



Political Column

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Dear readers, although this column is being written mid November, it is due for publishing in the spring of 2018, so here's hoping you had a fabulous festive period, and are commencing a great New Year. As I wrote that I could not help wondering what kind of Xmas the UK Government had, and whether we have had another election yet? How did the UK Government's November budget go? How many proposals have already U-turned? Is "spreadsheet" Hammond still in the role?

In the run up to the budget almost every conceivable department is now squeaking at the seams and begging for a spending increase, as the effects of so many long years of Tory austerity make themselves felt. Meanwhile there are calls for Hammond to prepare for a "Hard Brexit" by either boosting spending, or squirrelling aside a disaster fund, depending on which Brexit camp is preaching at the time. Schools complain of huge class sizes, the NHS warns of imminent collapse, and even the military are fed up with appearing stoic and are warning of inability to maintain their undertakings, or "not fit for purpose" and "close to breaking point" as retired General Barrows reported (Barrows 2017). Meanwhile the least prioritised areas such as social care are beyond the point of collapse, starved of both funds and workers as disgruntled and unloved EU workers return home feeling rejected by Brexit. As Williams (2017) reports in the Guardian, the rate of deaths linked to Tory austerity continues to increase. She lists 30,000 extra deaths, representing the worst rise in mortality for 50 years (according to the researchers from Oxford University, the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, and two borough councils). The Prison system meanwhile reports a huge

suicide rate increase, now running at the equivalent of one every three days, surely related to the 40% reduction in Prison Officers, and as Prof Pamela Taylor of the Royal College of Psychiatrists (RCP) reports: there simply were insufficient staff to take mentally ill patients to appointments (RCP cited in Williams 2017). Meanwhile the DWP tribunal system has found that the DWP habitually provided evidence whose quality was so poor it would be "wholly inadmissible" in any other court (Ernest Ryder, senior president of tribunals, cited in Williams 2017). Claimants are being subjected to unfair processes within a system cut to the bone and designed to reduce claimants and tax payer cost, not protect the sick and fulfill our civil duty to the vulnerable. Rees (2017) who is the Head of policy, Chartered Institute of Housing, reports on how the benefits "cap", designed we were told to make the system fairer to working tax payers by preventing people "milking the system", has left people like the subject of her article with a mere 50p contribution to her weekly rent. In fact it is a 25p per person contribution, since she is a single mother with a young baby.

Part of the systemic and ideologically driven problem is the new benefit known as Universal Credit (UC). It was initially promised as a replacement benefit which would simplify the system, reduce under-claiming by those who qualified, and which would ensure that by allowing people to keep more earnings, work would always pay. Since its design though, successive Tory Governments have shaved off parts of the benefit. Already from the start the disabled premium allowing disabled people to work within the working tax credit system by covering their added costs,

strangely vanished. Next came threshold changes so that people could earn less before the sliding scale of benefit tapering decrease started. In both cases, as by magic, people needed less to live on. Now additional anomalies have been identified. The "in work conditionality tests" apply if you are working, but still having to claim UC, so claimants are dragged into the job centre to explain why they do not have better paid jobs, or more hours, often not their decision or fault. Miss an appointment to, say attend your job, and be sanctioned! (a polite way of saying punished and starved). Dare to be self employed, and you can now expect to submit your cash flow data monthly, and to have to prove a) that you have not earned too much this month, and b) That you earned enough - equivalent of the minimum wage for the number of hours worked. No allowance is made for seasonal change or heavy invoices falling some months and not others. Apparently if you are self employed and earning less than the equivalent of minimum wage each month then you should get a paid job. How, or why a person should disregard their aspirations, qualifications or vocation is not explained, nor is how new business owners are supposed to meet these criteria with a fairly short grace period. In all cases delays of six weeks with no money are the average, and now the Government, despite warnings from all sides, intend to roll out this disaster to 50 job centres a week, amid warnings of increased evictions, food bank use and suicide. The mood music offered? The helpline for the most vulnerable is to become free and no longer a premium rate call, scant compensation for six weeks living on thin air.

But the political news has not all been about the Conservative party trying to ethnically cleanse our society of the poor and disabled. The Tories have been up to their usual favourite "other things" too! They have been arguing like rats in a sack over Europe (obviously), and they have been abusing their power with female colleagues yet again. In fact saying "yet again" infers it ever stopped! Apparently the scandals of Jimmy Saville and Cyril Smith, and the other cases yet to be proven, were not enough

to make MPs of all sides of the House of Commons wake up and realise that abuse of power in a sexual manner is not OK. In the interests of fairness it should be mentioned that other party MPs have also been implicated, not just Tories, however in the context of privileged, mainly white male establishment figures abusing power in misogynistic ways, the Tories have remained in a league of their own. From "touchy" defence ministers to sexting DWP ministers (allegedly although the SMS has been revealed), the conservatives are at it again. Perhaps I am showing my age, but sex scandals and Europe endangering a conservative Government, sounds kind of familiar? In both cases these people are exercising privilege and power in a manner resembling subjectification, as proposed by Nietzsche and discussed further by Foucault (1971). The group formed (Nietzschean Herkunft), came up with its own privileged rules of conduct (Lebensführung) and then decided how it might treat its members (Foucault's technologies of the group), and themselves (Foucault's technologies of the self), while treating undesirable others as the enemy. With its own self reinforcing rules, and its tendency to protect itself against outside challenge, no wonder this group fails to change, it's not in its social DNA.

Meanwhile in the rest of the world, the EU have given the UK a two week deadline to stop time wasting, Donald Trump is still trading insults and threats with Kim Jong Un, and independence referendums have been suppressed or ignored in Kurdish Iraq and Catalanian Spain. The old order is resisting change everywhere it seems.

So Happy New Year, and rather than Keeping Calm and Carrying on, Get Annoyed and get Active, because a humanistic challenge to the politics around us has never been more vital! 📍

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