

# **The law of unintended consequences**

**HOW THE GOVERNMENT JUSTIFY PREVENTABLE HARM**

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## **- how the government justify preventable harm**

**A report by**

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The law of unintentional consequences refers to the idea that actions or decisions can have unforeseen and unintended consequences, often in ways that are not immediately apparent. This can occur because complex systems often have multiple interconnected parts, and a change in one part of the system can have ripple effects. ... It is often difficult to predict or identify unintended consequences in advance, and they can have significant impacts on individuals, groups, and society as a whole.<sup>1</sup>

For many years, the UK chronically ill and disabled community have been intimidated by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), who escape any form of reprimand. Is this due to 'the law of unintended consequences' as routinely used to justify government failure?<sup>1</sup> The well-documented government-induced public health crisis<sup>2,3,4</sup> has been ongoing and increasing since 2008. Historically, successive right-leaning UK neoliberal administrations created social policy reforms to limit the ever-growing costs of the welfare budget, whilst disregarding the deteriorating health, wellbeing and, often, the survival of many of the chronically ill and disabled community who are unable to work. This could be deemed to be the 'unintended consequences'<sup>1</sup> of social policy reforms. The public health crisis<sup>2</sup> followed the introduction of the Work Capability Assessment (WCA) to limit access to the Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) long-term disability benefit in 2008, by the Brown 'New Labour' administration, with often fatal human consequences as the WCA was designed to disregard clinical need.<sup>5-10</sup> No-one is held to account<sup>11</sup> for this violent bureaucracy<sup>12</sup> impacting on the health, wellbeing and survival of many of those in greatest need, who are relentlessly penalized when unable to work due to the identified hostile culture within the DWP.<sup>13</sup>

As a result, we heard that deep-rooted, cultural change was necessary to rebuild the trust of claimants, and to drive and embed improvements to how DWP safeguards vulnerable claimants. In our view, the number one priority arising from our inquiry is for the Department to change its culture. This has been acknowledged and supported by Ministers. (p.1)<sup>13</sup>

Successive neoliberal administrations adopted increasingly extreme UK social policy reforms following the introduction of austerity measures by the Coalition administration (2010-15), including the adoption of financial sanctions as extreme conditionality impacting on those in greatest need. This was justified by relentless hostile political rhetoric against disability benefit claimants who are not in paid employment, which was demonstrated by politicians making totally false claims. This hostility was still ongoing in September 2025 as the new Secretary of State for Work and Pensions for the Labour government, Pat McFadden MP, continued with his **disinformation** via national television, as reported online by *Disability News Service*.<sup>14</sup>

Their anger and frustration only increased when new work and pensions secretary Pat McFadden claimed [in an interview](#) that there were currently “incentives” in the system for people to declare themselves unfit for work so they can “double their money”, and also claimed that people were “declaring themselves long-term sick.”

McFadden will have been aware that claimants cannot declare themselves “long term sick” but instead must go through the harsh work capability assessment in order to be found not fit for work, and he should have been aware that this system has [led to countless deaths](#).

Researcher and writer Sue Jones [responded on X/Twitter](#): “Progressive, incurable illnesses are not ‘perverse incentives’ you vicious man, and no amount of lying about people and inventing ‘incentives’ and motives will change the fact that many of us can no longer work, simply because we are too ill and disabled.”<sup>14</sup>

The removal of care, concern, compassion, humanity and dignity from the needs of the chronically ill and disabled community is, by definition, tyranny. With no one held to account<sup>11</sup> for the identified government-induced public health crisis<sup>2</sup> impacting on those in greatest need, and by successive UK neoliberal administrations being devoted to ‘Cash, Not Care’,<sup>15</sup> there can be no surprise that many people now live in fear of the DWP when unable to work. This national scandal has been ongoing since the Thatcher administration (1979-90) deemed that the welfare state was an unacceptable drain on the public purse, with 1982 Cabinet minutes during Thatcher’s first term in office identifying the need to adopt ‘*the politics of fear*’ to remove the psychological security of the welfare state.<sup>16</sup> This has now been achieved.

Many of those who are unfit to work were destined to die often by suicide or starvation when, quite literally, ‘killed by the state,’ with no-one held to account for this government imposed psychological tyranny created by social policy reforms using psycho-coercion to remove the past psychological security of the welfare state when influenced by corporate America since 1992. This has been achieved. Chronically ill and disabled people who are unfit to work live in fear of the DWP, who disregard Coroners’ warnings of the risk of suicide relating to the WCA. The adoption of the ‘politics of fear’ was skilfully introduced over time, and the creation of ‘disability denial’ was adopted by social policy legislation relating, exclusively, to the costs of the welfare state and not to the health, wellbeing or to the survival of disability benefit claimants. Thatcher’s ‘dark legacy’ continues. (p.10)<sup>16</sup>

## Justifying the unjustifiable

The UK is recognized as having one of the oldest parliamentary democracies in the world, and is the envy of many. The British public select the next administration at every general election, and democracy can be seen in action in the many debates in the House of Commons, where policy decisions are debated and decided. However, for many, democracy very frequently deteriorates into an authoritarian state when no one is held to account<sup>11</sup> for social policies that are guaranteed to cause preventable harm, and when the administration disregard any authority that offers detailed evidence of preventable harm.<sup>12-16</sup>

The House of Commons supports various select committees, with the Work and Pensions Committee (the Committee) being one of the most significant as it considers the needs of benefit recipients, and the impact of social policies on those in greatest need. The Committee chooses its inquiries and can spend months gathering evidence from a multitude of experts in their field, and invariably produce a report of significance which includes recommendations based on the gathered evidence which the government can then disregard, as demonstrated by successive administrations.<sup>17,18</sup>

The Committee does not believe in unconditional benefits for those who are capable of moving into work. But unfair and disproportionate application of the current sanctions regime is causing unintended consequences. ...

The Welfare Reform Act 2012 and subsequent changes have made sanctions longer, more severe and applicable to more people than ever before. The previous Government did not know the impact of these changes in 2012 and, six years later, it is still unknown. What we do know is that sanction rates are higher under Universal Credit than under the legacy system, and when applied inappropriately can have profoundly negative effects on people's financial and personal wellbeing.

The failure to evaluate the 2012 reforms is unacceptable. It is time for the Government urgently to evaluate the effectiveness of reforms to welfare conditionality and sanctions introduced since 2012, including an assessment of sanctions' impact on people's financial and personal wellbeing. Furthermore, until the Government can point to robust evidence that longer sanctions are more effective, higher level sanctions should be reduced to two, four and six months for first, second and subsequent failures to comply. ...

Of all the evidence we received, none was more compelling than that against the imposition of conditionality and sanctions on people with a disability or health condition. It does not work. Worse, it is harmful and counterproductive. We recommend that the Government immediately stop imposing conditionality and sanctions on anyone found to have limited capability for work, or who presents a valid doctor's note (Fit Note) stating that they are unable to work, including those who present such a note when waiting for a Work Capability Assessment. Instead, it should work with experts to develop a programme of voluntary employment support. (Work and Pensions Committee report, 18 October 2018) (p.3)<sup>17</sup>

Needless to say, the Conservative government led by Prime Minister (PM) Theresa May disregarded the 2018 Committee's recommendations,<sup>17</sup> and those in greatest need continue to be sanctioned in 2025 by the Labour government, led by PM Keir Starmer.

Successive administrations are implicated in what is identified as being a government-induced public health crisis.<sup>2</sup> In the Coalition administration led by PM David Cameron (2010-15), when the then Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, Iain Duncan Smith MP, generated hostile rhetoric regarding vast numbers of people making fraudulent disability benefit claims, published academic research demonstrated that DWP statistics did not support his hostile rhetoric.<sup>7</sup> However, Duncan Smith excelled when generating hostile banner headlines in the tabloid press, so he wasn't about to change his many false claims. At the same time as this hostile political rhetoric was gaining public and press attention, published academic research was exposing Duncan Smith's claims as being totally unfounded:<sup>2,7</sup>

In reality, when Duncan Smith was creating a moral panic by claiming that there were excesses of fraud by benefit claimants, the DWP's published figures were stating the opposite. In fact, the 'fraud rate for sickness benefit is just 0.5 percent, meaning that 99.5 percent of claimants are not fraudulent.' (pp.222)<sup>2</sup>

The relentless hostile political rhetoric impacting on the chronically ill and disabled community continued, with DWP published statistics stating the opposite. In 2024 the Conservative Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak, was continuing with claims that disability benefits were being 'misused and exploited',<sup>19</sup> despite official DWP statistics demonstrating that disability benefit fraud for the Personal Independence Payment (PIP) disability benefit had fallen to zero.<sup>20</sup> DWP statistics demonstrated that fraudulent PIP claims fell from 0.2 percent in 2022-23 to 0.0 percent in 2023-24.<sup>20</sup> In reality there is not, nor has there ever been, any published official statistics demonstrating a large amount of disability benefit fraud, but all it took was relentless hostile political rhetoric to justify the DWP intimidation of those in greatest need, with no one held to account.<sup>11</sup>

Whilst 'unintended consequences' is the diplomatic explanation used to justify the preventable harm of those in greatest need by successive administrations, the reality is that whatever is identified as being 'unintended consequences' is, in reality, government enforced suffering when devoted to neoliberal politics which disregards human need. Is it realistic to assume that social policies which adopted brutal sanctions that can remove a claimant's total income would not cause harm?<sup>17</sup> Is it at all realistic to assume that when adopting a fatally flawed assessment model, that disregards all clinical need, there would not be many fatal human consequences?<sup>22</sup> These consequences are very predictable, and are not 'unintended.'

## **Conclusion**

In reality, the 'Law of Unintended Consequences'<sup>1</sup> is the justification used by successive administrations for social policies which were always destined to cause preventable harm,<sup>21</sup> and guarantees that no administration will be held to account for what is the government-induced human suffering on a vast scale.<sup>2-9</sup> So, this identified government-induced public health crisis<sup>2</sup> is destined to continue regardless of predictable fatal human consequences.<sup>22</sup>

## References

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