

Frances Ryan, March 2018

For the Tories, eliminating the deficit was just a pretext to slash the state

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David Cameron and George Osborne are celebrating this week. But their austerity programme has left lives in ruins

They say that a picture looks different, depending on the viewers' perspective. The same can be said for politics. The continuing, unprecedented cuts to Britain's public services, for example, will appear quite different to a disabled person unable to get to the toilet because their social care has been halved than they will do to, say, a former prime minister reading the news at his mansion.

Two events from the past week display this stark contrast. In response to news that Britain has eliminated its day-to-day deficit budget, the delayed target originally set by George Osborne when he imposed austerity on public services in 2010, [the former chancellor tweeted](#): "We got there in the end – a remarkable national effort. Thank you." David Cameron followed self-congratulatory suit with: "[It was the right thing to do.](#)"

Only a few days earlier, Northamptonshire county council – the authority that has essentially [gone bankrupt](#) – confirmed a cuts programme of almost [£40m over the next financial year](#) (an additional £10m than was first planned) in an attempt to stay afloat.

This means [the closure of 21 of its 36 libraries](#), after a public campaign forced the council to abandon plans to close 28 of them. Children's centres in the area [have already had their funding cut by 40%](#), and now vulnerable teenagers will lose half a million pounds in skills and jobs support. Meanwhile, insufficient funds for adult social care means care services for older and disabled adults are said to be on "[the verge of being unsafe](#)" – that's a wheelchair user on the bathroom floor because she's got no one to help her safely wash, or an 80-year-old developing sores after being left to sit in his own dirt.

I wonder, is this an example of the "right thing" Cameron speaks of? There is an almost delusional refusal among austerity's architects to acknowledge the reality of the last decade – a gaping chasm between the moral superiority Cameron and colleagues attach to the implementation of cuts and the human misery they have caused.

From its beginning, the Conservatives practically romanticised cuts – creating an image of a simple belt-tightening, a type of blitz-spirit rationing. Sacrifice sounds noble. But then, it's easy to find sacrifice noble when its other people who are doing the sacrificing. Reminiscent of his "[all in it together](#)" mantra, Osborne's language this month – "We got there in the end – a remarkable national effort" – is reflective of this. "We", as if each of us has taken an equal share of the burden.

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Research by the [Equality and Human Rights Commission](#), among others, show these are in fact cuts felt predominantly by those least able to take the strain, from working class women to ethnic minorities, and disabled people. This week it emerged that 75,000 disabled people – yes 75,000 – have [now had their Motability cars removed](#) because of tightened benefit eligibility rolled out by Cameron’s government and continued by Theresa May – in essence, tens of thousands of sick people having their lifeline to the shops to the doctor pulled out from under them. Forget “all in it together”: Osborne’s so-called fiscal success is built off the back of making paraplegics housebound.

This gutting of services was always the intention. Rather than sound economic prudence, the austerity measures that Osborne and Cameron launched were ideological: an excuse to shrink the state, as cuts to government spending focused in on social security and public services. (Think of the [zealotry with which ministers spoke of](#) waging war against the “something for nothing culture” of single mums, jobseekers, and disabled people.)

As Ann Pettifor, director of Prime: Policy Research in Macroeconomics, [points out](#), this was not even economically sound. Many economists stress Osborne’s post-crisis austerity programme actually deepened and lengthened Britain’s post-crisis recession, causing public and private investment to fall further and real wages to decline.

That’s not to mention the long-term cost to the taxpayer of [rocketing numbers in expensive temporary accommodation because of a rise in homelessness](#) at a time of benefits cuts, or [added strain on NHS from cuts to care services](#).

Far from revelling in success, the Conservatives should be considering the consequences of their failure. What’s happening in Northamptonshire may well be repeated in councils up and down the country as local authorities are forced to deliver vital services on almost halved budgets.

It’s hard to imagine how it feels to be a low-income teenager in Northamptonshire right now, about to lose your chance at job training, or a disabled person unable to sleep because you’re terrified your personal assistant is going to stop helping you wash. These are ordinary families who are being abandoned by the state when they most need help. That this is being celebrated is an insult to injury.

*** Austerity – Hardworking Britain*

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/mar/08/tories-deficit-slash-state-david-cameron-george-osborne-austerity>

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