

Labour is ignoring the evidence on healthy life expecta...

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The Financial Times [is reporting today](#) that key Labour MPs are softening their opposition to another round of welfare cuts.

This comes in the same week that the Health Foundation [has published evidence](#) that I have [already discussed this morning](#), showing that healthy life expectancy in the UK has collapsed, and that most people in the UK now become seriously ill before they even reach pension age, with our performance on this measure now being second worst among comparable wealthy nations.

The juxtaposition of these reports is not merely unfortunate. It is an indictment of Labour's thinking.

The FT reports that senior figures are preparing another round of welfare cuts, with the Tony Blair Institute calling for a "default ban on claiming sickness benefits for people with milder mental health problems." The justification offered is that the cost of benefits linked to ill health will exceed £100bn by the end of the decade.

The issue is that cost is all they appear to be worried about. What is missing from that conversation is any honest engagement with why so many people are ill.

First, people are not claiming sickness benefits because the system is too generous. They are claiming them because they are sick. The Health Foundation's evidence makes that clear. Healthy life expectancy has fallen sharply. In more than one in ten local authority areas, it is now below 55. This is a population health crisis, and it has identifiable causes. They are austerity, poor housing, insecure work, inadequate incomes, weakened public services, and a food environment saturated with ultra-processed products that are driving chronic illness at scale. Labour is addressing none of these things seriously.

Second, the economic logic being deployed is simply wrong. Cutting benefits does not make sick people well. It makes sick people poor. It does not return them to the workforce. Instead, it removes the support that might eventually allow some of them to

do so. In addition, it reduces tax revenues further if maximising that tax from those on lower earnings is what the government wants to do, whilst increasing pressure on the NHS and social care, and transferring costs from the Treasury onto individuals and families least able to bear them. This is not fiscal responsibility. It is fiscal illiteracy dressed up as tough-mindedness.

Third, the politics here are as confused as the economics. Labour MPs who resisted last year's social security cuts are apparently now prepared to back "reform focused on getting people back to work," according to the FT. But work requires health. Unhealthy people, most especially in older age, are essentially unemployable, as many are finding to their cost. Health is, then, a precondition of work, but the environment that creates that good health has been systematically destroyed over more than a decade, and Labour shows little appetite for rebuilding it. Talking about work as the solution whilst ignoring what makes work impossible is not a serious position. It is a rhetorical gesture designed to neutralise political pressure.

The consequences of this approach are predictable. A further squeeze on sickness benefits will not reduce the number of sick people. It will simply make their lives harder, accelerate their deterioration, reduce their personal and financial resilience, and eventually increase the total burden they might impose on public services as the likelihood that they will have increased need for support as their old age advances and their finances run out will rise.

Meanwhile, the housing crisis continues, the food environment goes unaddressed, insecure work remains the norm for too many, and the public health infrastructure that has been hollowed out by austerity is not being rebuilt. The conditions that are driving people into ill health before they reach 60 will remain in that case.

This is the defining incoherence of Labour's current position. It has accepted the neoliberal framing that the welfare bill is a problem of supply. It says too many people are claiming benefits. The problem is not that; it is one of demand, because too many people are genuinely ill because of how the economy treats them. Until Labour confronts that distinction with a degree of honesty that appreciates beyond it at present, whatever reforms it proposes will fail on their own terms, and the human cost will continue to mount.

If the evidence that healthy life expectancy in one of the world's wealthiest countries is falling faster than almost anywhere else in the developed world is not enough to prompt a serious rethink, one has to ask what would be. Labour came to power promising change. On the evidence of this week, it is offering more of the same, whilst expecting different results.

That is not good enough. Not for the people living with the consequences. And not for a government that claims to govern in their interest.

Unless and until Labour abandons the now frighteningly apparent incoherence of neoliberal thinking, it has nothing to say to this country, and a recent opinion poll outcome that suggested it might have just nine seats in the next parliament may be nine seats too many, so irrelevant is it, and its Tony Blair Institute-derived thinking to the well-being of the people of this country now.