

Targeting disabled people

is woeful politics

Of course spending needs to be curbed, but this latest cut hits the wrong people for the wrong reasons

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Sometimes you can only shake your head at the sheer stupidity of politicians, so stuck in their Westminster bubble that they make the most obvious mistakes. For it is hard to think of a worse message to offer the country than the one sent by the Government this week. Forget the froth over the sugar tax. The lasting impression of Wednesday's Budget is a Chancellor making hefty savings by hitting people with serious disabilities while handing tax cuts to prosperous professionals.

This self-defeating measure may obscure a Budget that, for all the usual smoke and mirrors, had much to praise. Perhaps party managers were too focused on Brexit. Or maybe ministers just thought people with disabilities were so downtrodden already that no one would notice the infliction of a little more pain. Regardless, George Osborne managed to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory with a cut disturbing even

many loyal supporters in Westminster. "This is the most angry I have seen people since I was elected," said one backbencher from the 2010 intake.

They have good cause to be annoyed by this latest blunder. Despite talk of austerity, there seems to be so much money swirling around the state that chunks of free cash can be given to young savers, while billions are frittered away on daft foreign aid projects. But as delighted Labour critics pointed out, the biggest single revenue raiser over the next five years found in the Budget red book is the removal of £4.2 billion earmarked to help disabled people live decent lives. And the reason these harsh new cuts were needed? The introduction of an arbitrary welfare cap on total spending, which was breached by the botched attempt to cut tax credits.

Those targeted could not be further from the supposed "shirkers" and "scroungers" demonised in some quarters. They are working-age people whose disabilities drive up living costs. People such as David Turner-Smith, a 50-year-old accountant from Doncaster who suffers from a range of life-impeding conditions. He needs specialised bedding and breathing equipment, blood sugar monitors, disposable gloves and disinfectants. A skin condition means he gets through 12 towels a day. All this pushes up energy and water bills.

Such issues are all too familiar for people with disabilities; my own family had to install a lift and is

rebuilding our house to accommodate our daughter. According to the charity Scope, additional bills associated with disability add up to £550 a month on average. These extra costs were recognised by a Conservative government when John Major launched the Disability Living Allowance in 1992, saying this was "the right thing to do". Yet this same system was branded "ridiculous" by Iain Duncan Smith, the Work and Pensions Secretary, then replaced by the Personal Independence Payment (PIP).

The move was designed to save cash under the guise of improving effectiveness. But this failed when assessments started being made. Like it or not, disability costs money if people are to play any role in national life – and there are rising numbers of disabled people, many with complex and multiple conditions, in a society that is ageing and enjoying medical advances. This is a problem: in just two years, the numbers claiming disability benefits has risen by 200,000 to almost 5.2 million. But remember only one in six people with disabilities was born with them. And for all the scaremongering, more money is lost through bureaucratic bungling with disabled benefits than fraud or false claims.

Mr Osborne's response to these unexpectedly rising bills was to tweak the PIP criteria, reducing payments for some and removing them for many more. This was based on one of those spurious "independent" reviews

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ministers create to provide political cover. It was carried out by Paul Gray, a former head of the tax office who resigned after operational failures from a body renowned for its dismal record. Meanwhile, ministers protest that they are spending record amounts on disabled people, and recoil in mock horror at the idea that they would do anything to harm them.

Certainly the Government can claim credit for efforts to push up employment of disabled people, although a huge gap remains between their job rates and those of other Britons. But too many disabled people remain stuck in the margins of society thanks to blinkered attitudes and bigotry. And, sadly, life has become tougher for many under the Tories,

with flawed benefit assessments, the silly bedroom tax and spending cuts loaded on local councils providing much of the support.

Few sensible people dispute the need to control government spending, reform flawed benefits and attack dependency culture. But as even Conservative critics point out, this latest cut hits the wrong people for the wrong reasons. It is also woeful politics, reviving tedious cries of "heartless Tories" and ruining those claims of compassionate conservatism. Mr Osborne is fortunate there is not a functioning opposition. But he still needs to make another of his trademark U-turns – and fast.

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