

I have taken some notes from Philip Alston's live broadcast today which may be of use to those of you campaigning over the coming weeks. He is the United Nations Rapporteur who recently spent 12 weeks visiting all parts of the UK to put together his report.

One fifth of the population are living in poverty, that's 14 million people.

1 and a half million are destitute.

Child poverty rates are staggering and due to rise over the next 2 years.

Main challenge in the UK – not enough being done.

Ministers are in a state of denial – “things are going well”, they don't see a problem with their policies and are happy with the way things are playing out.

In school, job centres etc there is a lot of misery, people feel the system is there to punish them. If they are a little bit down and need help, there is no longer the help that would have been available to them in an earlier Britain

Why? What is main problem? What is the motivation for the main policies that seem to be problematic in the benefits system?

Answer is Austerity – need for immense budget savings.

TRUTH – there haven't been many savings.

Motivation has NOT been to promote more caring communities.

Motivation is ideological one. Government has been successful in transforming the nature of the system. A worthy object. The previous system was confused and confusing and efficiencies have been found.

Employment is key to getting people out of poverty. Efficiency has improved.

Universal Credit driven by desire to get across a simple set of messages:

The State does not have your back any longer.

YOU ARE ON YOUR OWN

The governments place is NOT to be assisting people who think they can't make it on their own.

Made system as unwelcoming as possible. Reminded constantly you are lucky to get anything.

Nothing will be made easy. Sanctions should be hard, painful and immediate. Sgt. Major approach.

Sanctions create fear and loathing, impose immense hardships if only 5 minutes late.

'Ton of bricks' approach instead of trying to work through issues.

Punitive approach is inconsistent, not just with human rights but with whole British sense of values of justice and fairness.

Brexit – almost no matter what it achieves it will leave Britain worse off. Fall in GDP, fall in tax revenues.

Problem is there has been no discussion of impact on low income groups. They will bear brunt of economic fallout from Brexit. They are really going to suffer and should be brought higher up the agenda.

Universal Credit – number of characteristics – harsh and unnecessary and almost gratuitous.

5 week waiting period – up to 12 weeks for some.

Amazing part of system is that people who are completely unable to cope go through benefit system and are then told to go away and maybe in 5 weeks we'll send you some money.

People being plunged into misery and despair and must beg from family and their community. DWP can give you an advance (if desperate) which needs to be paid off at rate of 30% from benefit cheques.

This needs to be changed immediately.

Payments to single households – impact on many women extremely problematic. Greater risk of domestic violence. According to Secretary of State 93% have joint bank accounts. She said if they have problems, they should seek counselling and if things are really bad, they should leave. Not an option for many. Government should change approach.

Digital by default system not working. A third of claimants begin the claims process on-line and then give up. DWP probably quite happy about that – less benefits to be paid.

Overstated the number of people who are comfortable doing all this digitally. System is overwhelmingly pressing people to do everything online.

Sanctions – consequences grim.

Digital and automation policies in welfare area. UK sees itself at forefront in world terms and in some ways it is.

There are a number of warnings how this automation can quickly cross over into a line where all sorts of compassion, all sorts of human interaction are lost. A welfare system cannot survive on algorithms alone.

The rest of the report focusses on the dismantling of the broader social safety net – not just Universal Credit.

Benefit reductions are pretty draconian. There is an extraordinary disconnect between the triple block that protects pensioners and the freeze that freezes all in-work benefits. The argument that pensioners couldn't possibly have to put up with that – quite right. Whereas people in work, well let them suffer, let them lose every year, let them get less, I think that is deeply problematic.

One of the things I feel most strongly about is the cuts to local authority budgets.

Britain has famously had a culture of local concern, people being able to get some sort of assistance from their local council, some sort of human contact, when things go really wrong there'll be a social worker or some service they can go to.

49.9% budget cuts according to National Audit Office. Leader of Newcastle Council says they have been reduced to emergency service provision only, not doing a range of things we think are essential.

Yet when I met the Economic assistant to the Treasury he said "No it's fine. These councils have a lot of money, they can take these cuts, they're doing well".

It's a totally mechanical economic analysis that ignores the damage that is being done to the fabric of British society, to the sense of community which has been built in part around the sports centres, the recreation places, the public lands that are being sold off, the libraries that are being closed down, the youth centres are being downsized and soon there will be nowhere for people in the lower income groups to go.

It's perfect because those in the higher income groups will have more money because their taxes are being cut, but they will find themselves living in an increasingly hostile and unwelcoming society, because the community roots are being systemically broken so I think there are big reasons for concern.

I'll finish by saying that if a new Minister was interested, if a new government was interested, the harshness, the worst aspects of these policies, could be changed overnight and for very little money.

*\*\* Philip G. Alston is an international law scholar and human rights practitioner. He is John Norton Pomeroy Professor of Law at New York University School of Law, and co-Chair of the law school's Center for Human Rights and Global Justice.*