alarms me that Atos, which has been involved in the debacle of the work capability assessments, and which has raised concerns and asked to be

released from its contract, is apparently being awarded the contract for the collection of highly sensitive care data from GPs, but that is another Minister's responsibility.

Social care for children and adults makes up 60% of all spending over which local authorities have any control. The huge 40% reduction in local government funding spells disaster and will have a huge impact on adults and children who depend on vital public services. An interesting statistic is that by 2015 and the next general election, £8 billion will have been cut from social care in

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England—about 33% of the total. Last year, 320,000 fewer people received local authority brokered social care compared with 2005. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington said, one reason for that is the change in the eligibility thresholds that many local authorities have been forced to make. As well as being unjust and denying people adequate social care, that has unsustainable consequences. It is a false economy. By removing care in the community, we are putting pressure on other public services, for example accident and emergency.

At the same time, changes to benefits are having an appalling impact on those who rely on them. Other hon. Members have touched on the consequences of the abolition at the end of the year of the independent living fund, which currently supports more than 21,000 people with severe disabilities. Funding cuts already mean that in many areas services for sick and disabled people are reduced to a minimum. With such large-scale and rapid change to the services that disabled people depend on, the Government owe it to those who have been affected to have an understanding of what the impact is. That is why I support the War on Welfare campaign's call for the Government to commission an independent cumulative assessment of the impact of the changes in the welfare system on sick and disabled people and their families. We were not elected to this House to represent and fight for the interests of the powerful and privileged. Without a cumulative impact assessment, the Government will be failing in their responsibilities.

1.51 pm

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): I start by declaring an interest. My husband is in receipt of disability allowances.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery), in his very powerful speech, said that we can be one day away from a disability. It was not even one day for me. One day, I went home to a husband who was perfectly fit and healthy and who lived an outdoor life—everything one could hope in terms of a fit and healthy man. Within a matter of days he was terminally ill. Life can change, but that change can be softened by knowing that financial security is there for the future. That is why this debate is so important.

I was disappointed when the hon. Member for Aberconwy (Guto Bebb), who has not been in his place for most of the debate, commented that I was the only Member from Welsh Labour in the Chamber. If he had stayed in his place he would have seen how many Welsh Labour Members are in the House working. They are not able to take part in the debate because it is time-limited. The comment was made that it was a one-line Whip. This is a Backbench Business debate: there is always a one-line Whip for Backbench Business debates. I want people who are watching this debate to understand that if people are not here today, it is due not to a lack of interest or a lack of understanding, but a lack of time. Those who perhaps are most passionate are the ones in the Chamber today, but those who are not here are giving us the space and time to make the important points we want to make.

We are here to ask for a cumulative impact assessment. People have said that no one knows the cumulative impact. I do not think that is true. I think we do know,

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because of the people who come through our doors. They are ringing our offices every day to tell us of the horrendous impact on their lives. I think the Government do not want to undertake an assessment because they cannot face the reality and horror of what they have done, and to be in denial gives them grounds to continue. We have been facing cuts to social care, cuts to disability benefits and cuts to housing benefits. What has been created is a climate of fear, a climate of social outcasts and a climate where the understanding of the sick and disabled has gone. They are seen to be the undeservingly ill. We need to focus

on the human stories. Some 2% of the population have faced 15% of the cuts brought in by this Government, the same Government that gave tax cuts to the rich, and poverty and fear to the sick and the disabled.

I want to address briefly the work capability assessment. One of my constituents was told that she could work because she could make a shopping list. A lady who was unable to leave her house because she constantly needed to be able to go to the toilet was told that she could work from home making jewellery. The impact of the work capability assessment on people's lives is horrific. There is a lack of respect for the terror in their lives. The humility they face in just trying to survive every day is being undermined and dismissed by such glib statements.

I want to look briefly at personal independence payment assessments. A lady who came into my surgery on Friday has multiple sclerosis but, because of her age, she will not face an assessment until 2017. She tells me that she wakes up every day with a black cloud of terror over her life. She fears that she will lose the money that allows her to live with some form of dignity. How can we justify that in this place? How can we allow people to live with such terror?

Finally, there is the bedroom tax. I want to talk about one lady, Mrs Evans. In 2009, her son was horrifically injured in a road traffic accident. She was forced to move from the property she had lived in since the 1970s to a specially disabled-adapted property. This has meant that she is no longer eligible for relief from the bedroom tax. To avoid it, she would have had to have lived in the same property since 1996. She has a two-bedroom property. Her son lives downstairs, but she needs to have one of the bedrooms for her daughter, who allows her some relief at night. Because she cares for her son and not her husband, she is not eligible for relief from the bedroom tax.

We are living in a cruel and callous world if we cannot support people's lives when they have been destroyed by sickness and disability. That has to change.

1.57 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I apologise to my hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) and the House for not being here at the start of the debate. I was holding an advice bureau in my constituency, where all the problems that we have been discussing today came vividly to light. I compliment my hon. Friend on securing the debate and those who put the petition together. I draw attention to what my hon. Friends the Members for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) and for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery) have just said: disability can happen to any of us. At any time we can be a moment away from a major accident or a day or two away from the diagnosis of a terminal

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illness. The whole idea of not having an assessment of the effects of cuts in welfare spending on those who are sick and disabled is something that I feel very strongly about.

I hope the House agrees to the motion. If it does, I hope the Government accept that it is incumbent on them to carry out the independent review and assessment that is called for in the petition. It is a good part of the reality of parliamentary life now that groups of concerned citizens can get together and, with a sufficient number of signatures on a petition, force the House to address an issue. That is a good thing. Addressing an issue in a debate is only part of the process: what is done to follow up afterwards is important and I hope the Minister will understand the feelings that many people have on this matter.

Like many Members, I deal with a large number of cases relating to welfare payments, social security and disability. When the Government introduced an emergency Budget in June 2010, many were confused by the size of the cuts and the devastation to local government, education and so many other areas. What was not fully realised, however, was the impact of the changes to the welfare benefit system on those with disabilities, and the unfair way in which 15% of the cuts would fall on 2% of the population.

A number of us will have experienced the misery of following up return-to-work interviews. We see constituents who are manifestly incapable of undertaking any normal work. Following the closure of Remploy factories in constituencies including my own, people have no opportunity to undertake work of that kind, and then they are put through the stress of return-to-work interviews. Those whose applications for benefits are subsequently rejected go through a period of incredible stress, and some, sadly, take their lives during that

time. Applicants who appeal usually win. Why are we putting people who are already in a vulnerable position through this dreadful, appalling stress?

Others have mentioned the lack of proper assessment of people with mental health conditions. The House now debates the issue of mental health every year, and that is a good thing. Attitudes to mental health are changing in society, and that is a good thing too, but why has it not affected the DWP's attitude to return-to-work interviews? I have come across people who experience mental health "episodes". On some days they are okay, and on some days they are not; on some days they have a terrible time, and on others life is more stable for them. It is when such people undergo the additional stress that results from being told that they may be forced to go to work when they are clearly not able to hold down a job that terrible things happen. The numbers of suicides that have resulted from this system are a shame on the country, and a shame on the overall welfare benefits system that we have introduced.

Those who campaigned for—and secured—the principles of universal benefits and the welfare state throughout the 20th century, which culminated in the strong principles behind the National Assistance Act 1948, envisaged a society in which we would protect people from destitution, and would have particular concern for those with disabilities, work-related illnesses, or sicknesses that prevented them from working. Sadly, we now have a system under

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which many are denied benefits to which they ought to be entitled, and who are living in destitution as a result. Some of them simply cannot cope with that, and suicide results. The situation is compounded by the NHS cuts that have made it so much more difficult for people to get appointments, and the enormous cuts in local government budgets—particularly social services budgets—that have reduced the availability of support mechanisms.

We need to develop a society that protects all, and does not punish people who are suffering from disabilities or long-term sicknesses. It is incumbent on the Government to ensure that the cumulative assessment takes place, so that we can be shown the real impact of what we have done to our society over the past three years.

2.3 pm

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): This important debate is very welcome, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) and the Backbench Business Committee for arranging it. Like others, however, I pay particular tribute to the 104,000 people who signed the War on Welfare petition that forms the basis of the motion, and who were the driving force behind today's debate. The volume of signatures is testimony to the strength of public feeling about these matters. I have had the opportunity to meet War on Welfare campaigners in my constituency and here at Westminster, and I can testify to the anger and fear that many feel about the impact of the Government's policies on disabled people. It concerns non-disabled people as much as disabled people, which is not surprising in view of the fact that—as my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) so powerfully reminded us—only one in five disabled people is born with a disability.

It is to our shame that, in all walks of life, disabled people face injustice and unfairness. They are twice as likely to be treated unfairly at work as non-disabled people; they are more likely to be victims of crime; they face additional living costs associated with their disabilities; they are twice as likely to live in poverty; and they are less likely to be in work. Today the employment rate among disabled people is 45%, while the rate among the working-age population as a whole is 71%. The hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford) rightly identified some of the labour market barriers that disabled people face. Moreover, shamefully, they are on the receiving end of a virtually non-stop flow of hostile and abusive rhetoric. One would expect that, faced with that grim picture, the Government would focus their efforts on tackling the injustice and discrimination that confront disabled people, but the policies of the current Government so often make matters worse. That is why Labour wholeheartedly supports the call for a cumulative impact assessment of the effect of those policies on disabled people, and why we called for such an assessment last year.

The Government have argued that Labour never carried out such an assessment, but Labour never unleashed such a deluge of negative policies on disabled people. Let me say to the hon. Member for Aberconwy (Guto Bebb) in particular that our record speaks for itself. *[Interruption.]* He should listen to this.

Poverty among disabled people, which stood at 40% when Labour came to office, subsequently fell to about one in four,

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and the employment rate among disabled people rose by 9 percentage points. We introduced a host of measures to strengthen the rights of disabled people. We passed the Disability Discrimination Act 2005 and introduced the Equality Act 2010, we formed the Equality and Human Rights Commission, and, in 2009, we signed the United Nations convention on the rights of persons with disabilities.

Let us contrast that with the damaging policies of the current Government, which have been highlighted today. Cuts in local authority budgets have meant swingeing cuts in social care. The independent living fund has been closed to new applicants, and its future remains unclear. The Work programme is failing disabled people badly—only 5% of disabled participants have found work—and the Work and Pensions Committee has established that there is just one specialist disability employment adviser for every 600 people in the work-related activity group.

Guto Bebb: If the hon. Lady is so proud of the record of Labour, can she explain why training and skills programmes financed by the European social fund in Wales are not being made available to Work programme planners because of a decision by the Welsh Labour Government?

Kate Green: I can tell the hon. Gentleman that exactly the same is happening in my constituency. I am glad that he mentioned training and skills, because this Government are placing the future of residential training colleges in jeopardy. They closed 33 Remploy factories last year, and 12 months later two thirds of former Remploy employees were still out of work. Funds from the closures were promised to help those former workers into jobs, but they seem to have disappeared.

Grahame M. Morris: I am sorry to interrupt the flow of my hon. Friend's speech. She is presenting some excellent arguments. She mentioned specialist support. Northern Rights provides bespoke support in my constituency, but it cannot secure a contract from the DWP because of the prime contractors who are operating in the area.

Kate Green: It is so often the way that organisations which have a specialised knowledge and understanding of the labour market barriers that confront disabled people, and can identify with those people, are themselves shut out and deprived of the opportunity to set up post-Remploy work settings or provide support through the Work programme.

Damaging changes in the benefits system have also had a devastating effect. As was pointed out by my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen South (Dame Anne Begg), that applies both to cuts in benefits provided specifically for disabled people and to other cuts that affect them disproportionately. Employment and support allowance is in trouble—decisions are taking longer—and problems with the work capability assessment persist. About one in 10 decisions are appealed against successfully. The hon. Member for Meon Valley (George Hollingbery), who is no longer in the Chamber, appeared to think that the fact that people could appeal was a sign of the success of the system, but surely it would be better to get the decisions right in the first place.

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It is clear that Atos cannot cope. I know that the Minister will say that Labour made the contract, but four years and four independent reviews later—independent reviews which, I should tell the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Mr Reid), are required under Labour's legislation—things are going from bad to worse.

Mr Reid: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Kate Green: No I will not.

The Minister has, of course, been commendably frank about his plans to replace Atos with other providers—that was called for initially by my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Mr Byrne)—but we need root-and-branch re-purposing and reform of the work capability assessment, as well as improvements in the process. Those improvements should include systemising the collection of evidence in all cases, including evidence from GPs and other clinicians, providing suitable, accessible settings for assessments, and ensuring that recordings of interviews are always available to claimants.

Caroline Lucas: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Kate Green: Not at the moment.

I do not apologise for our intentions when we introduced the ESA and an assessment of people's capacity for work. We wanted that to be a supportive and facilitative process, but, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Mrs McGuire) pointed out, the renegotiation of the Atos contract by the current Government has rebalanced the system to be punitive, not facilitative. The Minister's plan to replace Atos with other providers goes nowhere near to meeting the need for wholesale reform.

However, I do part company with the motion in its call for the WCA to be scrapped. I know that will disappoint many disabled campaigners listening to the debate. In my view, the assessment should be the first step in a process of identifying and assembling the right support, including financial support. I say to the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) that I have never thought there should be no assessment or reassessment, and I do not think it now. Justified criticisms were made of people being left for years on incapacity benefit without any support or any check on their progress or the deterioration of their condition, and we should not go back to that. Yet just this week, as my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh East (Sheila Gilmore)—who has had to leave the debate to attend a Bill Committee—pointed out, we learned that Ministers are going to leave people on ESA in exactly that position for the next two years without reassessment, and apparently planned to keep both claimants and MPs in the dark about it. I hope the Minister will be able to clarify exactly the background to that extraordinary decision today.

Caroline Lucas: I think people with disabilities will be disappointed to hear what the hon. Lady says, because the current work capability assessment has become so tainted by being linked to a Government who are very clearly trying to reduce the amount of money they give out that if a new Labour Government wanted to redesign the assessment, which would still obviously need to assess whether or not people are eligible, they should call it something else. By sticking to the name "work

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capability assessment" and not being able to support the motion, the hon. Lady is doing people with disabilities a disservice.

Kate Green: The hon. Lady largely made a very helpful contribution, but there is an important point about the legitimacy of the assessment process—a legitimacy that disabled people will themselves recognise confers on them the entitlement to the benefits they receive. It is very important that we do nothing to undermine the public's perception of entitlement.

Meanwhile, as we can see from today's National Audit Office report, the roll-out of PIP is also in trouble. Terminally ill patients and disabled people have to wait weeks, if not months, for a decision, leaving them stranded financially, and anxious and uncertain about their claim. Why on earth Ministers awarded a PIP contract to Atos, given its failure to manage the WCA contract properly, is simply beyond my understanding. What on earth were they thinking of?

The replacement of the DLA with PIP also comes with a 20% budget cut, leaving disabled people and their carers facing the loss of vital financial support. Some will lose their Motability vehicles, and some will fall out of work as a result. The Disability Benefits Consortium has suggested that if 50,000 people leave work as a result of losing the mobility payment, that could cost the Exchequer £464 million in lost taxes and national insurance and in additional benefits.

It is not just about cuts to benefits specifically for disabled people either, because other benefit cuts affect them disproportionately too: the bedroom tax; the introduction of the benefit cap, which will also significantly impact on carers, many of whom cannot take paid work to escape it; the localisation of council tax support; the removal of funding for local assistance schemes; and, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Katy Clark) pointed out, the decision to uprate benefits by CPI, which impacts particularly harshly on disabled people, who face substantial additional living costs.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) said, in times of austerity it is disabled people who are bearing a disproportionate burden, and the Government's responsibility is to work hand in hand with them to protect and strengthen their independence, their dignity, their choices and their right to live free from stigma, hardship and fear. As a first step to doing that, it is high time that Ministers undertook a proper cumulative impact assessment of the effect of their policies, took action and faced up to their devastating effects.

2.15 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Work and Pensions (Mike Penning): I apologise as I had to pop out of the Chamber for a second—nature called—but I came straight back and I think I caught most of the speech of the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green).

Ian Lavery: It's down to age.

Mike Penning: Yes, it's an age thing; the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right—and that is no doubt the voice of experience.

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I welcome the debate and congratulate the hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) on securing it from the Backbench Business Committee. This is the sort of debate that should take place. I also agree that it should be a non-whipped debate; that is right and proper. We may not all agree about what has been discussed, but it is, frankly, in my opinion something the Whips should stay out of, and we should have proper debates. I will probably get shot when I leave the Chamber for saying that.

There are also some parts of this very long motion with which I have a great deal of sympathy, and there are parts of it with which I do not agree, as Members on both sides of the House will realise, but perhaps we can try to work on what I do agree on and what we can do together to make the benefits regime better for the people we are trying to represent and the lobby that is here today.

Some 24 Members including myself have now taken part in the debate and it is a shame that it was time-restricted, but I understand fully why that was the case. We could have spoken for a great deal longer and have had longer contributions, however. Many Members on both sides of the House have raised specific constituency cases and my officials are in the Box and will have taken note of them. I will write to the Members concerned directly after this debate and see how we can progress those matters forward. I will also take a personal interest in certain cases, and in particular the case raised by the hon. Member for Rochdale (Simon Danczuk). On that case, as the Minister responsible, I apologise unreservedly to the family. It falls back on me, and it is about time politicians stood up and apologised when things have gone wrong. In that case, things clearly have gone wrong and the family have every right to be aggrieved, and I hope the hon. Gentleman's constituent makes a full recovery.

On the call for a cumulative assessment, I am not going to say to the shadow Minister that previous Administrations did not do that—although they did not—but there was a reason why and it is very complex, and the Institute for Fiscal Studies has also said that that could not be done properly and accurately enough. I hope the shadow Minister and others will understand why, although the Treasury carries out independent reviews of different parts of Government policy, it does not do that. I respect the work done in other reports, but they are not cumulative in the way we would like.

Ian Mearns: Outside agencies have attempted to do cumulative impact assessments—Scope and Demos, for instance, worked together on an assessment. Surely, given the resources of Government, we can do a better job than those organisations and make a good fist of it.

Mike Penning: Actually, I was going to refer to the work by Dr Duffy, and when we leave the Chamber today, I will ask my officials to contact Dr Duffy and his team to see whether we can work closely together. Perhaps we can give them better information so we can be as accurate as possible. The right hon. Member for Stirling (Mrs McGuire) said my heart is in the right place, and I hope it is. I consider it a great honour to do this job and I desperately want to make things right and proper. If we look at the spending since 2009 going forward and projected

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into 2015, we see that the budget in this area of Government expenditure will continue to rise. We have a slightly more cumulative figure than the ones I cited earlier, and it is about £50 billion a year, so we spend just under £1 billion a week in this budget. The key for everybody in the House is how we spend it—that we spend it correctly.

I also believe in having a work capability assessment. I do not agree with the motion, but I do agree with the shadow Minister. I think that the assessment was brought in for the right reasons. I am not going to say all the problems were caused by the previous Administration because, frankly, the problems with Atos and the WCA have been there for everybody to see since the general election as well. It is not quite as simple as saying, as some Members have, that we should go out tomorrow morning and sack Atos. It has a contract. As I said at oral questions earlier in the week, I am determined that once we have negotiated the position with Atos—and we are in negotiation with Atos, which is why I was so surprised to read the views of Atos in the press over the weekend—we must make absolutely sure taxpayers' money is not paid to Atos as compensation for the end of the contract when that comes. That would be fundamentally wrong and I would not agree to it. The negotiations continue.

We have discussed several aspects of benefits today, and I believe that the time being taken for people to be assessed is fundamentally unacceptable. This is an issue not only for the suppliers of PIP and the WCA—we have talked about Capita and Atos—but for my Department as well.

Yasmin Qureshi *rose—*

Mike Penning: I want to make some progress, but I promise that I will give way to the hon. Lady in a moment.

Kate Green: Will the Minister give way?

Mike Penning: I want to make a little more progress on this point.

The National Audit Office report has been mentioned today. It was a snapshot report based on the situation in the autumn of last year. When I appeared before the Select Committee, I spoke extensively about one aspect of the report, which dealt with terminal illness. It is crucial to understand that I hid nothing away from the Committee, and that I said that the length of time involved in dealing with those cases was unacceptable. It has now come down to about 10 days. That is still too long, although it is less than it was under the previous scheme. We will get it down even further. I am working closely with Macmillan, and we have agreed to pilot a scheme for the 2% of terminal cases in which we will return to a paper-based system until I can get a secure PDF into place. Macmillan is pleased with what we are doing on that. The system is still not perfect, but we have moved an awfully long way, and we learned a lot of the lessons before the report even came out.

Kate Green: My point is on the WCA, and I hope that the Minister will address the question that I and my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh East (Sheila Gilmore) raised about the suspension of reassessment

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of ESA claimants for the next two years. Will he tell us why the Department appears to have decided not to inform claimants or Members of Parliament about that?

Mike Penning: If we were to inform claimants and Members of Parliament about the minutiae of every single change in policy, we would be here a lot longer. As most Members know, I am not hugely party political, but I must point out that the previous Administration did not offer that level of information either. That is not how Governments work. We are trying to deal with the delays, and to ensure that people get what they are entitled to as quickly as possible and that nobody will be worse off while we are doing that. We are, however, in the middle of a really difficult negotiation with Atos over the WCA.

I want to talk about how we can speed things up. Yesterday, I chaired a meeting of a network involving all the major stakeholders and charities. I hope that I will not upset any of the charities by leaving them out. It was a positive meeting, at which I said to them, "Sit with us and work with us to help us improve on what we have." I was very much in listening mode, which is why I shall now give way to the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi).

Yasmin Qureshi: I am not going to make a party political point; my comment is meant to assist the Minister. On a voluntary basis, I have represented people appealing against assessments now, under the current system, as well as 20-odd years ago under the old system. The problem now lies with the assessment method, which involves only form-filling and box-ticking. That is why we can no longer assess

people's disabilities properly. In the old days, a medical expert gave evidence on a person's ability. If we were to bring doctors back into the equation, we might find that more decisions were made properly.

Mike Penning: I am almost sorry that I gave way to the hon. Lady, because her intervention was so long. My time is being massively eroded, and I hope, Madam Deputy Speaker, that you will give me a few more minutes to address the issues that have been raised.

The consultants and GPs tell us that the clinical evidence taken at the assessment is vital. When they carry out an assessment, they are not there to provide a diagnosis; they are there to assess capacity. They can do that only by using an evidence base. One of the big issues under DLA was that only 6% of applicants ever got a face-to-face assessment. We are at 97% now with PIP. I agree that that is fundamentally too high, as I said to the Select Committee.

I have also attended tribunals to see what is happening during the last part of the DLA claims that are now coming through. I listened to the cases, and I agreed that some of them should never have come before the tribunal in the first place. Under PIP, we have mandatory reconsideration; that was never the case before. I have now asked my officials to go through the approximately 30,000 cases waiting to go to tribunal. We will mandatorily assess all of them, to try to prevent so many from going to tribunal. There is a lot of work to be done, but we must do as much as we can, together with the charities and the representative bodies.

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Residential colleges were mentioned earlier. I agree that they do excellent work, but the college principals know that I cannot pay for places that are not taken up. That is what was happening under the previous contract. There were residential places with nobody in residence, and we had day people on day courses. We have worked with the colleges on that, and we will ensure that we have the necessary capacity.

Interventions have eroded my time, so I shall now listen to what the hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) has to say; I think I know what it will be. Please, let us work together to ensure that the system is better for everyone we represent.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. Before I call Mr McDonnell to wind up the debate, I would like to congratulate the Minister on behalf of the House on his appointment today to the Privy Council.

2.26 pm

John McDonnell: I am sorry to spoil the Minister's day. When the banking crisis took place, the Government—with the support of all parties in the House—found £1.3 trillion to bail the banks out. Since then, virtually every other part of society has been paying for that bail-out, other than the banks themselves. Is it not ironic that we are debating cuts affecting people with disabilities in the week when RBS is putting together a half a billion pounds pool to pay bonuses?

Time and again in the debate, we have heard about the suffering that disabled people are enduring as a result of the cuts, and to be frank, I have heard nothing today about alleviating that suffering. That is why it is important to make a commitment to carry out a cumulative impact assessment. Any good Government would want to assess the impact of their policies, so why are this Government refusing to do so? I think it is because, if an impact assessment were published, people across society would be so angered and disgusted at how people with disabilities were being treated that they would rise up in revolt.

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I say to the Minister that when the Question is put at the end of the debate, I will be shouting "Aye", and I hope that everyone in the House will do the same. If the Government say that it is too complicated for them to carry out the assessment, let us have an independent assessment. Why cannot the Government bring in the Centre for Welfare Reform, Demos and the other think-tanks and fund them to do the cumulative impact assessment that the Government are running from?

All the campaigners have been saying—as we have exposed again today—that the work capability assessment is not working. It is failing people and causing them to suffer; it is failing properly to assess their ailments and conditions; and it is failing to get them back into work. That does not mean that there should be no assessment, however. We are saying that we should scrap this one and work with people with disabilities, their representatives, the BMA and others to create a system that is fair and just. That is all that the people up in the Gallery and the 100,000-plus others who signed the petition are asking for. That is why I urge Members to shout "Aye" today, and to support the reform that is so desperately needed.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House calls on the Government to commission an independent cumulative assessment of the impact of changes in the welfare system on sick and disabled people, their families and carers, drawing upon the expertise of the Work and Pensions Select Committee; requests that this impact assessment examine care home admissions, access to day care centres, access to education for people with learning difficulties, provision of universal mental health treatments, closures of Remploy factories, the Government's contract with Atos Healthcare, IT implementation of universal credit, human rights abuses against disabled people, excess deaths of welfare claimants and the disregard of medical evidence in decision-making by Atos, the Department for Work and Pensions and the Tribunals Service; urges the Secretary of State for Health and the Secretary of State for Education jointly to launch a consultation on improving support into work for sick and disabled people; and further calls on the Government to end with immediate effect the work capability assessment, as voted for by the British Medical Association, to discontinue forced work under the threat of sanctions for people on disability benefits and to bring forward legislative proposals to allow a free vote on repeal of the Welfare Reform Act 2012.

End of Hansard record for this motion

(The ayes have it so the above motion has been passed)

However, there now arises the question of what the government will do. As was noted in the debate, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition has been defeated two or three times in succession over social security benefits – and has done absolutely nothing about the motions that have been passed.

Slightly modified from this source:

<http://mikesivier.wordpress.com/2014/02/27/wow-debate-on-sickness-and-disability-benefits-live-blog/>