

# Selling Austerity to the Public: Analysing the Rhetoric of the UK Government on its Welfare Cuts

Alice Tihelková

## ABSTRACT

*Over the past twelve years, the UK has seen a marked increase in poverty and economic inequality. While numerous factors have contributed to this situation, an undisputedly important role has been played by the continuous program of welfare spending cuts designed and executed by a series of Conservative governments. To alleviate the potential for the unpopularity of austerity measures, the Conservatives have attempted to put a positive spin on their policies by making a series of core claims emphasizing the beneficial effects of the welfare reform. Using the method of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), this paper examines these claims and offers a critique of each of them. In doing so, the research seeks to expose the use of traditional stereotypes (especially that of the “deserving” and “undeserving” poor) in the government’s rhetoric. The paper draws on a corpus of political speeches and media appearances of Conservative politicians, as well as on sociological reports and newspaper coverage. The analysis is principally focused on the two governments led by David Cameron, although some attention is also devoted to subsequent Conservative administrations.*

## KEYWORDS

austerity, Critical Discourse Analysis, CDA, David Cameron, undeserving poor, welfare reform

## Introduction: Austerity in the UK

Despite ranking among the world’s seven wealthiest countries<sup>1</sup>, the United Kingdom has a long-term record of social and economic inequality, a trend exacerbated by the recent cost-of-living crisis. A major factor in the decline in living standards was the 2008 financial crisis, the long-term effects of which have included spiralling debt, stagnation in productivity, falling wage levels, and a housing crisis in part due to a slowdown in house-building activity.<sup>2</sup> Although the crisis erupted under the Labour administration of Gordon Brown, its impact was inherited by the Conservative-led government headed by David Cameron. The Conservatives became the primary governing party in 2010 and have held power since; thus, UK social policy has been shaped by Conservative ideas for the past thirteen years.

During his first election campaign, David Cameron promised a clean break with the image of the Conservatives as the socially insensitive “nasty party” in supposed contrast to Labour. The Cameron government offered a program of what was called compassionate Conservatism,<sup>3</sup> involving a putative move away from the Thatcherite orthodoxy to embrace a more socially conscious set of policies. This vote-winning vision, however, proved difficult to reconcile with the

1 Caleb Silver, “The Top 25 Economies in the World,” Investopedia, September 20, 2023, accessed October 20, 2023, <<https://www.investopedia.com/insights/worlds-top-economies/>>.

2 Andy Bruce, “Britain’s Lasting Scars from the Financial Crisis,” Reuters, September 17, 2018, accessed May 20, 2023, <<https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-britain-economy-crisis-graphic-idUKKCN1LX0FY>>.

3 Hugh Bochel, “Whatever Happened to Compassionate Conservatism?” LSE, November 9, 2016, accessed May 20, 2023, <<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/whatever-happened-to-compassionate-conservatism/>>.

stark economic realities of the financial crisis, with the massive debt incurred by the government's bank bailout package totalling 500 billion pounds. Thus, the discourse of compassion soon turned into the discourse of austerity as the government embarked on a programme of public spending cuts. Addressing the audience at the banquet of the Lord Mayor of London in November 2013, David Cameron declared:

We have a plan – and we are carefully implementing that plan.  
 Already we have cut the deficit by a third. And we are sticking to the task.  
 But that doesn't just mean making difficult decisions on public spending.  
 It also means something more profound.  
 It means building a leaner, more efficient state.  
 We need to do more with less.  
 Not just now, but permanently.<sup>4</sup>

The Conservative plan involved the most comprehensive shake-up of Britain's welfare system in the last sixty years in the form of the Welfare Reform Bill masterminded by Iain Duncan Smith, Cameron's Minister for Work and Pensions. Designed to slash welfare expenditure by transferring as many welfare claimants as possible from benefits into work, the legislation involved several controversial policies based on conditionality and sanctioning, such as the Bedroom Tax, a two-child limit on benefits policy, large-scale disability reassessment, benefit sanctions which included the withdrawal of benefits for non-compliance with the labyrinthine system of job-seeking, as well as other measures. Poignantly portrayed in Ken Loach's film *I, Daniel Blake*, the policies inflicted suffering on tens of thousands of low-income Britons, causing financial hardship, anxiety and depression, health issues, and even suicides, with many lives lost due to physically unfit people being coerced into work following a fitness assessment by a privately contracted company. In addition, the welfare overhaul involved major cuts to local council funding which affected vital local services such as childcare and elderly assistance programs.<sup>5</sup>

The welfare reform was met with scathing criticism from a series of UK public figures. Catholic Archbishop (now Cardinal) Vincent Nichols called it a "disgrace," while socialist film director Ken Loach referred to it as "conscious cruelty."<sup>6</sup> According to Labour MP Rachel Reeves, the measures were "penalizing rather than helping" benefit recipients, while *Guardian* journalist Frances Ryan described the policies as causing "untold hardship."<sup>7</sup> Despite the outcry, David Cameron was adamant that his government's welfare agenda was a force for good, referring to it as a signal of "new hope and new responsibility" and a part of his "moral mission."<sup>8</sup> While critics

4 David Cameron, "Speech to Lord Mayor's Banquet," GOV.UK, November 15, 2010, accessed May 25, 2023, <<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/speech-to-lord-mayors-banquet>>.

5 Alice Tihelková, "The Human Cost of Austerity of Britain Since 2010," *Hradec Králové Journal of Anglophone Studies* 4, no. 2 (2017): 144.

6 Graeme Demianyk, "Ken Loach on BBC Question Time Accuses Tory Government of 'Conscious Cruelty' over Benefit Sanctions," *Huffington Post*, October 28, 2016, accessed May 25, 2023, <[https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/question-time-ken-loach-accuses-government-conscious-cruelty-benefits-sanctions\\_uk\\_581275f3e4b0672ea6885246](https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/question-time-ken-loach-accuses-government-conscious-cruelty-benefits-sanctions_uk_581275f3e4b0672ea6885246)>.

7 Frances Ryan, "Universal Credit Has Caused Untold Hardship. But the Worst is Yet to Come," *The Guardian*, August 31, 2017, accessed May 10, 2023, <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/aug/31/universal-credit-broken-expanding-conservatives-welfare-reform>>.

8 Claudia Woods, "Should Welfare Be a 'Moral Mission'?", *Demos*, February 19, 2014, accessed May 25, 2023, <<https://demos.co.uk/blogs/should-welfare-be-a-moral-mission/>>.

were pointing out the putative human cost of the cuts, the government touted the legislation as a moral crusade to deliver a better society.

## **Analysing austerity discourse: the goals and methodology of this paper**

The present paper aims to analyse the rhetoric used by the Conservatives to explain and justify their austerity-driven welfare policies. The research focuses on the attempts of the Prime Minister and other government officials to put a positive spin on the controversial measures, which were seen by many to bring adverse social effects. The analysis primarily covers the period of the two cabinets led by David Cameron (2010-2016), with a brief outline of the situation under the subsequent Conservative administrations.

The source material for the analysis comprises a corpus of ten political speeches as well as media appearances of leading figures of the Conservative Party from the years 2010-2023 supplemented with texts from election manifestos, news coverage, sociological reports, and academic papers. The government's rhetoric is analysed from the perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), an interdisciplinary research method for critically describing and interpreting spoken or written language in relation to its social context. According to Theun van Dijk, CDA "primarily studies the way social power abuse, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by texts and talk in social and political context."<sup>9</sup> Through the use of CDA, critical theory can be applied to various societal circumstances to uncover the underlying politics. Going beyond mere linguistic analysis, CDA focuses on real social and political problems to offer critical assessments. As noted by CDA's pioneer Norman Fairclough, the method

focuses on what is wrong with a society (an institution, an organization and so on), and how "wrongs" might be "righted" or mitigated, from a particular normative standpoint. Critique is grounded in values, in particular views of the "good society" and of human well-being and flourishing, on the basis of which it evaluates existing societies and possible ways of changing them. The crucial point, however, is that the critique assesses what exists, what might exist and what should exist on the basis of a coherent set of values.<sup>10</sup>

The analysis presented in this paper is conducted on a purely qualitative basis. The examination focuses on the UK government's effort to present the putatively punitive and hardship-inducing austerity measures as socially and morally fair in order to mitigate the potential backlash from the members of the public who opposed the policies. The individual "selling points" identified in the government rhetoric are analysed and subjected to critical examination.

9 Theun van Dijk, "Critical Discourse Analysis," in *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, ed. Deborah **Schiffrin**, Deborah **Tannen**, and Heidi **Hamilton** (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2001), 466.

10 Norman Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis. The Critical Study of Language* (London: Routledge, 2010), 7. Qtd in Martin Nonhoff, "Discourse Analysis as Critique," *Palgrave Communications* (September 1, 2017): 3, accessed April 20, 2023, <<https://www.nature.com/articles/palcomms201774.pdf>>.

## Austerity selling point No. 1: “It is about creating a different culture.”

Although primarily motivated by the need to cut the staggering public deficit in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis and resultant massive bank bailout, Prime Minister David Cameron chose to frame the swingeing cuts to welfare expenditure as a long-overdue attempt at cultural change. In a speech delivered on launching the welfare reform on 17 January 2011, he said: “This bill is not an exercise in accounting. It’s about changing our culture.”<sup>11</sup> The word *culture* appears eight times in his speech, in two distinct uses. On the one hand, it refers to the widespread unhealthy welfare dependency that the government is seeking to change. In this context, Cameron speaks about *benefits culture* or *sick-note culture*, which are merely euphemisms for welfare abuse. The expression *sick-note culture* is especially telling given the objective of the reforms to move as many incapacity benefit claimants as possible into work through large-scale eligibility reassessment. In the same vein, the expressions *something for nothing culture* and *culture of entitlement* are used to indicate the parasitic nature of welfarism. On the other hand, Cameron uses the word *culture* positively when speaking of a *collective culture of responsibility* as well as a *culture of respect for work* that mark the desired outcome of the reform.<sup>12</sup>

One of the strategies to make the cuts more acceptable to the general public is emphasizing that hard-working citizens are being treated unfairly by a system that subsidizes ethically flawed individuals:

We have, in some ways, created a welfare gap in this country between those living long-term in the welfare system and those outside it. Those within it grow up with a series of expectations: you can have a home of your own, the state will support you whatever decisions you make, you will always be able to take out no matter what you put in. This has sent out some incredibly damaging signals. That it pays not to work. That you are owed something for nothing. It gave us millions of working-age people sitting at home on benefits even before the recession hit. It created a culture of entitlement. And it has led to huge resentment amongst those who pay into the system because they feel that what they’re having to work hard for, others are getting without having to put in the effort.<sup>13</sup>

Such rhetoric reveals a calculated use of the stereotype of the undeserving poor to reassure the public that those who “do the right thing” need not fear the cuts, since the brunt will be borne by those behaving immorally. Dating back to at least Tudor times but seeing its heyday in the Victorian era, the idea that there were two kinds of poor – the deserving (the sick, the elderly, orphans, or otherwise blameless individuals) and the undeserving (the able-bodied poor unwilling to work) has remained a steady presence over the years in the discourse of public officials committed to reducing welfare spending.<sup>14</sup> Despite a wealth of research on the systemic nature of poverty and the effects of deprivation on the lives of individuals and communities, the tendency towards victim-blaming

11 David Cameron, “PM’s Speech on the Reform Bill,” GovUK, January 17, 2011, accessed April 20, 2023, <<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pms-speech-on-welfare-reform-bill>>.

12 David Cameron, “PM’s Speech on the Reform Bill.”

13 David Cameron, “Speech on Welfare,” British Political Speech, June 25, 2014, accessed April 20, 2023, <<http://britishpoliticalspeech.org/speech-archive.htm?speech=350>>.

14 Alice Tihelková, “Framing the ‘Scroungers’: the Re-emergence of the Stereotype of the Undeserving Poor and Its Reflection in the British Press,” *Brno Studies in English* 41, no. 2 (2015): 122, accessed April 20, 2023, <<https://digilib.phil.muni.cz/cs/handle/11222.digilib/135030>>.

along with crude preconceptions concerning welfare dependency appear regularly in neoliberal discourse. Framing his reform as a way of eliminating welfarism as a lifestyle choice, Cameron portrays himself and his Cabinet as seekers of social justice “standing up” to those who exploit the taxes paid by hard-working citizens: “We’ve stood up against the abuse that left taxpayers footing the bills for people on £30,000 or even £50,000 a year in benefits. [...] We want money to go to people who need it, not subsidizing the consequences of our broken society.”<sup>15</sup>

The metaphor of *broken society* or *broken Britain* is widespread in Conservative rhetoric, referring to the moral decay of the undeserving poor, sometimes also called *troubled families*: “Irresponsibility. Selfishness. Behaving as if your choices have no consequences. Children without fathers. [...] Rights without responsibilities.”<sup>16</sup> The “brokenness” of this allegedly morally corrupt segment of society is thus placed into the context of the welfare reform, a move that allows the government to present the cuts as a much-needed remedial measure rather than a punitive anti-social policy.

For all his effort to paint a picture of a class of dissipated scroungers living off taxpayers’ money, Cameron’s war on welfare abuse lacks support in sociological evidence. Research has shown that while the public believes that about one-quarter of welfare spending is lost to fraud (a belief that, to some extent, explains the recent decline of general support for benefit claimants), the real figure is only 0.7%. Two-thirds of families with children living in poverty are in work and by far the largest portion – approximately 46 percent – of welfare payments are expended on old-age pensioners.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, the hope of targeting the undeserving poor by removing their welfare assistance is a false one: the cuts are more likely to hurt low-income working families with children or, significantly, individuals with health issues found fit for work in incapacity benefit assessments made by private companies contracted by the government, with these contractors subsequently found to have made numerous misjudgements.<sup>18</sup> In addition, the punitive system of benefit sanctions, by which social assistance has been denied for trivial job-seeking breaches (such as missing a job centre appointment due to traffic issues or caring for a sick family member) is in stark contrast to the government’s proclamations that a “compassionate welfare system” is being introduced.<sup>19</sup> On the contrary, the rhetoric around the reform contains strong echoes of a Victorian understanding of dependence on the state as an individual moral failing to which essentially punitive measures are an appropriate response.

15 Jason Groves, “Historic Welfare Reform ‘to End Culture of Benefits Being Seen as an Acceptable Alternative to Work’ Finally Becomes Law,” Daily Mail, March 2, 2012, accessed May 30, 2023, <<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2108757/Welfare-Reform-Bill-end-culture-benefits-seen-acceptable-alternative-work.html>>.

16 David Cameron, “PM’s Speech on the Fightback after the Riots,” YouGov, August 15, 2011, accessed May 30, 2023, <<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2108757/Welfare-Reform-Bill-end-culture-benefits-seen-acceptable-alternative-work.html>>.

17 Richard Machin, “Four Reasons Why Welfare Reform is a Delusion,” LSE, June 28, 2017, accessed May 15, 2023, <<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/four-reasons-why-welfare-reform-is-a-delusion/>>.

18 Alice Tihelková, “The Human Cost of Austerity,” 144.

19 David Cameron, “PM’s Speech on the Reform Bill,” GovUK, January 17, 2011, accessed April 20, 2023, <<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pms-speech-on-welfare-reform-bill>>.

## **Austerity selling point No. 2: “It is about helping individuals reclaim their lives through work.”**

One of the main arguments in promoting welfare reform had been that the transfer from benefits into paid work would eliminate social ills, from poverty to low self-esteem and self-destructive habits, that plagued the claimants. In this view, individuals and groups motivated to find work by the withdrawal of benefits would see an improvement in their standard of living as well as their general self-esteem and well-being. In response to the fact that one in four children in the UK was living in poverty in 2014, the Department of Work and Pensions replied, “Our reforms are improving the lives of some of the poorest families by promoting work and helping people to lift themselves out of poverty.”<sup>20</sup> Thus, instead of a complex explanation of the welfare overhaul, including the social risks involved, the government presents the cutbacks entirely positively as an instrument of social mobility. By merely transferring from benefits into work, a move enabled and encouraged by the reform, the claimants will “lift” themselves from their predicament in their individual welfare-to-work success stories.

The centrality of work and its allegedly transformational power, echoing the Victorian spirit of self-help and the belief in the redemptive qualities of work, is an omnipresent feature of the government rhetoric on the welfare reform. Instead of citizens being forced into work by the denial of welfare assistance, the process is framed as liberation from unproductive life patterns and wrong choices – indeed, as an act of reclaiming one’s sense of agency and taking control of one’s own life. The rhetoric of Work and Pensions Minister Iain Duncan Smith, in particular, abounds in such argumentation, with praise of the transformational power of work concealing the socially destructive potential of the cuts. In a speech addressed to the Centre for Social Justice on 23 January 2013, Smith declared:

It should be about helping people to take greater control over their lives. For all those who are able, work should be seen as the route to doing so – for work is about more than just money. It is about what shapes us, lifts our families, delivers security, and helps rebuild our communities. Work has to be at the heart of our welfare reform plan, or all we will do is increase dependency, not lessen it. “Reform,” often overused, is in reality about transformation and life change. Improving people’s lives through the choices they make. A journey from dependence to independence. Our mission is to put hope back where it has gone, to give people from chaotic lives security through hard work [...] helping families to improve the quality of their own lives.<sup>21</sup>

The true motive of the reform – to reduce public spending – is absent from Smith’s rhetoric. The legislation is marketed as an opportunity for people to reclaim their own existence, which has been blighted by idleness, dependence, and even chaos. Rejoining the labour market will end the disorder and bring security and prosperity, provided that the individual works “hard.” Indeed, there appears to be a somewhat obsessive use of the phrases “hard work” and “hard-working” families in

20 Patrick Butler, “Number of UK Youth Living in Poverty Could Reach 5m by 2020, Says Charity,” *The Guardian*, May 28, 2014, accessed April 20, 2023, <<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2014/may/28/child-poverty-act-5m-2020-save-children-uk>>.

21 Andrew Sparrow: “Iain Duncan Smith Gives a Speech on Welfare,” *The Guardian*, January 23, 2014, accessed May 1, 2023, <<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/blog/2014/jan/23/iain-duncan-smith-gives-speech-on-welfare-politics-live-blog#block-52e0e351e4b001e96915d3fb>>.

Conservative discourse. These expressions in particular were pointed out by Katherine Runswick-Cole, who argues in her article *The Trouble with Hard-Working Families* that the “‘hard-working family’ discourse conforms to the neoliberal-ableist trope; the ‘hard working family’ is independent, self-sufficient and, crucially, it does not rely on the state for its survival.”<sup>22</sup> This concept thus fits the government’s aim to cut public spending and wean as many individuals as possible off state assistance. To make the re-engagement with the job market more attractive, various persuasion techniques are used. The process is described as a “journey” leading to personal independence as a type of quest for a stake in society. It is also a quest for personal redemption from the deficient habits rampant among the undeserving poor as well as an embrace of a new life based on the right choices. It is thus an entire lifestyle, not just work status, that is programmed for change. The use of positive lexemes such as *lifts*, *rebuilds*, *helping*, *mission*, and *hope* serves to create an impression that the process is basically benevolent and transformational.

A bit of confrontation with sociological evidence, however, reveals the fallacious nature of the proposition that resuming paid work is a route from poverty and dependence. The mere fact that a substantial portion of welfare expenditure goes towards in-work benefits suggests that poverty persists in the low-income sector of the labour market, however “hard-working” the individuals and families may be. As observed by a study entitled *Managing Precarity: Food Bank Use by Low-Income Women Workers in a Changing Welfare Regime*, the government appears to ignore the precarized character of the labour market when assuming that merely forcing people into work will decrease their dependence on state assistance:

Employment had risen to historically high levels in Britain before the coronavirus crisis; however, whereas work is traditionally conceptualized as a route out of poverty, this is no longer necessarily the case. Participation in non-standard or low-income work such as zero-hour contracts, involuntary part-time work and self-employment is increasingly a feature of the labour market and in-work benefits which top-up low incomes have been pared back.<sup>23</sup>

Thus, the government’s claims that in the wake of the reform, Britain experienced a jobs miracle and that employment was readily available to anyone wanting to work glossed over an unpleasant truth, namely that many claimants were forced into the so-called “gig economy” that failed to provide jobs secure enough to survive without any further state assistance. Many became trapped in the so-called “low pay-no pay” cycle as they found themselves shifting from benefits to badly paid work and back again, often incurring debt and seeing their mental health decline dramatically as a result. In a country with a nearly 20% rate of in-work poverty,<sup>24</sup> the narrative of welfare-to-work as a pathway to prosperity and personal independence is socially irresponsible at best and callous at worst.

22 Catherine Runswick-Cole, “The Trouble with Hard-Working Families,” *Community, Work & Family* 19, no. 2 (2016): 257, accessed May 1, 2023, <<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/13668803.2016.1134153?needAccess=true>>.

23 Christina Beatty et al., “Managing precarity: Food Bank Use by Low-Income Women Workers in a Changing Welfare Regime,” *Social Policy & Administration* 55, no. 5 (2021): 981, accessed May 29, 2023, <<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/spol.12707>>.

24 Phillip Inman, “Poverty Rate among Working Households in UK is Highest Ever,” *The Guardian*, May 26, 2017, accessed April 30, 2023, <<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/may/26/poverty-rate-among-working-households-in-uk-is-highest-ever>>.

### Austerity selling point No. 3: “It is about creating the ‘Big Society’”

In 2010, as part of the Conservative election manifesto, David Cameron launched his Big Society drive, a set of policies with the declared goal of empowering communities and encouraging local volunteerism. Described by Cameron as his “great passion,” the program involved a form of local governance combining traditional paternalism with free market economics by which local communities, charities, and small private businesses would replace governmental institutions as providers of local services.

Cameron celebrated the withdrawal of state services and their takeover by local actors as freeing up space for the self-fulfillment of the individual as a dramatic redistribution of power from “the elite in Whitehall to the man and woman on the street.”<sup>25</sup> On the occasion of the launch of the Big Society in Liverpool, Cameron described this “cultural change”:

There are the things you do because it's your duty. Sometimes unpopular – but you do them because it is in the national interest. And yes, cutting the deficit falls into that camp. But there are the things you do because it's your passion. The things that fire you up in the morning, that drive you, that you truly believe will make a real difference to the country you love. And my great passion is building the Big Society. But before I get into the details, let me briefly explain what the Big Society is and why it is such a powerful idea. You can call it liberalism. You can call it empowerment. You can call it freedom. You can call it responsibility. I call it the Big Society. The Big Society is about a huge culture change. Where people, in their everyday lives, in their homes, in their neighbourhoods, in their workplace, don't always turn to officials, local authorities or central government for answers to the problems they face but instead feel both free and powerful enough to help themselves and their own communities.<sup>26</sup>

In this extract, we see David Cameron striking an unusually personal note, making an emotional identification with the policy he is promoting through lexemes such as *passion*, *fire*, *drive*, *truly believe*, etc. The Big Society idea is framed within the context of the government welfare reform, but clearly separates the two spheres of public and private – whereas the public sector cuts are an unpleasant duty that the government must undertake despite their unpopularity (a surprisingly honest admission, free of the usual moralism of paid work), the Big Society is based on conviction and enthusiasm, thus it is not in this context characterized as an economic necessity. The idea that communities will help themselves rather than relying on the government is shown as a process of liberation from state power, as a re-discovery and empowerment of local bonds and networks, in line with putative Conservative values of self-sufficiency and self-empowerment.

In reality, however, the social and economic motives are not separate at all and are in practice two manifestations of a single intention: to build a “leaner, more efficient state,” as pledged by Cameron at the banquet of the Lord Mayor of London mentioned above. For all of the Prime Minister's declarations of his own personal interest in and passion for the project, the Big Society appears as little more than a fig leaf covering the planned defunding of local services and their surrender to either volunteer groups or private businesses. As noted by *Guardian* journalist Anna Coote, “Effectively, Big Society abandons the idea of collective action and shared responsibility

25 David Cameron, “Big Society Speech,” VoltaireNet, July 19, 2010, accessed April 30, 2023, <<https://www.voltairenet.org/article166381.html>>.

26 David Cameron, “Big Society Speech.”



through the state, focusing instead on encouraging local interventions by the ‘little platoons’ of civil society and businesses.<sup>27</sup> Such a concept of absolving the state of all responsibility and placing most (if not all) social and economic burdens onto individuals and their communities essentially represents a nineteenth-century view of the welfare state. Such a regression is likely to result in greater deprivation and lack of necessary assistance rather than real efficiency and local empowerment in services provision. Out of the three welfare reform selling points presented by the government to citizens, this particular one seems the most disingenuous and manipulative, albeit also perhaps the easiest to unmask as a strategy to mislead voters.

### **Austerity discourse after Cameron**

Despite the attempts of the Cameron-led government to market the welfare reform as a series of constructive measures to usher in a nationwide culture of responsibility by encouraging a more realistic attitude to work and reinforcing community spirit, the implementation of the austerity measures came under a strong wave of criticism as their human and social costs were becoming evident. Even Iain Duncan Smith, the architect of the reform, resigned from his position of Minister for Work and Pensions in protest against the government’s planned cuts to disability benefits, which went beyond what he was prepared to accept as the austerity threshold. The subsequent premierships of Theresa May and Boris Johnson brought a temporary retreat from austerity discourse and an embrace of more socially conciliatory One-Nation Conservatism.<sup>28</sup> While May vowed to end austerity and expressed a commitment to building more affordable housing, including council houses, Boris Johnson spearheaded a levelling-up policy, pledging to focus on left-behind communities and to tackle regional inequalities. The COVID-19 pandemic measures resulted in an unprecedented surge of public spending in an attempt to save jobs, businesses, and livelihoods, with policies including a temporary increase of the Universal Credit (claimed by 5.8 million people in Britain, 40% of them being in employment) to help struggling households.

The move away from the austerity agenda, however, proved only transitory. With the short-lived premiership of Liz Truss, the language of cuts returned. In October 2022, Simon Clarke, the levelling-up secretary and a major ally of Liz Truss, declared that welfare would have to be cut and a number of projects cancelled to tackle the national debt. In his words, the West was living in a “fool’s paradise” of unsustainable welfare spending, and the UK government would have to “trim the fat.”<sup>29</sup> This marked a new phase of welfare discourse, where any attempts to attach a moral purpose to the cuts, a strategy typical of Cameron’s governments, were dropped, and the reduction of the state debt became their sole declared aim. This trend is continuing under Rishi Sunak, who as the Leader of the Conservative Party was named Prime Minister in 2022. Although

27 Anna Coote, “Cameron’s ‘Big Society’ Will Leave the Poor and Powerless Behind,” *The Guardian*, July 19, 2010, accessed May 25, 2023, <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/jul/19/big-society-cameron-equal-opportunity>>.

28 Alice Tihelková, “An Heir to Disraeli or Cameron? A Critical Look at Boris Johnson’s Rhetoric of One Nation Conservatism,” *Hradec Králové Journal of Anglophone Studies* 9, nos. 1-2 (2022): 140.

29 Martin Brown, “Truss Will ‘Trim the Fat’ from Spending, Says Tory Chairman,” *Express*, October 2, 2022, accessed May 30, 2023, <<https://www.express.co.uk/news/politics/1677350/liz-truss-public-spending-cuts-jake-berry-tory-party-conference>>.

avoiding the socially insensitive language of Truss's cabinet, Sunak also speaks about "tough choices" and "difficult decisions to come," which means nothing but more austerity in the near future.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, it makes very little difference to those affected by the austerity measures whether the cuts are marketed as a morally and socially transformative process or as a stark necessity in the face of the spiralling national debt. For those opposed to the policies, the only possible real outcome is an increasing rate of poverty, food bank reliance, and even homelessness. The fact that these UK governments have chosen to shift the burden of the country's troubled finances onto the most vulnerable citizens continues to be a serious cause for alarm for anyone concerned with economic or social justice.

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**Alice Tihelková** is a long-term member of the Department of the English Language and Literature, Faculty of Philosophy and Arts, University of West Bohemia in Plzeň. She teaches courses in British Cultural Studies and conducts interdisciplinary research on contemporary British society. Her main research interest is political and media discourse describing Britain's class system and class stereotypes reified by the commentariat, politicians, and other actors.